

## NOTE ABOUT THE ELECTRONIC VERSION

### Contact

Devora Neumark + fireside@progression.net

Louise Lachapelle + lachapelle.louise@aces.com

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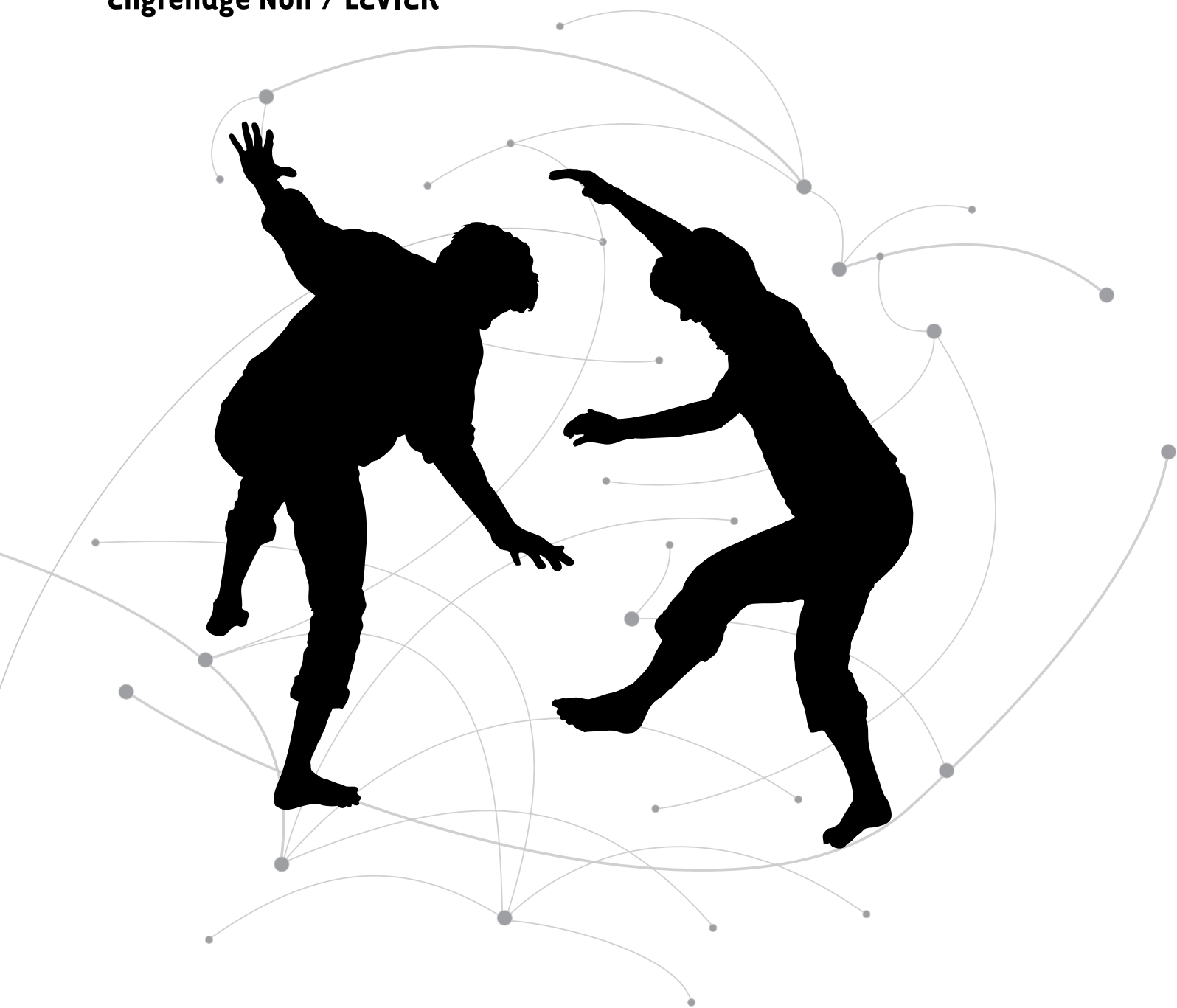
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# **Affirming Collaboration**

## **Community and Humanist Activist Art**

### **in Québec and Elsewhere**

**Engrenage Noir / LEVIER**





Editors: Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon, in collaboration with Louise Lachapelle  
Publication coordinator: Norman Nawrocki  
Interviews: Devora Neumark and Sylvie Tourangeau  
Translation: Denis Lessard, Devora Neumark, Diana Yaros, Howard Scott and Phyllis Aronoff, H  l  ne Thibodeau, Johanne Chagnon, Louise Lachapelle, Susanne de Lotbini  re-Harwood  
Copy-editing: Anne-Marie Deraspe, Rhonda Mullins and Susanne de Lotbini  re-Harwood  
French language feminization consultant: Susanne de Lotbini  re-Harwood  
Proofreading and corrections: Sheila Eskenazi, Marie-  ve Lamy and Rita Bauer  
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© Engrenage Noir  
www.engrenagenoir.ca/blog/en/  
levier@engrenagenoir.ca

Lux Éditeur  
C.P. 129, succ. de Lorimier  
Montréal, Québec H2H 1V0  
Tel: (514) 521-5499 fax.: (514) 521-4931  
[www.luxediteur.com](http://www.luxediteur.com)  
[info@luxediteur.com](mailto:info@luxediteur.com)



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# **Affirming Collaboration**

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### **in Québec and Elsewhere**

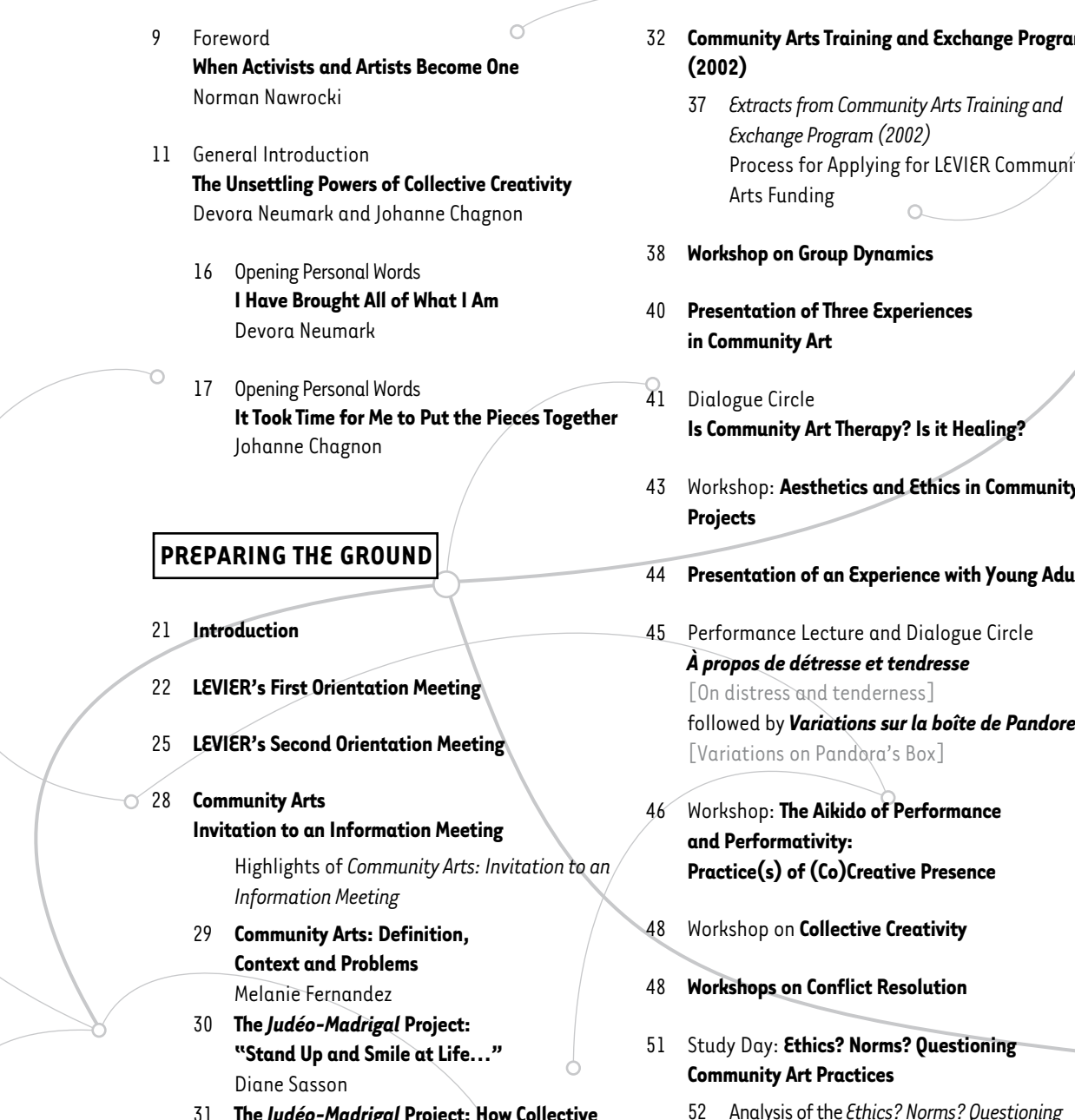
**Engrenage Noir / LEVIER**

Devora Neumark, Editor

Johanne, Chagnon, Editor

Louise Lachapelle, Collaborating Editor





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## Foreword

# When Activists and Artists Become One

Norman Nawrocki

*Musician, author and cabaret artist, I am also a long-time community activist, educator and hellraiser who believes it's important to learn the art of "creative resistance," i.e., how to use the arts for radical social change.*  
— Norman Nawrocki

A longtime Montreal housing rights organizer was skeptical at first about participating in a community musical project. Months later, moments after her first performance with the choir and orchestra, she exclaimed: "I had no idea this would be so much fun, so satisfying, and so effective! We must do this more often!" This is the magical power of activist community art. This is where activists and artists become one, and the art of meaningful social change moves to the top of the agenda.<sup>1</sup>

In my three decades of work as a community organizer and political cabaret artist/violinist/actor concerned with questions of social justice, rarely have I come across a private, non-profit group like Engrenage Noir / LEVIER dedicated to promoting and supporting community activist art. Like government funding bodies, most private organizations avoid art projects that have any social content or blatant activist objectives.

When I first heard of LEVIER, I was curious. The field of community activist art today is not overrun with players, the documentation of it minimal. Unlike in the USA, practitioners in Québec and across Canada are few; the literature, thin; the academic presence, almost non-existent. Why? A rich tradition does exist, across Canada, from early 20th century working class, trade union-inspired, cultural expression such as labour songs from the Industrial Workers of the World meant to rally the unemployed, or the immigrant minority popular theatre projects condemning racism and new bosses in the new land. Fast forward to Depression-era housing rights projects, 1960's neighbourhood counter-cultural or anti-war declarations, and the burgeoning, urban eco-guerilla creativity of today.

But until recently, community activist art seemed to lack the credibility of commercially friendly or government-sponsored "serious art." It fell in between the cracks. Mainstream media ignored it. Professional artists scoffed at it. The academy cringed. Potential funders were not interested. Why? Because the practice raises uncomfortable truths about poverty, social injustice, or speaks about a part of our society that the mainstream, including establishment-accepted artists, prefers to ignore?

I was intrigued, to say the least, when LEVIER came along and promised financial, critical and moral support to build a reflective community activist art practice rooted in Québec. They were determined and methodical about establishing a significant and independent body for the arts with a radical vision. Their preparatory public workshops and conferences gave shape to an arts initiative without precedent. Over the past decade, LEVIER has collaborated with countless artists and community groups as they pursued and realized co-creations. In the end, some projects were more overtly socially engaged than others; some missed the mark. Regardless, LEVIER took the risk.

This publication effectively documents this experience and enriches the heritage of practice and thought for a new generation of community artists, activists and academics. It also contributes to the discussion. Will "community art" be relegated to the role of "public pacifier," or "prettyfier of community spaces," or will it grow into its activist role, recognize its social responsibilities, and contribute to mobilize people to speak out on important issues? Will the practice continue to be co-opted by either the State, or artists out to further their careers rather than the goals of communities affirming their right to tell their own stories and take control of their own futures?

Misleading, deceptive "art" claiming to address social problems receives government and private sector support simply because it is "safe" art. It fits the requirements of "art as opiate, art as spectacle, art as diversion, art as harmless



creative expression.” This art misrepresents, displaces and ultimately sabotages the need for a critical art that speaks to issues of today.

Where is the anti-war art that dares question the priorities of the State? Where is the anti-gentrification art that questions prerogatives of private property over the right to have a roof over one’s head? Where is the anti-poverty, anti-capitalist art that questions the systemic marginalization of the underemployed and jobless?

We need less “do-gooder” art and more art that is not afraid to speak out. We need less art that “pink-washes” ghettos and poor neighbourhoods and more that paints collaborative murals with social significance. We need fewer artists lulling people into believing that art – with all its wondrous, magical powers – will alone change anything if it is vapid, focused on form only, and void of socially-relevant content. The arts can work their magic when they invite us to engage with issues of critical concern.

That housing rights organizer’s face was so flush with excitement after she played her guitar and sang her heart out that you just knew she would never doubt the transformative potential of community activist art again. This book invites everyone to experience that excitement for themselves.

#### NOTE

1. The organizer referred to above was a member of a radical community group with whom I have had a long association as an activist/artist. We collaborated on one project described in this publication, pp.198-199.

## General Introduction

# The Unsettling Powers of Collective Creativity

Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon

Throughout this publication there is a clear and strong emphasis on collaboration — an approach that has shaped Engrenage Noir / LEVIER since its inception in 2001 as a non-profit art advocacy and funding organization. This rather large collection of texts and images that you hold now in your hands was initiated in 2007 as an internal assessment of LEVIER-supported programming after the first five years of activity. Given how much we learned during our review of the 30 training and exchange programs, dialogue circles, roundtable discussions and workshops and the 37 community and humanist activist art projects that took place between 2002 and 2007, we were enthusiastic about the possibility of expanding the critical reflection and making it public. We quickly realized that if we were to be consistent with our commitment to collaborative ethics and aesthetics we could not do this alone. As a result, the elaboration of *Affirming Collaboration: Community and Humanist Activist Art in Québec and Elsewhere* is as much a celebration of the individual and collective efforts associated with the persons who have shared LEVIER's journey over the years, as it has been a co-creative process. Like many collaborative projects, finishing this book has taken longer than expected. Despite the many hurdles and challenges, it has also been a deeply rewarding experience.

Without minimizing the risks and pitfalls related to the collaborative process, *Affirming Collaboration* proposes that co-creativity is a gesture of personal empowerment — often of a healing nature — and civic intervention that contributes to a more responsible and equitable co-existence. Negotiating decision-making and the allocation of resources within a collective art project — in such a way that the different voices are heard — involves dealing imaginatively with power and relational dynamics. This leads potentially to personal transformation and subversive political agency.

## Presentation of LEVIER

As an advocate of community and humanist activist art, LEVIER has always been conscious of the need to exercise ethical answerability in all aspects of what we do. We consider it necessary to nurture ongoing attention to critical thinking about the co-creative process. Our approach has never been to simply distribute money and say: "Congratulations on submitting a successful project application; we look forward to reading your final report." Nor do we subscribe to the notion that the artist is there to "help" or "guide" a community and its members. LEVIER's implication is consistent with the way in which we see the involvement of the artist, and for that matter, of all project members: we strive to participate in a dialogic process aimed at generating collaborative insight towards a more just and responsible society.

Passionately curious about the ways that imagination can nourish the potential for people to adapt to difficult situations, while sometimes working to change those very same conditions (which require such adaptive efforts in the first place), LEVIER supports community and humanist activist art collaborations that interrogate the dynamics of cultural, political and economic power. Collaboration is embraced as a locus of social, aesthetic and ethical engagement with the systemic forces that shape our individual and collective lives — and conversely, a process by which the personal intervenes in the public sphere. LEVIER encourages artistic experimentation that affirms personal and political agency while channeling creativity into well-considered gestures of resistance and celebration.

### **What Does LEVIER Mean by "Community Art" and "Humanist Activist Art"?**

Community art, according to LEVIER, implicates long-term artistic collaborations between members of community

groups or organizations and individuals who self-identify and are recognized by others as artists (who may or may not be otherwise associated with the community groups or organizations linked to the projects). With its emphasis on dialogue, community art offers the possibility for collaborative exploration, which in turn fosters the potential for individual and collective imagination, critical reflection, and informed decision-making. The communities and all associated project members control the process, aesthetics, content, production and dissemination of the creative process and finished product(s).

LEVIER identifies humanist activist art as short- or long-term individual or collective non-violent creative efforts that redefine militant socio-political protest and demonstrate a thoughtful analysis of what's at stake for the individuals involved and for the society at large. Such art may advocate on behalf of a given community but does not necessarily implicate its members in as active a manner as community art. Humanist activist art often emerges spontaneously in reaction to specific current events, which unfold locally and/or internationally.

A community artist is – or becomes – a member of a self-defined community. A humanist activist artist may end up intervening within a community setting but may not have had prior contact with the group and may, or may not, stay around once the work has been completed. What LEVIER considers common to both of these approaches however is the commitment to “an ethics of communicative exchange” – a term suggested by Grant Kester in *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art*,<sup>1</sup> referring to the conditions under which art can establish and sustain dialogue.

Within community and humanist activist art projects, artists and other project members inhabit a complex posture involving many different roles (e.g.; co-creator, learner, teacher, activist, organizer, accountant, etc.). In addition to the creative problem-solving experiences and skills that artists bring to such projects, many are committed to interrogating and challenging the myths of the artist as hero or prophet. These community and humanist activist artists often end up functioning as co-facilitators to inspire and encourage the collective process but they also open themselves to experiences of vulnerability and unknowing. Similarly, community members who do not self-identify as artists bring their own abilities, competencies and talents as well as their know-how and understanding about the issues that they want to address through the artistic collaboration. Their insights about the social, material, and political conditions that impact their lives are based on their own first-hand knowledge and experiences and thus constitute a grounded theoretical framework within which the artwork emerges.

### **A Different Aesthetic?**

Hybrids of creativity, politics, and community organization, no one singular project or project type can define community and humanist activist art. Yet there are certain consistent elements: at their core, community and humanist activist art projects are radically interdisciplinary. Because the projects tend to emerge from the life conditions of the project members, and are thus time and place specific, the values of the project members are likely to determine how a work looks and sounds and the context in which it is presented. We propose that the aesthetics of collaborative art therefore cannot be separated from the question of ethics. Furthermore, we think that the aesthetics and ethics of such collective practices are evidenced in both the co-creative process as well as whatever is ultimately disseminated publicly.

These aesthetics/ethics are often different and distinctive from other types of contemporary art production precisely because they are multivocal, context arising, and process driven. Often their effects are unsettling, seemingly unfinished or open, offering dissensus rather than a unified or seamless whole. In other words, it is less a question of producing paintings, sculptures, videos, websites, dance or music, etc. – although not excluding the possibility that such works will be collectively produced: project members collaborate first and foremost to envision, articulate, and create better conditions within which to live.

Moving through and across the borders of community development, public engagement and creative practice, members of such projects are often faced with the necessity to explore different ways of relating to the materials undergoing transformation during the artistic process, whether this material is physical or the stuff of life experience. This emphasis on emergent interdependence refutes the generally accepted hierarchy within modern art, which asserts that the artist's expertise is selflessly offered as a gift to others.

### **Reconnecting with Commitment?**

Collective creative responsiveness is particularly compelling at this time following the disappointment experienced

by many in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in North America, when grand schemes for progressive social change fell short of expectations. Artists and activists alike have been trying, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to find more collaborative and holistic solutions to such problems as ongoing gentrification in major urban centres; the impact of draconian neo-liberal agendas attacking social services, social housing, and employment benefits; the discourse blaming “the poor”; and the growing number of people who are living with poverty.

While LEVIER assumes that there are many beneficial consequences for the individuals and groups involved with creative practice, community and humanist activist art should not to be confused with art therapy as such co-creative projects are intentionally communicative and publicly engaged. For activists and artists who approach the creative challenges holistically, collaborative art practice can be profoundly transformative and healing. Potentially therapeutic for individuals and communities alike, community and humanist activist art offer artists, activists and other citizens the possibility to engage with pressing socio-political issues, while redefining the conditions for equitable reciprocal relationships. New schemas for co-operation, which are experimented with and explored within such collective art projects, can then be transposed to other situations.

Such co-creative practices are as committed to a renewed sense of personal and political responsibility as they are to a renewed sense of connection to the places we inhabit, to each other and to ourselves. For LEVIER, even from the beginning, artistic practice, socio-political engagement, ethics and wellness have been fully interrelated. This connectivity stems from our conviction that art is a “major and integral part of the transaction that engenders political behavior.”<sup>2</sup> This conviction about the centrality of culture in the socio-political sphere is at the heart of LEVIER’s equal emphasis on activism, creativity, healing and ethical responsibility. As the power of art is so great, careful attention has to be given to how creativity can impact the lives of the people who take part in emotionally and politically charged artistic projects that emerge directly from the challenges they face personally. This is the connection that LEVIER invites: small-scale artistic experimentations – often leading to surprisingly profound results – that implicate challenges to one’s beliefs, thought patterns and emotional coping mechanisms, even as they put into question the social structures and economic systems that perpetuate inequality and exploitation.

## Presentation of *Affirming Collaboration*

*Affirming Collaboration: Community and Humanist Activist Art in Québec and Elsewhere* and the accompanying DVD – *Documenting Collaboration* – provide a wider appreciation of the culturally significant efforts related to community and humanist activist art; convey practical information; and invite critical reflection about how collaborative art develops and sustains healthy communities, even in this time of rampant individualism and global systemic inequalities.

This broad contextualization heightens the sense of recognition and visibility for members of the LEVIER-supported projects and participants in the training and exchange programs, dialogue circles, roundtable discussions and workshops who speak out about their artistic and activist experiences. The multiplicity of approaches gathered within these pages aims to inspire communities and community groups who have yet to explore the power of creative engagement. Our intention is that this publication will be used as a tool – one that we would have liked to have access to when we began our activities. As with any tool, the ways in which it is worked with will depend, at least in part, on who picks it up and for what purpose.

For the growing number of students enrolled in academic programs whose focus is on creativity and social change, this book balances experiential testimony with theoretical analyses by articulating a diverse set of proposals for mutual learning. For individuals interested in sociopolitically engaged art practice and people seeking alternatives to the pervasiveness of the corporatist state and neo-liberal capitalism, *Affirming Collaboration* offers exciting new possibilities.

In keeping with our approach of honoring everyone’s participation equally, LEVIER asked each contributor to this publication if they would be willing to write a short personal statement responding to the following set of questions: Who are you? What are your social/political preoccupations? What guides your activism? In addition to these personalized introductions, more formal biographical information is included for individuals whose prior experience factored into our inviting their collaboration.

As the coordinator for this publication, Norman Nawrocki was in the perfect position to write the Foreword entitled *When Activists and Artists Become One*. He was able to draw upon his experiences as an accomplished interdisciplinary artist

and dedicated political agitator to contextualize LEVIER's work within the history of community activist art practice.

In each of our opening personal words – *I Have Brought All of What I Am* (Devora), *It Took Time for Me to Put the Pieces Together* (Johanne) – which are to be found at the end of this general introduction, we have tried to convey the milestones that have shaped our journeys as artists, activists and co-directors of Engrenage Noir / LEVIER while articulating the ways in which our own life challenges have influenced our artistic engagement with sociopolitical change. A strong vision for healthy interdependence goes hand-in-hand with care for each individual's well-being. Experience has taught us that the sustained practice of affirming social responsibility through art almost always involves some form of personal transformation.

We have extended this invitation for personal reflection to everyone who has gotten involved in LEVIER-sponsored programming over the years. Indeed, each of the creative collaborations supported by LEVIER began with one or more interdisciplinary encounters in which questions of personal motivation were addressed alongside an inquiry about activist intention. *Preparing the Ground* traces these 30 different community art training and exchange programs, dialogue circles, roundtable discussions, and workshops organized by LEVIER between May 2002 and October 2007<sup>3</sup> with a thorough presentation of the annotated program schedules and event proceedings; in some instances, lengthy reflections were written by a number of different participants while others are described only summarily with an excerpt or highlight. Having established an approach that integrates personal reflection and critical thinking in all that we do, these events were designed to encourage the sharing of experiences as a means to explore what is currently at stake in community and humanist activist art, while contributing to the development of these practices and related discourse. Based on the premise of mutual learning, these encounters created and reinforced a network of practitioners, which continues, even now, to play as important a role socially and politically as it does pedagogically.<sup>4</sup>

*Shaping the Experience* offers an overview of the 9 community art and 28 humanist activist art projects supported by LEVIER during this same period, involving nearly 100 community organizations in Québec and elsewhere. This section includes material culled from the final project reports written by community representatives and other project members and features 46 interviews with people involved in 12 different projects. The interviews were carried out between December 2008 and May 2009, at LEVIER's office in Saint-Henri (Montréal) or at the homes and offices of the project members.

*Making Sense of It All* presents a series of essays commissioned by LEVIER and written by a variety of artists, community organizers, activists and scholars. There is a pedagogical intention behind their inclusion within this publication: life-long learning requires bridging ongoing reflection with the cycles of co-creation and action. These texts are intended to build a practice-led discourse about sociopolitically engaged art practice, while addressing critical issues that have been guiding LEVIER's demarche from the outset: the ethics of individual and social change; group dynamics; the link between art practice and tactics for political action; and the power of collective creativity.

The final section – *Documenting Collaboration* – takes the form of a DVD inserted into the centre of this publication, featuring the history of five different LEVIER-supported collaborative projects as told by the project members themselves. In addition to highlighting the links between personal transformation and what was at stake sociopolitically for each of the community groups involved, these narratives contextualize the results of the co-creative process within a framework that assumes that creative conflict is a significant element of individual and collective change.

Long-time LEVIER accomplice and collaborating editor Louise Lachapelle offers a close critical reading of the material contained within this publication. Louise participated in the organization and facilitation of several LEVIER public activities and thus was not only already familiar with LEVIER's approach, she has, over the years, contributed to its shaping; she had however, many different LEVIER-supported art projects to discover. In the Postscript entitled *La brûlure avant la voix or Could this be a love letter?* she proposes an elaborate, if somewhat troubling, cultural analysis of community and humanist activist art practice.

The choice to publish this book as a bilingual volume is an extension of LEVIER's language accessibility policy, which was established from the very beginning. Language politics – which has been, and continues to be, a constant public debate in Québec and elsewhere in Canada – has had a direct impact on the documentation of activist art practice. Very often, when the history of sociopolitically engaged art in North America is recounted, the specificity of what has taken place in Québec is ignored. Furthermore, amongst local practitioners, there is sometimes a certain lack of knowledge about what is happening elsewhere. The language barrier has most likely played a significant role both in this lack of inclusion and limited information sharing. Within this volume, therefore, our approach has been to not only present the texts in

both languages but to recommend that readers be curious about the “other solitude.” To this end, there are two entirely different sets of images that appear in the English and French versions of the book. You are encouraged to follow along in both languages in order to get a more complete sense of the scope of the projects and processes described within.

The copious amount of footnotes and cross-referencing found throughout the book, and the graphic presentations of each page and section, accentuate the connections between creation, action and reflection. These elements also point to the strength of the network that has evolved over the years as individuals took part in multiple activities and committed themselves to developing the community and humanist activist art praxis.

We conclude this presentation of the *Affirming Collaboration* content by drawing your attention to the fact that a language feminization policy was adopted for some of the French texts contained in this publication. This is the case for texts that we ourselves authored, for the introductions to the four sections of the book, as well as for the texts in *Preparing the Ground*, the project descriptions in *Shaping the Experience*, the presentations of the essays found in the section entitled *Making Sense of it All*, the texts by Kim Anderson, Vivian Labrie and Ève Lamoureux, and the Postscript written by Louise Lachapelle.

This policy means applying in a different way the standard gender rule of French grammar whereby nouns, adjectives, some pronouns and past participles are gender-marked and where, generally-speaking, the masculine overrules the feminine, that is to say that the masculine grammatical form is used no matter if it/he is in a minority, or is only implicit. We were seeking a way to reflect – but also to problematize and to question – a fact: women are in the majority, when it comes to participation in community art and humanist activist projects supported by LEVIER, as well as at the events we organize. Therefore, we decided to put to use formulations that play down references to the gender of the subject or subjects of the sentence, without however opting for a neutral form – which would, in any case, be no more neutral than the standard “universal” use of the masculine. This is why our vocabulary is inflected towards the feminine gender.

There are certainly more questions than answers in *Affirming Collaboration*. Whether you are familiar with or new to community and humanist activist art practice, we wish that you consider the material gathered here in a critical way. Rather than define norms and standards, this publication offers a diverse set of creative propositions and accomplishments that illustrate the possibilities and challenges of nurturing a sociopolitically engaged art.

## NOTES

1. Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2004).
2. Murray Edelman, *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).
3. Note that while this publication covers LEVIER-supported activities from 2002–2007, there is the occasional mention of other, more recent, LEVIER programming.
4. As Jim Ife and Frank Tesoriero, authors of *Community Development: Community-based Alternatives in an Age of Globalisation* (Toronto, Pearson Education Canada, 2006) affirm: “To embark on a program of participatory democracy without an effective education process is a recipe for failure, and would serve only to support the views of those who see participatory democracy as unworkable.”

Opening Personal Words

## **I Have Brought All of What I Am**

Devora Neumark

Growing up unaware that the hidden rules of poverty were operative in my family, I took for granted that everyone wore hand-me-downs and that one chicken shared amongst seven mouths was a Sabbath feast. Other truths that I assumed in my childhood: everyone fought about money and however hard one worked, there would never be enough to live comfortably and without fear. Maybe this perception wasn't only related to the financial difficulties that seemed to haunt my family back then; perhaps it was also shaped by the violence that was triggered by the fiscal insecurity. I know first-hand, and all too well at that, how devastating is the combination of low self-esteem and the internalized stigma associated with the scarcity of resources.

For much of my adulthood it was these narratives that I repeated and believed above all others. And yet there were also a lot of positive elements that have shaped who I am today: formative experiences, which I am increasingly able to connect with and celebrate.

As a child, for example, my siblings and I accompanied my father countless times as he and others took to the streets in protest for the release of Soviet Jewry. Back then I knew little about the sociopolitical, economic and cultural situation of the Jews behind the Iron Curtain. Even the details about my father's escape from Europe — as World War II was ending — and immigration to Canada with his parents and younger siblings were sketchy. Yet week after week for several years, as I marched along New York City's Fifth Avenue or gathered with thousands of others at Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza in front of the United Nations Headquarters, these phantom stories marked themselves into my being. Thinking back on these experiences now, nearly 40 years later, I can appreciate how much I learned about the individual and collective commitment necessary to implement change. My sense of activism was shaped step by step while holding a banner and calling for freedom.

I don't remember my mother accompanying us on these forays. What I do recall of my mother's presence was her delight in creative activity and her capacity to "make do" with whatever was available. Whether sewing late into the night on the landing just outside the door of the bedroom that I shared with my two sisters, trying out new recipes with careful attention to the nutrient value, or sharing her pleasure of exploring every nook and cranny of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, my mother bestowed upon me the love of beauty and the capacity to believe that anything is possible if one aligns one's thoughts and emotions with one's vision.

Perhaps not surprisingly, I became an artist with openness towards social responsibility and justice. Over the years, I worked to understand and articulate the differences and similarities between community and public art while exploring the tensions between art and activism. Given my need to talk through these issues with others, I extended my performance art practice and community engagement to include the organization of conferences and symposia. When Johanne came knocking and invited me to collaborate with her on shaping *Engrenage Noir / LEVIER*, I immediately embraced the offer. It was only years afterwards that I found out that she had contacted me on account of what she had seen and heard of the event that I initiated and then co-directed with Loren Lerner and pk langshaw entitled *Public Art as Social Intervention*, which was held at Concordia University in June 1997 and focused on artistic responses to violence against women.

Without a doubt, *LEVIER* has been, and continues to be, the most complex and demanding community/public activist art project that I have been involved with. I have brought all of what I am into this collaboration; I have been confronted by the challenges of communication and have marveled at the stamina and creativity of the people with whom I have had the pleasure of being in conversation with, even when the dialogue was difficult. I have learned an enormous amount about integrating the different parts of myself and, perhaps above all, feel liberated by what has become possible in the process of releasing the old narratives of lack and inadequacy.

Opening Personal Words

## It Took Time for Me to Put the Pieces Together

Johanne Chagnon

When I began my art practice, I often wondered: how to make art that has social relevance? In the 1970s, I had the good fortune of taking courses about the sociology of art, of avidly reading the three volumes of *Québec Underground*<sup>1</sup> and of making contact with activist art activities from the '60s. My art practice always involved an activist discourse. I also took part in theatre experiences with young people in Montréal's South-central area. As coordinator of the magazine *ESSE arts + opinions*, I wrote about the political and about activism during several years. Yet I never had the feeling of being quite whole.

In 2001, recurrent family funds, dedicated exclusively to social ends, became available to me provided that I personally involve myself in the project, that would ultimately benefit from this financial support. Thus, these private funds could not be used to make a donation to a cause of my choice, which would have been an act of "charity." The moment seemed right to take a further step in the quest to answer my initial question. Instead of supporting an existing organization, my partner Paul Grégoire and I created a new one, Engrenage Noir, born of our passion for art as a vehicle for speech and as agent of change. We then both developed, each on our own, a project linked to our personal interests: Paul launched the performance event entitled *Déranger l'espace* [Disturbing space] and, based on an intuition, I started LEVIER. For several years I had been involved with the Montréal community organization Le CARRÉ,<sup>2</sup> first as a member, then as President of the Board, but for me it remained a management activity quite removed from my art practice as well as from the organization's own life. I asked myself: would it be possible to combine my various personal traits, for example by involving myself as an artist with the members of this organization? That was a real "aha" moment!

I couldn't undertake such a project by myself, setting up a financial support program with the mandate of linking art and community organization. I needed an accomplice. That's when I contacted Devora Neumark. I knew Devora only on the basis of an event she had co-organized in 2000, *Public Art as Social Intervention*.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, it was enough to believe that this vision might interest her. Devora immediately came on board, which confirmed to me that this idea was not too far-fetched — quite the opposite! It was the beginning of a wonderful collaboration with Devora, thanks to whom the LEVIER "project" developed within Engrenage Noir.

As LEVIER activities expanded, artists and activists appeared, sharing our same thirst for commitment and for social justice. These people showed me that a community did exist wherein I could feel good, where I could find myself, at last. They had had lives that were not all that different from mine: they practiced a form of activist art without the resources associated with a network. In the framework of these encounters, I also met people who had suffered from exclusion, experienced abuse, genocide ... This confronted me, once again, with my situation as a "privileged" person, a situation where my own pain seemed rather insignificant compared to some of their realities. I am slowly and surely ridding myself of this guilty malaise, recognizing the legitimacy of my gestures and realizing that my social involvement within LEVIER denotes a sense of responsibility that questions the forms of "good deeds" usually extended by wealthier people to those living in situations of poverty.

My involvement in LEVIER shook me up far more than I had expected. I knew that personal and social transformations are closely linked. I learned this for myself over the last few years. My experience as a member of a community art project first brought me to open up about intimate personal realities I had not wanted to broach before — because I was wholly absorbed in "uniquely" social considerations. Then, a diagnosis of breast cancer provided me with a rather opportune possibility to reconsider the meaning of my life. I can now breathe more easily. Far from being incompatible, personal development and social change go hand in hand when it comes to making a difference in this world.

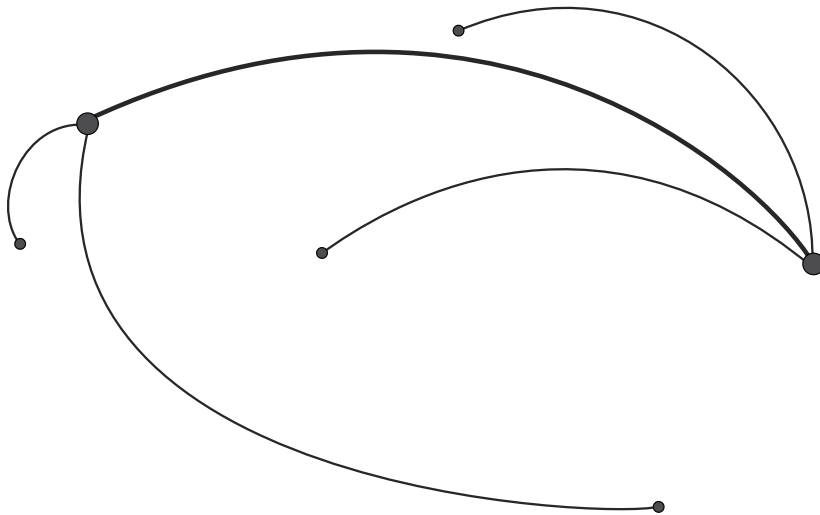
### NOTES

1. Yves Robillard (ed.), *Québec Underground 1962-1972* (3 volumes) (Montréal: Les éditions médiart, 1973).
2. See the description of the community art project that I later initiated with this organization, pp. 154-158.
3. See p. 16.





# Preparing the Ground





# Introduction

The practice of community and humanist activist art in Québec and elsewhere is expanding by leaps and bounds. While there are many forces shaping this trend and a plethora of reasons why this is a good thing, art practitioners who are not familiar with the dynamics of activism and community development often underestimate the challenges of leaving the studio. Similarly, community organizers who do not have prior experience with artistic collaboration easily disregard the destabilization that frequently accompanies the co-creative process. As an organization committed to responsibly funding community and humanist activist art, LEVIER prioritizes the sharing of experiences, skills enhancement and reinforcement of critical thinking amongst this growing network of practitioners interested in collaborating creatively with individuals who don't necessarily self-identify as artists, in order to invite reflective practice and rigorous analysis. During the 2002–2007 funding cycle, this priority translated into the 30 public encounters – training and exchange programs, dialogue circles, roundtable discussions and workshops – which LEVIER hosted.

These public encounters – which were free, bilingual and open to everyone who was interested – blended grassroots experience with theory, thus contributing to the building of a shared vocabulary among community representatives and artists. These two groups of people, more often than not, have different approaches and understandings of how things work, even if they share values. The importance of establishing good relations cannot be overstated: while collaboration can stimulate dynamic and potentially rewarding experiences, making art together also often provokes friction and personal triggers, if not outright confrontation. These public encounters provided an inviting space for people to get to know one another and discuss the thorny questions that often accompany collaborative creativity (e.g., How will decisions get made? What constitutes a successful project? What means of conflict resolution are we skilled in?). For many participants, the encounters broke through the isolation they felt as they persevered with their own projects not realizing that others were involved in similar efforts and facing common challenges. In order to create as safe a space as possible, a resource person skilled in offering emotional support was present during many of these encounters.

Coming up with the themes addressed during the public encounters was a result of an open collective process. As people joined the LEVIER network they brought with them their ideas and suggestions. Like a "domino effect," the more people got involved, the more these events suited the needs of the participants. Very often, one encounter became the springboard for another. Sometimes individuals participating in one program ended up presenting in others.

*Preparing the Ground* offers detailed accounts of each of these public encounters, including the very early collaborative brainstorming sessions that LEVIER hosted even prior to beginning its grant program, which were crucial to the orientation that LEVIER took during the first five years of activity. While this material is organized chronologically according to the dates of the programs, it is worthwhile to keep in mind that the community and humanist art projects described in *Shaping the Experience* were also underway at the same time.

Program schedules are included for those who are interested in the practicalities of organizing such co-learning opportunities. Comprehensive analysis of some of the training and exchange programs, dialogue circles, roundtable discussions and workshops provide an inside look at the issues. This section is designed, like the rest of the publication, to invite critical reflection about community and humanist activist art practice.

## LEVIER's First Orientation Meeting

In the offices of the community organization Le CARRÉ (Le Comptoir Alimentaire de Rencontres, de Références et d'Entraide)  
4589 Sainte-Catherine East, Montréal

November 10, 2001

*Before beginning its public activities, Engrenage Noir / LEVIER spent a year preparing; among other things, LEVIER organized a first day of brainstorming to collect ideas and proposals about the links between art and sociopolitical problematics such as poverty, the equitable sharing of resources and cultural diversity. The following people were invited because of their relevant experience:<sup>1</sup> artists Philippe Côté and Mary Sui Yee Wong; Directors of community organizations Janelle Bouffard, of CAP Saint-Barnabé, and André Galarneau, of Le CARRÉ,<sup>2</sup> both in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighbourhood in the East-end of Montréal, and Diana Yaros,<sup>3</sup> of the Mouvement contre le viol et l'inceste [The Montréal movement against rape and incest] and also a member of the Chœur Maha, a feminist choir; activists Vivian Labrie,<sup>4</sup> coordinator and spokesperson, and Christian Dubois, in charge of communications, for The Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty;<sup>5</sup> sociologist and art critic Guy Sioui Durand;<sup>6</sup> public art specialist Hélène Thibodeau, cultural officer with the Service culturel de la Ville de Montréal [Culture department of the City of Montréal]; art therapist Pierrette Simard, psychologist and director of the program Autonomie Jeunes Familles [Autonomy young families]; community development consultants Kim Anderson,<sup>7</sup> writer, researcher and author of a report on poverty among urban Native children in Ontario, and Nicole Saltiel,<sup>8</sup> organizational development consultant.*

*These two questions were submitted beforehand by LEVIER to the brainstorming participants:*

- *What do artists and community organizations need in order to respond to personal and social suffering through the use of creative strategies?*
- *What forms of art in particular and what creative intervention strategies are best able to respond to the different stages of individual and social empowerment?*

*Other questions dealt more specifically with issues related to the procedures for applying to the LEVIER funding programs such as loci of intervention, number of projects to be supported, fixed or flexible budgets, selection criteria, involvement of community organizations, as well as the roles and responsibilities of Engrenage Noir / LEVIER.*

*THE FOLLOWING ARE SOME OF THE ANSWERS THAT EMERGED FROM THE BRAINSTORMING SESSION.*

*In keeping with this idea-generating methodology, individuals are not identified by name in order to emphasize the collective nature of this process.<sup>9</sup> These answers have guided LEVIER's programmatic orientations.*

### **With Art, You Inject the Unexpected**

Symbols enable us to touch people differently.

Art can be such a powerful tool to name and denounce, but also to construct and imagine things differently, to dismantle our usual structures for seeking solutions.

Finally! This is not about art in a closed cultural context, but how art can participate in life. What LEVIER is proposing is completely opposite to the approach of those who now monopolize the resources intended to bring the public into the spaces of art. This usual approach makes for wonderful international conferences and beautiful big publications, but it changes nothing, because it only interests the professional art world.

It's interesting, the strategies of artists who get involved with the communities they belong to, who are dealing with real problems and speaking their truths. That's different from just validating the academic discourse that is expected from artists.

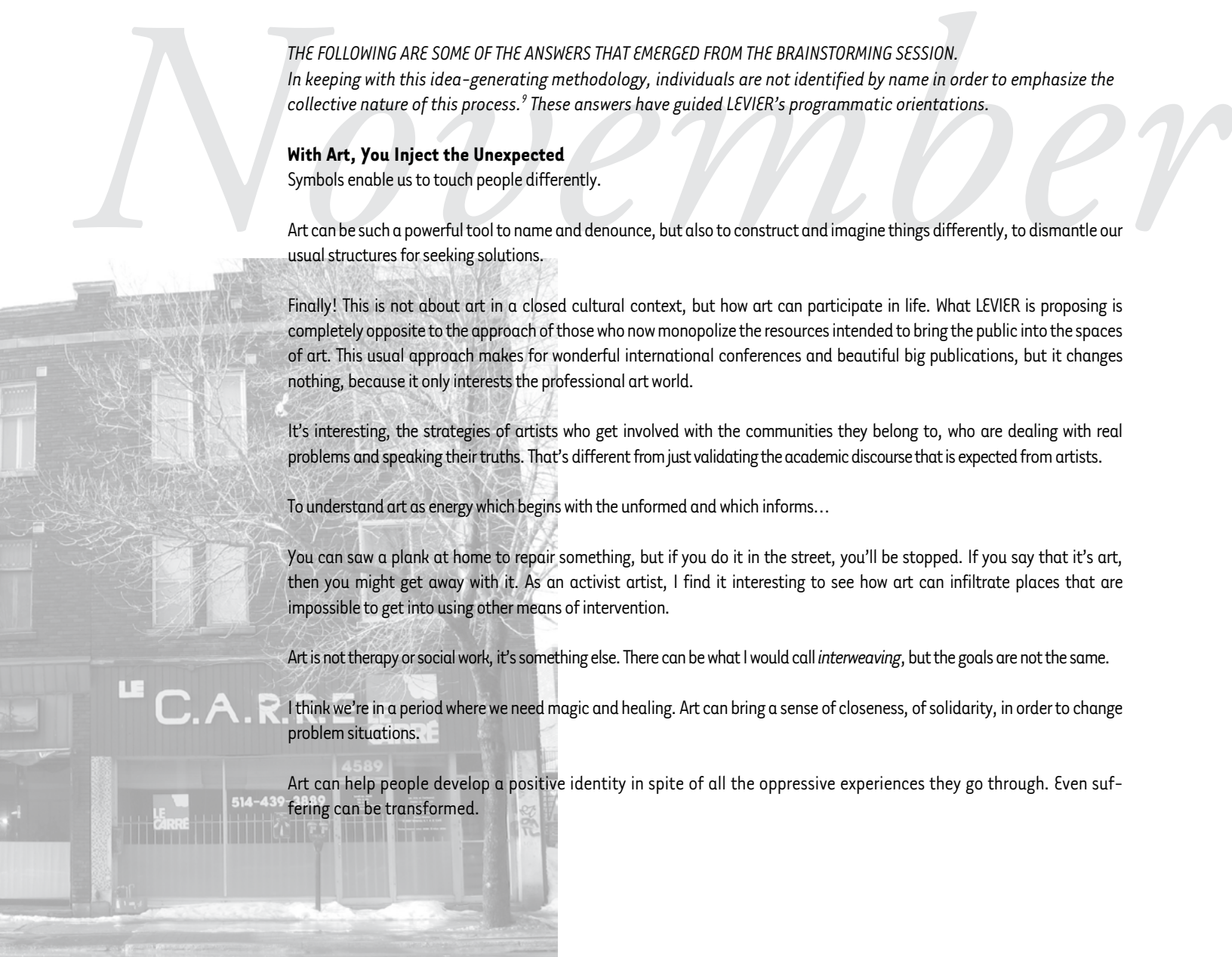
To understand art as energy which begins with the unformed and which informs...

You can saw a plank at home to repair something, but if you do it in the street, you'll be stopped. If you say that it's art, then you might get away with it. As an activist artist, I find it interesting to see how art can infiltrate places that are impossible to get into using other means of intervention.

Art is not therapy or social work, it's something else. There can be what I would call *interweaving*, but the goals are not the same.

I think we're in a period where we need magic and healing. Art can bring a sense of closeness, of solidarity, in order to change problem situations.

Art can help people develop a positive identity in spite of all the oppressive experiences they go through. Even suffering can be transformed.



To me, art adds to social action. There are a lot of things that are hard to say in words. Some people are less able to put things into words because they have always been told to keep quiet. Putting those experiences into images or on stage is already a way for them to take back their own experience.

Art makes it possible to say things differently when not everyone has the same ability or right to speak.

It is hard to know that things can be better without having experienced it. On the other hand, the moment when you discover that things can be better can't be programmed, because it's always a spontaneous action. That's why we say it's not just a matter of awareness, but of surprise.<sup>10</sup> It seems to me that we need this, and that art is a good vehicle because it enables people to connect things that would never be connected rationally.

### **On the Concept of Community**

There is a romanticism that we have to rid ourselves of. "The" community does not exist. We live in complex societies, with multiple problems that call for multiple strategies.

### **How can Creative Actions be Integrated into Political Action?**

I think that activism to advance an idea works best if it is expressed in an unusual way.

I think that whatever the project, what is very important in addition to participation by everyone — people working in organizations, activists, artists, activity participants and the public — is that there be interaction amongst all these people, that links be created. And that will lead to moments of openness toward potential social change.

What we want to measure is the difference between a little less starvation of the spirit and a little more human wealth. The risks you take in the fields of art, the imaginary and change, and that you share with others, are the real meaning of social existence.

I sense that there are new energies connected to community art that don't belong either to what is often called hyper-individualism or to the disconnection of so many people in society.

To have a political impact, you have to see healing as collective healing. You can't change all alone if others are not changing too. You can't solve problems if you don't change your surroundings.

### **Growing Through an Egalitarian Relationship**

A community functions on the basis of what people have in common. I think you have to see all the people who are involved — the members of the community, including the artists, people providing funding, etc. — not in a relationship of "power over the other," but in one of "power with the other."

One word comes to mind: *respect*. We have to make sure that the community is ready to receive us before intervening, and that we do not establish a climate of dependence, but rather create a situation that enriches the community instead of taking something from it.

What I find interesting in this situation is that there is less of a dichotomy between *artist* and *non-artist*.

### **Needs and Status of Community Organizations**

As a community organization, our interest in adopting an artistic approach relates to the terms of community life within the organization. I think that an artistic approach can be very useful in cultivating a critical perspective amongst our members about policies that concern them.

Would it be possible for community groups to have the same status in this society as museums or artist-run centres, which only promote individual careers? In the name of what corporatist apartheid should community groups not have the same right to apply to arts councils for grants? Is it absolutely necessary that an arts administrator or an artist-run centre endorse these applications?

### **The Question of LEVIER'S Responsibilities and Mandate**

The power of imagination means people connecting with themselves, with what they did not even suspect was there. This means that for me, as an artist, the responsibility is as great as the risks.

We have to be responsible during the process but also when we leave, because it produces all kinds of reactions.

When you enter into working relationships through creativity, you need to have support in order to pick up the pieces, if necessary.

You know well what happens when there are unresolved issues for the artist and the organization, when something has really gone wrong — so, what is needed? Is this LEVIER's role as a funding body? Are you there to ensure that there are negotiating structures in place?

There is a need for a kind of training that's useful for all the people involved in collaborative projects. Being an artist or an activist does not mean that you are necessarily able to work in groups.

I think many artists would like to incorporate sociopolitical issues into their work, but they don't know how that can be done from an ethical standpoint.

LEVIER should not be just a source of financial support, but also an intermediary bringing people together. It is important that there be training sessions within which LEVIER should include discussion time between artists and community organizations, because of the different cultures and vocabularies of each. Engrenage Noir / LEVIER could help the two parties understand each other's processes and limitations.

It is important that people give money, but I want the people who receive that money to have more responsibility in how it is used.

Engrenage Noir / LEVIER should be a structure that is independent, self-defined and self-managed. It should not supplement strategies that exist elsewhere.

Many artists are tired of spending their lives justifying themselves to civil servants who anyway think only of cutting their funding. We won't put ourselves back into the structure that all of us hate in some way, that we have been making compromises with for so long. Nevertheless, we still must establish operating rules; but ideally, nothing heavy.

The other aspect that is very important, in my opinion, is the transmission of memory and the sharing of tools, but using a process different from that of normative cultural and academic institutions.

Would Engrenage Noir / LEVIER support one-time non-renewable projects as well as the building of structures that would maintain the interrelation of the projects in the long term?

## NOTES

1. Since that meeting, several of these people have changed positions and one has passed away.
2. See the description of the community art project *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors*, which was subsequently carried out with this organization, pp. 154–158. See also the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 67, in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 100, and in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 121–122. See also the reference to these activities in the critical summaries by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 77, and *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 115, and by Bob W. White in his text *The Power of Collaboration*, p. 321. See also the video *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors* made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
3. Diana continues to be an active member of the LEVIER network. She has acted as a resource person during several public activities, providing emotional support to participants as well as offering simultaneous whisper interpretation between French and English or vice versa.
4. See her text *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty — A Degree of Freedom*, pp. 291–298. See also the description of the humanist activist projects in which she collaborated: *Urbaine urbanité III*, pp. 241–242, *AbriBec — suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, *Carte.compétence*, pp. 261–262, and *Boîtes à (sur) prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265.
5. Following the adoption of the *Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion* in December 2002, this organization changed its name to The Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec.
6. See the description of the activist humanist art project *Urbaine urbanité III*, which he organized, pp. 241–242, and his text written in response to a call for active participation in this publication, *Personal Investment and Social Impact*, pp. 243–244.
7. See her participation in the LEVIER's *Second Orientation Meeting*, pp. 25–27, in the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practice*, pp. 51–61, and the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 67. See also the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 79 and p.80. See also Kim Anderson's text *Community-Based Arts and Research Practices: What's Ethics Got To Do With It?*, pp. 299–302.
8. See her participation in the organization of the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 32–36, and excerpts from her working notes associated with the *Workshop on Group Dynamics*, which she facilitated, pp. 38–39.
9. As transcribed by Manon Brunet.
10. This expression was used in the title of the humanist activist project *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté* by Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon. See the description of this project, pp. 263–265.

## LEVIÉ's Second Orientation Meeting

In the offices of the community organization Le CARRÉ (Le Comptoir Alimentaire de Rencontres, de Références et d'Entraide) 4589, Sainte-Catherine East, Montréal

January 19, 2002

*One of the recommendations that was proposed at the end of the previous orientation meeting was that before going any further, Engrenage Noir / LEVIÉ should more clearly define the political basis for its future decisions and actions, and determine its area of intervention based on an analysis of the current political situation in Québec. This recommendation was a central element in this second day of brainstorming, which encouraged LEVIÉ to seek out opportunities to have an influence as part of a progressive sociopolitical action movement rather than an organization that only supports creative projects, however engaged those projects might be.*

*Certain people who had expressed interest in continuing the discussion were invited back: Kim Anderson, Vivian Labrie, Hélène Thibodeau, Mary Sui Yee Wong and Diana Yaros.<sup>1</sup> LEVIÉ also invited Louise Brownrigg (a long-time activist in an anti-globalization group), Aida Kaouk (curator of the South-West Asia Program at the Canadian Museum of Civilization), André Éric Létourneau<sup>2</sup> (artist), Norman Nawrocki<sup>3</sup> (musician and activist), Jacques Pelletier (author of the controversial non-fiction works *Les habits neufs de la droite culturelle* [*The new clothes of the cultural right*]<sup>4</sup> and *La gauche a-t-elle un avenir?* [*Does the left have a future?*]<sup>5</sup>), Caroline Alexander Stevens<sup>6</sup> (who was at the time writing her doctoral thesis on community art and a designer of courses on art and activism).<sup>7</sup>*

### Summary of the Points of Reflections Submitted to the Participants Based on the First Orientation Meeting

Art can contribute to social change, but what kind of change are we talking about? Art can play a role in dealing with social problems, but which problems should be prioritized? Art can encourage people's empowerment. Again, this is all well and good, but to what purpose? And in what contexts? If we do not adequately identify and articulate what is at the heart of the problems we collectively face, we risk wasting a lot of energy and not reaching our goals.

What will determine which groups will be considered priorities? Given the broad range of social problems it is possible to tackle as a community or as a society, which ones should we focus on? What factors will be used to assess and verify the most urgent needs?

What profound changes are most vital for our society and for the various communities we want be involved with? In what way will the projects that are supported offer an alternative to today's living conditions and act on a systemic level?

How can the projects be part of the process of sharing a sense of pride and social consciousness amongst all of the participants, including those who have not been chosen to receive financial assistance at any given time?

Will defining the same issues and themes for the two parts of LEVIÉ—community art and humanist activism—have a greater overall impact on all the projects supported, without spreading ourselves too thin? Will it enable us to attain more consistent and significant results and maximize the effects of all our energies, locally, nationally and internationally?

*FOLLOWING ARE EXCERPTS FROM THE MINUTES OF THE DAY, AS WELL AS SOME OF THE VIEWS EXPRESSED.*

*As with the First Orientation Meeting, individuals are not identified by name in order to emphasize the collective nature of the co-creative brainstorming process.<sup>8</sup>*

### PART 1—Living sculpture workshop Analysis of the Political Situation

Engaged art, but engaged in favour of what kind of society?

The process of creating a living sculpture was used to elicit ideas about the state of Québec in 2002. This dynamic form of brainstorming appeals to the emotions and to physical memory.

First of all, the participants spontaneously threw out lots of words and concepts about the subject in question. Then the first person chose one word or concept and took a physical position illustrating it. Each person in turn continued to make a choice and take a position connected to the positions that had already been adopted.

This led to a complex arrangement combining the "poorest fifth of the population," Bush, the rise of the right, violence, citizens' groups, solidarity and beer, while morosity, embodied by one person, continually circled around the rest of the group.



*We have to attack the causes, not only the consequences.  
Poverty is the consequence of decisions imposed  
by only 20 percent of the population*

*We also have to go to the centre of the machine,  
because if we only work with people who are marginalized,  
we don't really get to the gears of power*

## **PART 2 – Brainstorming What Specific Political Issues Should LEVIER Focus its Energies On?**

How do we translate the results of the living sculpture process into a coherent strategy for selecting projects?

It is counterproductive to divide the issues, to decide that violence and fear, sexuality and the price of beer, can be separated, because everything is related. Dividing them up prevents the possibility of openness to something else. What is urgent is the number of people who are most disadvantaged, those with no access to funds, no access to government or corporate resources. The projects supported should show originality, creativity and a truly political commitment to a social goal in a fairly concrete way.

Do we want to create an alliance with a particular group rather than enumerating themes?

A workable approach would be to aim at creating alliances with the people who experience the most exclusion.

We have to attack the causes, not only the consequences. Poverty is the consequence of decisions imposed by only 20 percent of the population. We also have to go to the centre of the machine, because if we only work with people who are marginalized, we don't really get to the gears of power.

We live in a society that creates differential powers, and that's what we want to change.

On what scale... the neighbourhood, the city, Québec, the world? Because that will affect the choices we make.

We have to be aware of the global issues and encourage projects that help solve structural problems. But at the same time, this needs to be based on local actions or projects.

### **To See the Gears [engrenages] and Point Them Out to Others**

#### **We are Aware that We have to Enter into the Gears**

So that one action triggers another

The mechanisms that bother us are those that cause social injustice as well as arbitrary and coercive power differentials. These are the mechanisms we have to act on, and we are aware that all this is connected.

I can offer LEVIER my experience with the organization I'm involved in. We've always said we have to attack on three fronts: 1) provide services, even if that sometimes means putting Band-Aids on terrible wounds; 2) do popular education, prevention and consciousness raising; 3) struggle politically for change.

One criterion could be to get away from acting in places where people are already sociopolitically aware. When you're an activist, you always have the same problem: you find yourself doing engaged art for people who are already convinced. Will we really go beyond this network?

One way of keeping the issues connected would be to concentrate on the fear and vulnerability many people feel, bearing in mind the tendency towards morosity noted by the person who walked around our living sculpture earlier in the day. If all the projects address those three things — fear, vulnerability and morosity — then, regardless of the issue chosen, the vision will remain consistent.

To me, poverty is not only financial. There is moral and intellectual poverty, and I think it would be a pity to reduce the theme of poverty to something purely material.

Once we begin to recognize the wealth we have within us, we can go forward, using our energies as a force to move the economy and the political system. Considering the process in this way, we can appreciate the importance of working on the causes rather than the consequences.

### Celebrating Life

#### Promoting a Culture of Joyful Resistance

When we speak of consciousness-raising and struggle, we must not forget our need for fun, celebration and pleasure in our lives. These are part of our humanity. And I feel that it is part of our responsibility as artists to nurture pleasure and beauty.

I find that's what is missing in citizens' groups and activist groups. The subjects are pretty heavy. During all the years I was working with a committed activist political group, it was nothing but "solidarity forever." You have to fight that by promoting a creative, artistic vision with a much more joyful spirit.

But how can we reconcile this festive aspect with a society in which we are encouraged to have fun in order to forget the real problems? How can we differentiate our activities from other festive activities that do not aim at tackling social injustice?

The word *festival* is somewhat disturbing to me, and so is *spectacle*. Perhaps we could use the word *celebration*, which includes all sorts of artistic events. We can't speak of a festival when a traumatic event is involved, such as the 1989 massacre at the École Polytechnique in Montréal, which left 14 women dead. But we can speak of celebration — the celebration at least of life.

The festive aspect can often sink into clownishness. There is also something poetic in art.

There is a big difference between creating culture and consuming it, because creating involves drawing on the depths of our being, while consuming is a very passive act.

In our society, our culture has been stolen from us, marketed for consumption and sold back to us. But our work as engaged artists — or engaged people with artistic sensibilities — is to lay the groundwork for a truly oppositional culture. While Montréal is a city of spectacles with a worldwide reputation, not everyone can buy CDs or attend plays at Place des Arts.

Jolting people out of their morosity.

### NOTES

1. See *LEVIER's First Orientation Meeting*, p. 22, for information on these individuals.
2. See the account of the roundtable *SEXE! Art Action* which he organized, p. 90, and the description of his humanist activist art project *Standard II and III*, pp. 266–267.
3. See his participation in the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 35 and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 74 and p. 79. See also the descriptions of the humanist activist art projects he has taken part in, *Une chanson pour un logement*, pp. 196–197, and *La Virevolte en musique et en chansons*, pp. 198–199; as well as the analysis of the project *Le Cirque en Ca\$h: où rien n'est caché*, in which he also took part, in the text by Caroline Alexander Stevens, "How Shall I Live?", pp. 279–281. Norman acted as coordinator of this book and in this capacity he wrote the Foreword entitled *When Activists and Artists Become One*, pp. 9–10.
4. Montréal: VLB, coll. Parti pris actuel, 1994.
5. Québec: Nota bene, coll. Interventions, 2000.
6. See her participation in the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, pp. 32–36, and her text "How Shall I Live?", pp. 276–290.
7. Since that meeting, several of the people invited have changed positions and one of them has passed away.
8. As transcribed by Manon Brunet.

Community Arts<sup>1</sup>

Invitation to an Information Meeting

In the Agora de la danse  
laboratory space  
840 Cherrier,  
Montréal  
  
May 9, 2002

*Engrenage Noir / LEVIER's first public activity was an opportunity to provide an overview of community art practices associated with sociopolitical struggles. There were not many practitioners in Québec at the time who had developed a critical analysis linking community art and activism, and those who had were not very well known. It became one of LEVIER's missions to circulate information about Québec-based community art projects, including Judéo-Madrigal, a project that was familiar to LEVIER on account of Devora Neumark's involvement with it. And as all activism starts from where one is, LEVIER invited two of the key people involved in this project to present it as a case study. Additionally, a call was extended to Ontario, where experiments rooted in both practice and theory were already carried out. This was also an opportunity to share the reflections and suggestions of those who had been invited to two preliminary days of brainstorming on the sociopolitical orientations and operating procedures of future LEVIER-supported projects.<sup>2</sup>*

*Those present at this inaugural public event also received concrete preparatory information on the training and exchange program to be held in the fall of 2002. It was explained that participating in the training and exchange program was a necessary step in order to be eligible to apply for funding and that the eventual application would have to be drafted jointly by the artist(s) and the community organization hosting them.*

*The response, in terms of the number of people present, surpassed LEVIER's expectations and revealed a hunger for critical reflection, because the evening quickly turned into a discussion of such questions as: Is community art only relevant with marginalized people, and how do we define marginalization? Aren't we re-inscribing the victimization of those people who are labelled "marginal?" What is the definition of community? Is it the artist or the community that receives funding support, and how does this make a difference? Will LEVIER follow the same procedures as the Canada Council? What responsibility should LEVIER take with regard to creative processes that trigger strong emotions? Some artists asked: "Am I going to become a social worker?" It was clear from the beginning of LEVIER's activities that the questions involving funding were closely connected to the reflexive process related to the practice of community art.*

THE PROGRAM AND HIGHLIGHTS OF THIS MEETING ARE AS FOLLOWS:

<b>Welcome and introduction to Engrenage Noir / LEVIER</b> Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon	An experience in community art from the point of view of an artist: <i>How Collective Creation Changes the Artist</i> Hélène Engel, singer Note that the other project members could not take part because of their need for anonymity.
<b>Community Arts: Definition, Context and Problems</b> Melanie Fernandez, then head of the Education Program at the Art Gallery of Ontario.	
<b>The Judéo-Madrigal project<sup>3</sup> (1997)</b> — creation of a vocal piece with a group of women who had experienced conjugal violence and were housed temporarily at the women's shelter Auberge Shalom... pour femmes. An experience in community arts from the point of view of a host organization: "Stand Up and Smile at Life..." Diane Sasson, Director of Auberge Shalom... pour femmes since 1995.	<b>The Artists and Community Collaboration Fund (ACCF) of the Canada Council for the Arts</b> Claude Schryer, of the Inter-Arts Office of the Canada Council for the Arts (It should be noted that at this time, in 2002, the Fund was only a temporary project; in 2007 it became the Artists and Community Collaboration Program and was integrated into the Council's programs in all disciplines, with permanent funding.)

*I am interested in the spiritual dimensions of sound and in the relationship between art and nature. I work in electro-acoustics, interdisciplinary art, acoustic ecology and arts management. I believe in art as social change.*  
— Claude Schryer

*There is no one specific way to engage in community art practice  
— other than it is a process-based production  
The ways of working evolve out of the collaborative exchange*

## Highlights of Community Arts: *Invitation to an Information Meeting*

### Community Arts: Definition, Context and Problems

Melanie Fernandez

*I have been passionate  
about community  
cultural development  
for as long as I can  
remember.*

*I profoundly believe  
that strong, healthy  
communities are  
culturally diverse  
and creative.*

— Melanie Fernandez

In Ontario, we use the term “community arts,” which can mean many things — from people working in creative ways in their leisure time, for example, community theatre productions, choirs, craft guilds, people who paint, quilt, etc., as hobbies. These are all important and vital creative activities within a community, but when I speak of “community arts” I am speaking about professional artists working with a “community” as facilitators to engage the community’s own creativity. It could be in any art form: visual arts, theatre, dance, writing, music, new media, etc. The artist works to assist the community to express their own issues artistically whether they are issues about economic status, gender, isolation, identity, or a celebration or commemoration — it is a mechanism of giving voice and form to community issues. When I speak about “community” I mean a self-defining group of people who are bound together by common bonds that could be ethno-racial, linguistic, geographic, faith, gender, interest, etc.

There is no one specific way to engage in community art practice — other than it is a process-based production. The ways of working evolve out of the collaborative exchange.

In other parts of the world different terminology is used to name community arts. Australia started with the term community arts and evolved to the term now used, “community cultural development.” In the United States you will hear “art in the public interest” from artists and arts councils, while foundations refer to “cultural democracy.” In Britain, and generally elsewhere in Europe, the term “community arts” has now evolved to “socially-engaged” arts practice and more recently, “littoral arts.” There is a theoretical framework that underpins all of these ways of “naming” a process that comes out of modernism that you can read extensively about as it has been the subject of many publications.

In Ontario, the Ontario Arts Council produced a workbook to assist artists and communities better understand the community art process.<sup>4</sup> We identified the following four principles of community art: 1) Mutual respect; 2) Process and consensus; 3) Inclusivity; 4) Generosity of spirit.

In all of the projects that I have had experience with, a transformation has occurred. It is difficult to measure the notion of “transformation” — it could be a project that gives a community the cohesion and confidence to fight for greenspace, or it could give the youth the ability and skills to voice their issues, or give a union the mechanism to acknowledge their contribution of their work to the history of a community.

There are also a number of tensions in community art. We have to acknowledge within the professional arts community that there is a tension in understanding the artistic outcome of community art projects and valuing them as process-based creations. Since in community art the process is equally important as the product or outcome, standard criteria for making aesthetic judgments do not apply; often the “established” art community questions the “quality” of the product as art. I believe more dialogue is needed between and within the artistic community to create these understandings and many more projects need to be developed, implemented and written about critically to grow a new understanding of this practice. We often do not remember that the arts and cultural community is a balanced ecology, not just one type of practice; the ecology has to be better understood and nurtured.

Another tension for me that has to be better understood, explored and written about is the notion that community art (as I have described it) is really a Western construct and that non-Western societies produce culture (and art) in very different ways — ways that are community-based, rooted in traditions and sacred (world view) beliefs. In many aboriginal societies, art is produced with a specific function within a community.

Tensions also arise from issues of copyright and project management. All these discussions and problematic issues just add to the interesting dialogue around community art — what it is; how it is done; how it is evaluated; and what is its place in contemporary discourse.



Highlights of *Community Arts: Invitation to an Information Meeting***The Judéo-Madrigal Project:****How Collective Creation Changes the Artist**

Hélène Engel

*I am a singer, I am Jewish, I am a woman, but I don't know what order to put this in. Additionally, I can also include the fact that I am a mother and wife, music therapist and radio host. Sometimes I lose myself in my daily agenda and my business cards, but my primary passion still and always is humanity!*  
— Hélène Engel

The Judéo-Madrigal project changed my perspective on things in several ways.

**Conception**

- The relationship to inspiration: The constraints to be respected, instead of being obstacles, became a driving force; that is, a constraint itself is not a driving force, but the *situation* of collective creation is.
- The exploration of ideas: Carefully, I explored things I would otherwise have rejected. I was obliged to go to places where I was not necessarily comfortable.
- The space of the *self* — the space of *play*: Artistic creation involves movement between *the self* and *play*, a relationship between the real and the imaginary. The multiplication of selves multiplied the play, and I realized that one of the successful aspects of this experience was that all this play and these selves remained in a shared space that, although moving, was clearly defined.

**Creation**

- The focus is as much on conception and creation (the act of production) as on the finished work (the product), whereas when I create something personal, the conception and creation are only preparation and I forget them. There, the creative process, the *emotions* raised, the way they had to be dealt with, how they changed us, all that was very strong, and it was part of the final work even though the public did not have direct access to it.
- The work of fusion-individuation: This occurs in most groups, but even more in those where one of the major problems is *attachment*. We had to find a way to dare to be ourselves (to find ourselves, to speak our own words, to dare to do it) without preventing others from doing the same, and to support them in reacting to what was offered and to react ourselves in a way that could be *integrated* with what others were offering. This constant renegotiation of the creative space was itself an important factor in creation and a totally new dimension of my work.

**The Relationship to the Finished Work**

My surprise was feeling a *healthy pride, unmixed with doubts*.

While I knew perfectly well that there was still a lot missing before it was “perfect,” that we had lowered our demands as a result of real events, etc., and despite my anxiety about other people’s opinions, I had a feeling of pride and *accomplishment* I had rarely felt before. The fact that I was sharing the responsibility for this creation with the group “for better or for worse” only increased this feeling and the extraordinary sensation that *this is good*.

This led to a fundamental turning point in my life.

I’ve continued doing what I did before that, but I’ve added two new dimensions:

I obtained my degree in music therapy at the Université du Québec à Montréal and I’m now working in that field. It became clear to me that I had to find a new way, a different way, to share the therapeutic aspect of art more broadly in the community space.

In addition, I’ve been seeking to repeat experiences like those and to explore how my own artistic message is expressed, enriched and enhanced by those of others and in turn contributes to expressing, enriching and enhancing those of others.<sup>5</sup>

**NOTES**

1. Until 2003, LEVIER used the plural term *community arts* to cover a range of art practices (theatre, writing, dance, visual art, etc.) in relation with community intervention. The change to the use of the singular was intended to highlight the particular characteristics of community art as a practice in itself and *with* communities.
2. See the accounts of these days: *LEVIER’s First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24, and *LEVIER’s Second Orientation Meeting*, pp. 25–27.
3. See the analysis of this project in Caroline Alexander Steven’s text “How Shall I Live?”, pp. 282–284.
4. This document entitled *Community Arts Workbook: Another Vital Link* is available on-line at: [www.arts.on.ca/Asset363.aspx?method=1](http://www.arts.on.ca/Asset363.aspx?method=1).
5. One such opportunity arose in 2008–2009, when Hélène participated in the project *Agir par l’imaginaire* developed by the Société Elizabeth Fry du Québec in collaboration with Engrenage Noir / LEVIER. See: [www.engrenagenoir.ca/blog/en/archives/category/agir-par-limaginaire](http://www.engrenagenoir.ca/blog/en/archives/category/agir-par-limaginaire).

## Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)

At the Centre Culturel et Sportif de l'Est (CCSE Maisonneuve)  
4375 Ontario East,  
Montréal

November 2, 3, 9 and 10, 2002



*Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon developed this first Community Arts Training and Exchange Program in collaboration with Caroline Alexander Stevens<sup>1</sup> and Nicole Saltiel<sup>2</sup> (who also co-facilitated the discussions in subgroups). It was designed from scratch, because no model then existed for this kind of program outside the academic context — and not much within academia was available either at the time: the program was the first of its kind offered in Québec and was addressed to both artists and representatives of community organizations. It was closely tied to LEVIER funding as an integral part of a longer-term vision for developing reflection on, and critical thinking about, community art.*

*It attracted a surprisingly large number of people, as had the information meeting held the previous May: some 60 people set aside two full weekends to take part in this program, which was developed to provide an overview of elements to be taken into consideration in planning and developing a community art project, and to present the complexities inherent in such projects. The program had been conceived as a kind of microcosm mirroring the community art process: there was a lot of room for participation and for establishing conditions conducive to dialogue, and there were no experts invited to provide the “correct method.” All those present worked together to refine the questions, develop answers and ways of doing things that were appropriate to them, and think together about their collective and individual experiences.*

*This program was a prerequisite for any artist or community organization that wanted to apply to the Engrenage Noir / LEVIER community art funding program. The artists and community organizations that had already decided they wanted to work together had to ensure that both parties took part in the training and exchange program, because it had been agreed that no funding application would be accepted unless at least one artist and one representative of the community group had participated.<sup>3</sup> Those who had not yet found partners prior to the beginning of the program were able to attend and then submit a joint application if affinities leading to a viable collaboration developed along the way. Indeed, some projects did emerge from this process. The program was structured to encourage discussion and sharing of experiences between artists and community group representatives: documentation on the participants’ creative and community projects were on display for consultation; periods for sharing first-person accounts were integrated into the schedule; as were two informal mixers with wine and cheese aimed at encouraging dialogue in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere.*

*In keeping with LEVIER’s commitment to invite a dialogue and critical exchange open to everyone, this program was bilingual and free of charge to all who were interested. People who were asking the same questions about combining the creative process with social engagement had the opportunity to connect one with another. This was a first opportunity to meet people who subsequently developed projects or collaborated extensively with LEVIER and to discover the extraordinary number of people in Québec who were involved, or wanted to get involved, in co-creative engaged art projects. It was also the beginning of a stimulating process of networking.*







*After submitting my doctoral thesis on collaborative creative process in 2001, I decided to focus my attention on my personal life – fully taken with being a parent – and pursuing a career as a personal stylist.*  
— Caroline Alexander Stevens



*A blackbelt instructor in the martial art Aikido, I help individuals and organizations apply “on-the-mat” experiences to daily communication and conflict opportunities.*  
— Judy Ringer



*It seems to me that I’ve always been one of those people who have a need to express themselves and to help transform the private sufferings and aberrations that hurt and kill dozens, and sometimes millions, of human beings. To give meaning, to comfort, to keep from going crazy, to gain perspective and not lose myself, to continue to believe, and to laugh, love and live in peace. From this process, I have memories of wonderful encounters with the social, personal and artistic spheres, with actors and spectators whom I have touched and who have touched me.*  
— Pierrette Simard

*To keep my practice alive in the Eastern Townships where I settled in 1977, I choose to be involved with local creators and artists and to explore with them new avenues for creation related to current social issues. If the future depends on our actions today, it is increasingly important that the arts continue to play a decisive role in creating new spaces of dialogue.*  
— Angèle Séguin



*Musician, author and cabaret artist, I am also a long-time community activist, educator and hell-raiser who believes it’s important to learn the art of “creative resistance,” i.e., how to use the arts for radical social change.*  
— Norman Nawrocki



*I see education as a strategy to promote access to growth and self-actualization for all human beings. My current area of work is in fundraising in an institution of higher learning. I continue to research the area of community consultation and outreach. Other areas of interest include the use of social and new media in community consultation and development work.*  
— Nicole Saltiel





THE FOLLOWING IS THE DETAILED SCHEDULE OF THIS TRAINING AND EXCHANGE PROGRAM:<sup>4</sup>

## Day One

### Getting to Know Each Other and an Introduction to the Issues

9:30 AM

#### Welcome and Presentation of the Program

10:00 AM

#### Community Arts According to LEVIER<sup>5</sup>

10:30 AM

#### Introduction to Working in Groups

11:00 AM

#### Working in Five Groups

How are the following relevant to community art practice? What do these mean for artists? What do they mean for community groups?

- Collaboration
- Participation and exclusion
- Social engagement
- Personal and communal development
- Political engagement

1:00 PM

#### Plenary Review

2:00 PM

#### Working in Five Groups

(different groups from those formed during the first session)

##### Group 1

Code of ethics for the community artist or for any other intervener in a community:

- Before taking on such a project and engaging with a community, what are the ethical considerations that you as an artist or community intervener must reflect on?
- What should be the nature of the relationship between the community intervener or the community artist and the community?
- How would you ensure that the interests of the community and that of the artist/intervener are respected?
- What are the limits of a community art project or any intervention? How do you manage expectations?
- How can you ensure that you will respect the culture of the host community?
- How would you go about developing a system of values and norms, which would be common to the artist/intervener and to the host community?

##### Group 2

The creative act, an individual or collective process:

- Is a creative act a dialogical act? One that fosters a dialogue between people?
- In what way is the creative act within an individual

artistic practice different from the creative act in a community artistic practice?

- How do you find yourself in a collective artistic expression?

##### Group 3

Self-knowledge and its importance for any community intervener or community artist:

- Is it important? Why is it important for anyone who intervenes in a community?
- Should we create opportunities for a community to learn to understand itself as a collective, in other words to learn what is the common ground from which the collective work will emerge? Why is this important to a community?
- Do community members and other community agents or workers understand the principles of artistic practice?

##### Group 4

Conditions for success of a community art project:

- In your opinion, what are the conditions for success of a community art project?
- How is success defined?
- Have you contributed to successful community-based projects in the past? What were, in your opinion, the aspects that contributed to their success?

##### Group 5

Pitfalls to avoid in achieving success of a community art project:

- What do you think are the pitfalls to avoid in the planning or in the implementation stages of a community-based project of any kind?
- Have you had experience with a community-based project that did not succeed? What were, in your opinion, the characteristics that contributed to their failure?

3:15 PM

#### Plenary Review

4:15 PM

#### Artists' Account of a Community Theatre and Reintegration Project

Pierrette Simard of Autonomie jeunes familles [Autonomy young families],<sup>6</sup> Angèle Séguin, author, artistic and general director of the Théâtre des petites lanternes [Theatre of the little lanterns]<sup>7</sup> and Sylvie Ouimet, a participant<sup>8</sup>

5:00 PM

#### Closing and Final Plenary of Day One

5:30 PM

#### Informal Discussion over Wine and Cheese

During which artists and community groups present documentation on their work and have time to mingle.



## Day Two

**Personal and Social Change:  
A Symbiotic Dynamic**

Note: The following workshops were presented simultaneously. Two groups were formed with each group participating in one workshop in the morning and the other in the afternoon.

9:00 AM and 1:30 PM

**Social Response-Ability and Progressive Change**Norman Nawrocki<sup>9</sup>

What are the political considerations necessary in orienting ourselves and preparing for creative community art practice? How can community arts address issues of personal and social inequality, the necessity for equitable redistribution of resources, and challenge discriminatory notions of poverty and exclusion?

9:00 AM and 1:30 PM

**The Magic Potential of Conflict**Judy Ringer<sup>10</sup>

Judy Ringer is a trainer specializing in conflict resolution with Thomas Crum of Aiki Works in Colorado; black belt in aikido; founder of Power & Presence Training in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, which offers innovative workshops on conflict resolution and communication; professional singer and voice coach. Author of *Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict*.<sup>11</sup>

Since disagreements are almost inevitable in any process of collaboration such as those of community arts projects, how can we prepare the mechanisms for their negotiation and resolution? Emphasis will be placed on a body-mind approach to understanding and dealing with situations of conflict as opportunities for personal and communal choice, change and growth. Practical suggestions will be offered on how to build sustainable relationships as decisions are made, as well as through, with and during the process of negotiation when difficulties arise.

4:45 PM

**Plenary Review**

5:15 PM

**End of Day Two**

## Day Three

**Giving Voice — Collective  
Participation**

9:30 AM

**Contiguous Transformative Processes: Creativity and  
Conscious Awareness**

Devora Neumark

How should we consider creative practice in relation to the effects of violence, disempowerment and exclusion? How can we approach each stage of coming to terms with individual and social suffering creatively? How might we assess and prepare appropriate creative contexts for individuals who are experiencing low self-esteem? What conditions can be created to address the need to feel safe, to remember and to mourn? How to play out desire for communal affirmation and participation? What kinds of issues can be anticipated and accounted for when working with individual and social bodies dealing with trauma and its after-effects? How does a commitment to consciousness and dialogue support the process of personal and social transformation?

1:30 PM

**Community Arts Processes and Project Development**

Work in five groups on the following:

## Group 1

## Planning:

- What are the most important steps in the initial planning of a community art project?
- What are the essential components of a plan?
- Who is a stakeholder in the planning process?

## Group 2

## Participation and Partnership:

- Who is a stakeholder in a community art process?
- What is meant by partnership?
- What should be the roles of members of the community organization? Of the community artist(s)?
- Of other community interveners?
- Who should participate in the creative process and in all its steps from its conception and the choice of medium to be used through its realization, dissemination, documentation and maintenance?
- Who should be responsible for ensuring that the administration and the organizational aspects of the process are discharged?
- Who is responsible for the integrity of the artistic process and for ensuring that its contribution to the community organization is significant?

## Group 3

## Maintaining Interest and Commitment:

- Given your own experiences of community art, what



characteristics foster continued involvement and participation throughout the duration of such projects?

- What are the characteristics that can discourage the members of a collective project and that would cause attrition in their ranks?
- What are the conditions that create strong connections amongst partners in a project?

#### Group 4

##### Documenting:

- Why is it important to document a community art project?
- What are the artist's needs in that respect? What are the needs of a community organization? Do they have the same needs?
- How should one document a community art project?
- What are the choices of media and content with regard to the documentation process?
- Should one document the process and/or the final result or product?
- At what stage do you begin thinking about the documentation process?
- What effect does the documentation process have on all aspects of the community art project?

#### Group 5

##### Evaluation:

- Is it necessary to evaluate a community art project? Why?
- When should the evaluation be carried out?
- What criteria should one use in the evaluation?
- When should these criteria be decided upon?
- Who should conduct the evaluation?

2:30 PM

#### Plenary Review

3:30 PM

#### Artists' Accounts

4:30 PM

#### Closing and Final Plenary of Day Three

5:00 PM

#### Informal Discussion over Wine and Cheese

During which artists and community groups present documentation on their work and have time to mingle.

### Day Four

## Nuts and Bolts

Funding strategies and developing budgets for community art projects

9:00 AM

#### Information Session on Private Sector Support

Xuân-Huy Nguyen, General Director of the Triennial exhibition *L'art qui fait boum!* [Art that goes boom!]

11:00 AM

#### Information Sessions on Public Sector Support

Lise Rochon, of the Canada Council for the Arts  
Michel Montagne, of the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec

Documentation on Heritage Canada's programs was made available.

2:00 PM

#### Distribution of Grant Application Forms

Note: LEVIER community art grant application forms were distributed to the participants and instructions provided on how to complete them. These workshops gave participants practical advice on developing their community art projects: key links between social action and political orientation and between art and social change.

3:45 PM

#### Plenary Review

4:45 PM

#### Closing and Celebration



#### NOTES

1. See her participation in *LEVIER's Second Orientation Meeting*, pp. 25-27, and her text "How Shall I Live?", pp. 276-289.
2. See her participation in *LEVIER's First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22-24, and excerpts from her notes on the *Workshop on Group Dynamics* that she facilitated, pp. 38-39.
3. This requirement had apparently not been well enough explained or understood by some of the participants who expressed their dissatisfaction at the end of the fourth day when the conditions for the grant application process were the subject of a long discussion.
4. A detailed account may be found in Rachel Heap-Lalonde's text *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71-85, in which she compares this program with the one held in 2004.
5. For more information about this approach, see p. 12.
6. See her participation in *LEVIER's First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22-24.
7. See also the description of the humanist activist project *Miscellanées* in which she took part with Sylvia Rolfe, pp. 253-254, and her participation in the *Presentation of Three Experiences in Community Art*, p. 40.
8. See her participation in *Presentation of Three Experiences in Community Art*, p. 40.
9. See his participation in *LEVIER's Second Orientation Meeting*, pp. 25-27. See also the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 74 and p. 79. See also the descriptions of the humanist activist art projects he has taken part in, *Une chanson pour un logement*, pp. 196-197, and *La Virevolte en musique et en chansons*, pp. 198-199; and the analysis of the project *Le Cirque en Ca\$h: où rien n'est caché*, in which he also took part, in the text by Caroline Alexander Stevens, "How shall I live?", pp. 279-281. Norman acted as coordinator of this book and in this capacity he wrote the Foreword entitled: *When Activists and Artists Become One*, pp. 9-10.
10. See the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 82. See also the account of the workshop which she facilitated, *The Aikido of Performance and Performativity: Practice(s) of (Co)creative Presence*, pp. 46-47.
11. Portsmouth: OnePoint Press, 2006.

Images taken from the video documentation by Jean Cédras.

*Extracts from Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*

## Process for Applying for LEVIER Community Arts Funding

After this *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)* — as with the one held in 2004 — the artists or artists' collectives in association with their community group partners could submit requests for financial support to undertake a community art project. Each of the two parties had to complete a questionnaire as part of the joint application process: there was one set of questions for the artist (or artists' collective) and another for the community group.

While the questions for the community groups were generally related to the mandate and aims of the group, one question in particular involved the personal motivations of the individual representing the group — a consideration that is not usually part of the grassroots community group culture. This was the question that gave rise to the most resistance, because community workers employed by community groups tend to focus on the needs of their members. For LEVIER, this point was central: each person involved in a community art project brings to it her own baggage of beliefs and feelings. Because creative process tends to stir up those beliefs and feelings, it is important to start thinking about personal motivations at the beginning of a project.

It should be noted that Engrenage Noir / LEVIER did not ask for specific descriptions of projects, nor even for particular themes. Projects were expected rather to emerge from the collaboration and the exchanges between the artists and community group members. Indeed, the first collaborative project was to create together the collective terms of reference: decision-making processes; goals and objectives; and even the form to be given to the art project.

*AS PART OF THE GRANT PROPOSAL PROCESS, APPLICANTS WERE REQUIRED TO COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONNAIRES:*

### Artist Questionnaire

How is your approach relevant to Engrenage Noir / LEVIER's mission?

How do you see the role of creativity in sociopolitical and communal engagement?

What creative skills have you developed and want to share with others?

What communication skills have you developed and want to share with others?

What motivates your interest in community art projects, in personal, artistic, social and political terms?

Describe your previous experience with collaboration.

Tell us about how you understand the significance of process in community art practice.

What are your personal, artistic and sociopolitical short- and long-term goals for working with this community group?

What prior experience do you have with this particular community group?

What can you tell us about the short- and long-term goals you have for the members in this community art project?

What is it about the creative process that has led you to choose it as a means of social engagement?

What do you know about the specific life conditions of the community group's members, and what do you see as the role and capacity for creative practice and community art projects to affect these conditions?

Two of the main issues to discuss and agree upon with the community group prior to beginning the actual creative project are:

- The process for making aesthetic decisions;
- The copyright for any part of the process and the final product.

Tell us what you think about these issues and list (and elaborate) on any other issues you think need to be discussed at the very beginning of the project.

What personal values are significant in community collaborations for yourself and for those with whom you are working? Are they the same; if not, why not? Please list at least three values and tell us why they are relevant.

Tell us about your previous community art experience.

Tell us how you see your role as an artist working within a community group?

What kind of evaluation process do you think is important for a community art project?

Have you and do you intend to seek out other sources of financial assistance for this project?

### Community Group Questionnaire

How do you imagine creative art practice relevant to your community group's mandate?

What interests you about working with this particular artist or collective (for example with regard to their creative practice and skills, sociopolitical engagement and previous experience)?

Tell us about how creative collaboration is important for you and for your community organization.

What goals do you have for your organization, your members and yourself as an individual with regard to community art practice?

What is your community group prepared to do to ensure the success of this project?

Tell us about any previous community art projects you have already been involved in.

Two of the main issues that have to be discussed and agreed on with the artist (or artists' collective) before undertaking the art project are:

- The process for making aesthetic decisions;
- The copyright for any part of the process and the final product.

Tell us what you think about these issues and list (and elaborate) on any other issues you think need to be discussed at the very beginning of the project.

What kind of evaluation process do you think is important for a community art project?

Are you going to try to find other sources of funding for this project?



### Workshop on Group Dynamics

At the Centre Culturel et Sportif de l'Est (CCSE Maisonneuve) 4375 Ontario East, Montréal

December 15, 2002

*Following the Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002),<sup>1</sup> a request was made by many artists to further reflect on group dynamics in community art projects since they felt ill-equipped to deal with the challenges associated with collective decision-making processes.*

*LEVIER THEREFORE INVITED NICOLE SALTIEL<sup>2</sup> TO FACILITATE THE WORKSHOP ON GROUP DYNAMICS THAT DEALT WITH THE FOLLOWING:<sup>3</sup>*

#### **What Considerations Should Be Taken into Account when Undertaking a Community Art Project with a Group?**

- Understanding and fulfilling your role; understanding the role of each person in the group.
- It is important to know yourself. What roles do we tend to play? What makes us withdraw? What roles do people who withdraw tend to play in the background?
- How do we facilitate relationships between people who have never worked together? What techniques can be used?
- How can we use mutual expectations and differences to avoid misunderstandings?
- Establishing the limits of our involvement in order to avoid failure and disappointment.
- Negotiating access to the human and material resources we feel we need to carry out the project.
- Avoiding pitfalls (dysfunctional dynamics).
- What consultation and decision-making process should be adopted?

*Nicole Saltiel  
(see p. 33)*



### Collaboration Agreement (Group Contract)

- Defining the project and the task to be accomplished.
- Deciding who is actively involved in the project (e.g., who should be part of the consultation and who part of the production group).
- Determining who has the authority to grant permission and allocate resources.
- Defining the objectives of the project with the working group.
- Defining the procedure to be followed and the major steps:  
Conception — Production — Dissemination — Evaluation — Documentation
- Negotiating roles and responsibilities.
- Defining the result desired and the final product.
- Establishing a timetable.
- Defining the group's operating rules.

### Pitfalls

- Lack of information sharing emergent from and leading to difficult power dynamics.

### Dialogue, or Informed Conversation

- Try to reflect collectively.
- Don't discuss *against* each other. Don't insist that your ideas be accepted!
- Don't be in a rush to make decisions (in Latin, *decidere*, "to decide," means *to cut off, to eliminate alternatives or potential solutions*).
- Remember that this is a cumulative, positive process.

### Emotional or Negative Reactions — Some Guidelines

- Express these emotions when they are related to the work of the group.
- Act on the basis of observable behaviour, not emotions.
- When speaking, respect the group's operating rules.
- Invite people to reflect on and understand what it is that has made them react emotionally.

### Prerequisites for Harmonious Discussion

- Know yourself and be authentic: contribute what you are and what you do.
- Deal with your fears and apprehensions.



### NOTES

1. See the program schedule, pp. 34–36, and the text by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86, in which she compares this program with the one held in 2004.
2. See her participation in *LEVIER's First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24, and in the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, pp. 32–36.
3. Some people at the workshop felt it did not focus enough on the kind of dynamics experienced specifically in community art; they would have preferred to work with case studies. At the beginning of its activities, LEVIER drew on this experience to organize subsequent meetings better suited to the needs expressed.

## Presentation of Three Experiences in Community Art

At the Centre des arts  
actuels SKOL  
460 Sainte-Catherine West,  
suite #511,  
Montréal

January 29, 2003

*There's nothing banal  
about "ordinary" life. I  
delve into it and find all  
sorts of truths there! There  
are all sorts of accidents,  
including sometimes the  
most beautiful ones:  
I brush against you,  
you touch me...  
— Claudine Cotton*

*I'm interested in  
what happens to  
highly sensitive people,  
marginalized people,  
losers. In my work, I  
look critically at current  
psychiatric practices and  
try to make people think  
about painful social  
questions. I focus my  
action on the zone where  
the cultural and social  
spheres intersect.  
— Céline Marcotte*

*I am interested in  
the role of art in  
contemporary society,  
opening up the  
"creative process" and  
understanding the  
dynamics of different  
types of "commu-  
nities." My work in  
activism and public art  
explores the potential of  
collaboration and the  
"voicing" possibilities  
within public space.  
I am motivated by belief  
in human spirit and  
the magic of people's  
"aha! moments."  
— c.j. fleury*

*Angèle Séguin  
(see p. 33)*

Starting in January 2003, in part as a response to a need that was expressed by a large number of people, *Engrenage Noir / LEVIER* hosted critical reflection meetings on a regular basis in order to contribute to the development of community art practice. Taking into consideration the comments made at the previous meetings, *LEVIER* organized this roundtable to provide an opportunity to talk concretely about different community art experiences. Comparing three projects from various communities led to a better understanding of the joys and sorrows that often arise in this form of art. It should be noted that while these presentations provided a fruitful opportunity for mutual learning, the forms of collaboration they described were not exactly the ones *LEVIER* is most partial to as the decision-making power over the aesthetics, themes and context for the works' dissemination largely remained within the hands of the professional artists.

This was the only time *LEVIER* presented an activity at a centre directly affiliated with the contemporary art milieu rather than a community or popular education centre; it did so in order to raise certain questions about supporting the work of professional artists at a time wherein the prevailing view was that professional artists are responsible for the work of art even when collaboration — with people who do or don't identify as artists — is a significant element in the project.

This meeting was an occasion to ask the following questions and hear a diversity of responses:

- How did the first encounters between members go?
- What problems arose?
- What solutions were found?
- Did you have difficulty maintaining motivation amongst all the members?
- Did the experience have repercussions for you in your personal life?
- Did you reach the objectives you had set for yourselves?
- What advice would you give to people wishing to undertake a community art project, either as artists or representatives of community organizations?

After a creative icebreaker, in the form of an interactive game, there was a discussion with the invited guests. Artist Claudine Cotton<sup>1</sup> spoke of her experience with people working on the street newspaper *La Quête* [The quest] as part of an event entitled *Dépossession* [Dispossession] organized by Folie/Culture [Culture madness] in the fall of 2002 in Quebec City. Céline Marcotte, the Director of Folie/Culture, presented the work of the organization, which over the years has developed a consciousness-raising approach that is unusual in the field of mental health. Angèle Séguin<sup>2</sup> and Sylvia Rolfe of the Théâtre des petites lanternes<sup>3</sup> [Theater of the little lanterns] (for which Sylvia works as Community Liaison Director), and Sylvie Ouimet<sup>4</sup> spoke about the role of theatre work in the reintegration program *Autonomie jeunes familles* [Autonomy young families] for mothers living in poverty, which was based at the Centre le Perlier (located in the East-end Montreal neighbourhood Hochelaga-Maisonneuve).<sup>5</sup> Finally, the artist c.j. fleury<sup>6</sup> presented *Templates for Activism*, carried out in collaboration with legal scholar Elizabeth Sheehy and the Ottawa-based feminist legal community.



c. j. fleury, *Hearings at the Rape Maze*, 2002.

*Hearings at the Rape Maze* was an installation altered through a 25 minute performance piece. Performance participants: two artists, a sax player, private and government lawyers, law professors, and the Director of the National Association of Women and the Law (NAWL). Photo: Adrienne Herron.

*I am fascinated by human development and relationships. I joined the Théâtre des petites lanternes when it was founded and I shaped a unique form of networking with the community that promotes local development and empowerment. I am also involved in the research and development for new theatre works in relation with social reintegration programs.*  
— Sylvia Rolfe



*Les parapluies d'Hochelaga-Maisonneuve*, Programme Autonomie jeunes familles and the Théâtre des petites lanternes, Centre Le Perlier, 2003.



Claudine Cotton, *L'égalité, la fraternité*, 2002. Street installation created with residents of the Saint-Roch neighbourhood in Quebec City. Photo: Denis Simard for Folie/Culture.

#### NOTES

1. See her participation in the humanist activist project *Boîtes à (sur) prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265.
2. See her participation in *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 32–34.
3. See the description of the humanist activist project *Miscellanées* in which Angèle Séguin and Sylvie Rolfe of the Théâtre des petites lanternes took part, pp. 253–254.
4. One of the women who took part in the program *Autonomie jeunes familles*. See her participation in *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 34.
5. See the participation of the director of this program, Pierrette Simard, in *LEVIER's First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24, and in the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 34. See also the critical questions on this project examined by Rachel Heap-Lalonde in her account *And if we were to tell the story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 73.
6. See her participation in the workshop *The Aikido of Performance and Performativity: Practice(s) of (Co)creative Presence*, p. 47.

#### Dialogue Circle

### Is Community Art Therapy? Is it Healing?

At the Mouvement contre le viol et l'inceste [Movement against rape and incest]  
Montréal

February 10, 2003

*The thorny question of healing arose quite quickly in the collective critical reflections on community art practice organized by Engrenage Noir / LEVIER, and it deserved to be dealt with at greater length during a meeting devoted specifically to the question.*

*THE FOLLOWING ARE EXCERPTS FROM THE THOUGHTS EXPRESSED ON THE SUBJECT BY DEVORA NEUMARK AND JOHANNE CHAGNON AND SENT WITH THE INVITATION IN PREPARATION FOR THE MEETING:*

First of all, people are often reluctant to associate community art with the idea of healing, since this suggests that people taking part in these projects are “sick.” Even though our society is sick and causes social problems, speaking of healing in terms of individuals is sensitive. But how can people be well in a society that is sick? And just because we always find ways to adapt to unacceptable conditions such as poverty and exclusion — so much so that we can often, if we are privileged enough, no longer even be aware of their effects — does that mean we should not try to change these conditions? And there is also the fact that to be “sick” in our society is considered counterproductive. What language would be more appropriate to use? Could we say *comfort* or *consolation* instead of *healing*? Or, better still, *wellness*? Or something else? What about the idea of the word *therapy*, which may also irritate some people?

Why has the dominant North American society distanced healing from the practice of art to the point that it seems almost shameful to speak of healing and art together? What can be done to re-establish a balance and reconnect creativity and healing? Is this even desirable?

What is the social function of a creative practice based on collaboration within a group? Since the practice of art, as well as social change, requires collaboration, how can we explore what needs changing? How can we speak of change without looking at violence and its consequences? And how can we look at violence and its consequences without recreating the initial conditions people have experienced? What is there in common between creative practice and alleviating trauma?

Creative collaboration often helps to define the experience of healing, especially when it involves issues such as exclusion and poverty or focuses on values such as forgiveness and communication.



Given the need for a space of support when individuals and groups are going through the stages of healing from trauma, given that there are specific factors that influence whether and how a person will “succeed,” and given that different individuals and groups are at different stages of their own process, what kind of training do artists need in order to be well prepared? Should artists even be concerned with these issues?

What is to be done with works of art that give rise to positive change for one person and which provoke an experience of trauma or exclusion for another project member or a member of the public? In other words, what are the ethical stakes for artists and cultural producers relative to the work they make public?

As artists and other community group members, what issues are you concerned about in the relationship between creative practice and healing?

*THE FOLLOWING ARE EXCERPTS FROM THE ACCOUNT OF THE MEETING ITSELF, WHICH TOOK THE FORM OF A DIALOGUE CIRCLE:<sup>1</sup>*

*Early on, LEVIER began to document its activities without identifying individual contributors by name in order to emphasize the collective nature of the reflections inherent, for example, in the process of convening a dialogue circle. The opinions expressed are not necessarily shared by LEVIER.*

### **Is There a Separation or a Profound Connection between Art and Healing?**

To start the discussion, preliminary definitions of the concepts were proposed: a creative practice is a positive action that is strengthening, while a healing practice is intended to eliminate some kind of suffering. The reactions were swift in coming, stressing the profound connections between healing and art, because art is a creative activity, the antithesis to stagnation and passivity, which are signs of a lack of well-being. Through creativity, art gives rise to questions and raises awareness. “Just because we’re not sick doesn’t mean we’re healthy!” joked one participant, who expressed a different view of healing, not only as eliminating the bad, that is the process of taking something away, but also as an awakening of awareness of forces in the self, of what is positive in oneself or others.

### **The Role of Art and the Artist**

The role of the artist in community art is to initiate this creative activity, to be the catalyst of this creativity that others will then explore in their own ways. While the artist instigates this activity, others then choose what they will do with the experience. Art is a tool of detachment from oneself: through the artistic process, people can gain some distance from themselves. This allows them to adopt a different perspective on themselves and on everyday life, and fosters openness to other things and other people. Art can then be not only a means of expression, but also a bridge to other people, a way to establish a kind of conversation.

### **What Does this Mean Concretely?**

“I want a magic formula!” said one participant from a community group. People’s ideas were wonderful, but in community art, you also have to think about their application. How to spark creativity, how to bring about this awareness of the self, this distance and openness to others, in groups of people who are often very different, with diverse histories and experiences? Unfortunately (or actually, quite fortunately), there is no magic formula. “What is valuable is the openness, the recognition of tiny steps and small results.”

As community artists, we start a creative process, and we have to be ready to accept all its manifestations, as small and slow as they may be. Therefore, what is important is not only the result but also the process itself: the recognition of the action is essential, but the process and the reflection that precedes it is equally important. In fact, two avenues emerged in the participants’ comments, which they felt were equally valid: one emphasizing the process and the prior reflection guiding the action and one emphasizing the result, the doing, with the awareness coming after creation. One participant stressed the importance of providing a concrete example: “Should I teach them to play the drum so that they can express themselves, or should I play the drum the way I like in order to convey the pleasure?” Some suggested that a balanced combination of the two would be most appropriate.

### **The Artist’s Responsibility and the Limits Thereof**

As soon as we speak of healing, questions arise concerning ethics and legitimacy. Is healing reserved for experts? How can we feel that our actions have legitimacy? Often our intentions are good but we have to be able to genuinely accept the reactions we provoke in a group: “You can do a lot of harm if you aren’t familiar with basic psychological processes,” one participant warned. Is human instinct sufficient to be able to rescue one’s self and others and to be able to close the divisions we have helped create? Perhaps it is not always, hence the importance of collaboration between the artist and a professional therapist. But there are limits to the artist’s social responsibility: the other project member artists who get involved in an artistic process of self-questioning and self-discovery also have a responsibility with regard to what they are ready to receive and to give.

### A Question of Scale

It also takes a balanced combination of art as therapy, aiming for individual healing through small gestures in a small group, and activist art, where the struggle is to activate and harness change the world. Where is community art in all this? The question has yet to be answered once and for all — and that is a good thing indeed.

#### NOTES

1. Account by Myriam Berthelet. See also her other accounts: *Aesthetics and Ethics in Community Art Projects*, p. 43, *Presentation of an Experience with Young Adults*, p. 44, and *Workshops on Conflict*

*Resolution*, pp. 48–50. See also the description of the humanist activist project *Podval* that she created with Anne-Élisabeth Côté, pp. 251–252.

## Workshop: Aesthetics and Ethics in Community Art Projects

At the Centre des loisirs  
St-Denis  
5115 Rivard,  
Montréal

March 30, 2003

*After the discussions at the two preceding meetings — the first, Presentation of Three Experiences in Community Art,<sup>1</sup> and the second, Is Community Art Therapy? Is it Healing? An Invitation to Dialogue<sup>2</sup> — there was an overarching issue still unresolved: when does the question of ethics arise in these collaborative processes and furthermore, what connections between ethics and aesthetics are relevant to community art practice?*

*This workshop also focused on the following apprehensions expressed by some people who identified themselves as artists:*

- *How do I deal with the contradictions that may arise between my aims and expectations and those of the other project members?*
- *What do I do if I find myself losing artistic control during a collective creative process?*

*These questions concern the intentions, expectations and leadership of those who identify themselves as artists. The pooling together of all the project members' expectations, a collective definition of the aims, and a sharing of power in the co-creative process are among the main concerns in LEVIER's approach. Nevertheless, LEVIER felt a responsibility to respond to anxieties raised by the above issues. As this one workshop could not hope to exhaust such a vast subject, LEVIER immediately thought of organizing a full day of reflection on the question of ethics, which took place in March 2004.<sup>3</sup>*

#### THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXCERPT FROM THE ACCOUNT OF THE WORKSHOP:<sup>4</sup>

"We mustn't forget the importance of process, or think only of the result," one participant said. "And there's quite a difference between an aesthetic and aestheticism!" another added. "The aesthetic emerges slowly from a process of creation and forms gradually, while aestheticism is an approach to creation, a more general way of looking at it."

"We need to take into account the fact that we are creating with people, not just with materials! To me, ethics is more important than aesthetics," said a participant. Another said that the aesthetics should be determined by the ethics of the group involved in the creation. Concepts of aesthetics differ depending on the ethics underlying them. Several participants stated that aesthetics should not dominate or be put ahead of the process or the values guiding it.

Although the process of collective creation is gratifying and enriching, it has its share of tension and uncertainty; one of the knots practitioners of community art have to untie is the relationship between the values of the project members and those of the artist or artists should they be different one from the other.

The aesthetics of the process should also be distinguished from the aesthetics of the final product. Community art is largely guided by different values from the ones other forms of art are based on. Therefore the aesthetics have to be different and more focused on the process of co-creation. But we must not deny that the products, the works that come out of this process, are often of great interest to the participants including the facilitating artist: these results offer recognition that the process has taken place and that it has been successful. This is why it is important right at the outset of the project for everyone to be involved in a conversation about the ethical and aesthetic directions (and the motivations underlying these choices) that each of the members want to give to this broad undertaking.

#### NOTES

1. See the account of this meeting written by Myriam Berthelet, p. 40.
2. See the account of this meeting, pp. 41–43.
3. See the account of this study day, *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Arts Practices*, written by Louise Lachapelle, pp. 52–61.

4. Account by Myriam Berthelet. See also her other accounts, *Is Community Art Therapy? Is It Healing?*, pp. 41–43, *Presentation of an Experience With Young Adults*, p. 44, and *Workshops on Conflict Resolution*, pp. 48–50. See also the description of the humanist activist project *Podval* that she created with Anne-Élisabeth Côté, pp. 251–252.

## Presentation of an Experience with Young Adults

At the Centre Le Perlier<sup>1</sup>  
2187 Larivière,  
Montréal

April 28, 2003

*This meeting was another opportunity for learning and discussion — this time based on the concrete experience of La Réplique [Backtalk], a non-profit organization founded in 1998 by psychoeducator Élyse Benoît and filmmaker Marcel Simard intended to initiate and support vocational and social projects with young adults 18 to 30 years of age who were having significant difficulties entering the job market. La Réplique invites young people to participate in producing and distributing short documentary videos.*

*Élyse Benoît presented the organization's work and screened the documentary Créateurs Atypiques [Unconventional creators], which was introduced by some of the young people involved in making it. The documentary consisted of portraits of four people who have had a positive impact on society despite their self-proclaimed marginality: Father Emmet John, of the organization Le Bon Dieu dans la Rue; Daniel-Claude, a worker engaged with individuals who are HIV positive; Simo, a graffiti artist; and Omar Aktouf, an activist who teaches management at the École des hautes études commerciales (HEC) in Montréal.*

*After the suicide of  
a young man I knew,  
I started to question  
everything, including the  
methods I had relied  
upon up until then.  
I adopted four principles  
based on my observations:  
don't work with pre-  
existing programs, but  
rather help young people  
to appropriate the rules;  
work in film supporting  
the creativity of young  
people; help others who  
are in the same situation;  
develop a life project.  
— Élyse Benoît*

*Certain questions raised by people at this meeting led Engrenage Noir / LEVIER to organize subsequent gatherings focused on nonviolent communication,<sup>2</sup> ethics<sup>3</sup> and copyright.<sup>4</sup>*

*THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXCERPT FROM THE ACCOUNT OF THE MEETING:<sup>5</sup>*

Questions of identity and representation were clearly at the centre of this project: Who is the audience? Who is being addressed, and how? How did the young people represent themselves? The documentary was greeted with enthusiasm because of the many and varied forms of marginality presented. The quality of the video was also greatly appreciated. One person who was present at this event made the following comment about the potential of such creative projects: "Thank you for showing us that you're not just victims of a system, that you can rise above that system and its categories with works like these."

There were also some questions about the direction and implications of the project: How much co-creation is really possible when the director, a filmmaker, has editorial control? Who holds the copyright on such a collective creation? These questions also led some people to ask about the means for evaluating the project: How can the effects of such a project on the members in the short, medium and long term be measured? How can criteria of success be established, and according to what underlying values?

*...you can rise above that system and its categories  
with works like these*

### NOTES

1. The centre where the reintegration program Autonomie Jeunes familles took place: see the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 34, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 73-74; see also their participation in the *Presentation of Three Experiences in Community Art*, p. 40.
2. See the account of that meeting written by Myriam Berthelet, pp. 48-50.
3. See the account of this study day, *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Arts Practices*, written by Louise Lachapelle, pp. 52-61.
4. See the account of that meeting, pp. 62-64.
5. Account written by Myriam Berthelet. See also her other accounts: *Is Community Art Therapy? Is It Healing?*, pp. 41-43, *Aesthetics and Ethics in Community Art Projects*, p. 43, and *Workshops on Conflict Resolution*, pp. 48-50. See also the description of the humanist activist project *Podval* that she created with Anne-Élisabeth Côté, pp. 251-252.

Performance Lecture and Dialogue Circle

**À propos de détresse et tendresse** [On distress and tenderness]

followed by

**Variations sur la boîte de Pandore** [Variations on Pandora's Box]

In an apartment in the  
Rosemont neighbourhood  
Montréal

May 25, 2003

*In À propos de détresse et tendresse [On distress and tenderness], a performance conceived especially for Engrenage Noir / LEVIER, the interdisciplinary artist Suzanne Boisvert<sup>1</sup> shared some questions raised by her project Détresse et tendresse, an art project about the margins of invisibility, during which she worked with young children and with elderly people living with Alzheimer's Disease. Suzanne invited everyone present during the performance to subsequently "squat" her apartment and spend some time talking together as a large group with a facilitator and then in small informal clusters about the problems presented in the performance and the issues involved in community-based co-creation; this part of the meeting was entitled Variations sur la boîte de Pandore [Variations on Pandora's box]. Some of these subjects, such as the concern about collaborative creative processes and the danger of appropriating other people's stories, had already been discussed in previous conversations hosted by LEVIER. The unique aspect of this meeting was the personal vulnerability of the participants and the fact that this performance lecture was made a deliberate part of Suzanne's everyday life as it took place in the intimate context of her apartment, where both friends as well as strangers from outside her personal circle of acquaintances had gathered at her invitation.*



THE FOLLOWING ARE FRAGMENTS OF THE REFLECTIONS ABOUT CO-CREATION AS PROPOSED BY SUZANNE BOISVERT TO THE PARTICIPANTS PRIOR TO THE MEETING:

- All artists who become seriously involved in this practice must subject themselves to radical and constant questioning and must be ready to re-examine all the artistic strategies in which they have been trained. The practices of engaged art deconstruct the modernist paradigm of the artist as living outside the citizen's world, a member of a kind of caste, partaking of the myth of the romantic hero who is not subject to the contingencies of everyday life that are the lot of common mortals. Through our practice, we not only maintain that art and life are inextricably connected, but we also claim our right to be full citizens, contributing to the order – and the disorder – of the world.
- Art is not a concept but a vision, a vision that is constantly developing. The liveliness of art is not finished works presented in public, but rather an extension and a capacity to resonate in the imagination, the hearts and the actions of people who interact with them. Sharing creation in projects in the community: How do we find a balance between exercising leadership and expertise in our field and showing genuine openness, flexibility and receptiveness to different approaches, to goals that are not strictly artistic and to other ways of seeing, in order to do things that are part of the cultures of the groups we are working with?

- To speak of sharing creation and leadership is also to speak of democracy and power relationships. How do we put these questions on the table, how do we negotiate these power relationships and decision-making powers with transparency and without manipulation? These problems arise clearly when there is a production at the end of the process.
- With the prospect of making the work public, don't artists give in to the intimidation of professional standards? Are we ready to take responsibility for aesthetics that are different from those that are associated with our individual practice or are we ashamed to show certain works?
- In the same vein, we need to ask ourselves whom the process belongs to? Why are we part of it beyond professional obligations, honoraria and artistic expertise?
- About the question of appropriation: Artists who are invited into communities remain outside and protected unless they find a way to integrate into the groups and make significant links to their cultures and their members. There is a danger of using the stories and voices of others for one's own benefit, as many contemporary artists have done with foreign cultures, without embracing the complexity of the imagery they have borrowed.
- We need to identify the places of our alienation and to recognize the need for a popular education aspect in the projects, as in the political philosophy of Paulo Freire.<sup>2</sup> We also have to acknowledge our own need as artists to deprogram ourselves, because it would be naive to underestimate the power of the dominant paradigm, that of the cultural industry. For many of the people with whom we collaborate, artistic references are predominantly formed by television, the recording industry, the major American movie studios, publishers of bestsellers and blockbuster exhibitions in museums. I believe that these dominant cultural models have colonized the imagination of many of us, artists and non-artists alike, and we must undertake to deconstruct them in order to discover together other ways of looking at creation — or not, because in certain projects there may be a genuine informed choice to use practices from mass culture.
- What remains after the artist and the group have gone their separate ways? Have we been able to share our art tools with a view to more than the result, the thing that must be produced at any cost? Will we be able to listen in the way that is needed to understand the more basic needs of the people we work with and to help make it possible for the process of creation in the broadest and deepest sense of the word to continue without us? Do we learn, from one project to the next, to listen better and consequently to have more ideas for working with our collaborators?

## NOTES

1. See the description of the humanist activist project *Il était une fois... mon quartier*, in which she took part, pp. 212–213.
2. For a presentation of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, see note 5 of Jorge Goia's text, *Soma: Origins and Paths of an Anarchist*

*Experiment*, p. 331. See also the mention of Freire's work in Nisha Sajjani's text, *Playback Theatre and Social Justice: What's At Stake Relative to Diversity and Anti-Oppression – Reflections From a Montréal Workshop*, p. 128.

Photographic documentation: Johanne Chagnon.



*I am a theatre director by training, an interdisciplinary artist by adoption, a practitioner of relational art by conviction and a community organizer by passion. A humanist free radical committed to making art part of everyday life. I see myself as a coach in many areas: with people at the end of life, those excluded from the world of art ... anyone and everyone. My motto: We make ourselves possible. — Suzanne Boisvert*

## Workshop: The Aikido of Performance and Performativity: Practice(s) of (Co)Creative Presence

At Villa Saint-Martin  
9451 Gouin Boulevard West,  
Pierrefonds

June 27–29, 2003

*This workshop was a weekend retreat focused on applying the principles of the Japanese art of aikido (the art of peace) in life and creative practice. Judy Ringer had already been invited to participate in the Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (November 2002) and had, at that time, offered to run a workshop on conflict resolution.<sup>1</sup>*

*Judy's weekend workshop, like the training program in 2002, focused on exploring the bridges between being present, individual and social change, and creativity through physical exercises involving centring. This approach is somewhat of a spiritual practice, and as such can easily put people off here in Québec because of the post-WW II separation between Church and State. What the participants experienced, however, was that the connection between this type of practice and community art, and between activism and healing, could be explored and expressed, not in words, but through presence.*

*In an article entitled "Becoming Each Other," in the winter 2003 issue of Power and Presence, her quarterly newsletter, Judy Ringer writes: "It isn't that hard to imagine that soon we will all understand — we are not separate. We are connected by invisible strands of energy, and we are becoming more aware of it every day." During this retreat, the participants set themselves the challenge of examining and sharpening their activist creative practices in order to more fully experience the connections amongst them, and of considering how they could bring this experience into their lives. During this workshop what emerged most strongly was a desire to share.*

*Judy Ringer  
(see p. 33)*

THE FOLLOWING ARE REFLECTIONS GATHERED FROM SOME OF THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE WORKSHOP:

**For Devora Neumark, Who Recognizes Both the Activist Component and the Healing Aspect of Socially Engaged Art, the Question Is:**

How can we maintain being in the present moment, which is where we can respond? Too often, we lose our power as we project into the future focusing on a change to come, or wallow too much in the past, concentrated on our wounds and scars. The practice that matters is one that strengthens the bridge between the two. That means one has to be aware of the way the past and the future impede the possibility of presence. This alignment is a process of liberation from the wounds of past and from the idealization of the future.

**Johanne Chagnon Realized from the First Night:**

That her anxiety about the effect of the workshop, namely, "Will I have to become wise and zen?" was unfounded, and that, on the contrary, learning to centre herself would help her to feel more fulfilled. Three exercises had a particular impact on her, and she still uses them to deal with various situations in her life. One, which comes from Qi Gong and was presented by Devora Neumark, enabled the participants to physically experience the exact moment when you decide to "take the plunge," that moment when, after allowing time to really be present in your body, you lean forward, almost out of balance, with your arms raised, and engage fully with life. The second one explored the position of leader through a series of physical exercises in which each person had to lead the others. Despite the reluctance participants might have felt to take this position—which was perceived as a position of power—this exercise brought out the need to have a clear vision of one's goal so that people who want to work collaboratively can find each other spontaneously. The third example demonstrated, again in a physical way, that at certain times it is better to stop resisting and let go. In this exercise, the participants were asked to let themselves fall backward onto their backs and stand up again in a single movement. Amazingly, this was easy to do!

**Barbara Todd Recalls How Much She Appreciated the Weekend:**

It was the first time I took time for this kind of reflection. I remember the movements best of all; how fluid they were and how they redirected your energy with amazing ease, and how surprised I was.

**cj fleury<sup>2</sup> Said of Her Experience:**

The retreat was a gentle gift of stillness and learning, as I dreadfully approached a personal crossroad and was worried about its implications for my practice. Through words, action and meditation, the group sessions provided a lifeline to a drowning and forgotten *centre*... lessons that continue to unfold and reveal themselves in different times and contexts. What lingers still today are: Questions about why I let the awareness fade, sometimes for months... Where does my intention "go?" What comes to mind is the image of us — intentionally sitting in a circle, outdoors... how that appears in my vision quite often as I start to meditate...

**Madeleine Marin Wrote:**

It was a workshop that, after all these years, still makes me smile with contentment because I learned a lot about myself, my behaviour at the time, my defence system and my reactions.

Judy Ringer had the generosity and the openness it took to gently lead us into conflict resolution. She never hesitated to speak of her own experience. Her words were extraordinarily simple, sincere and clear. A life lesson that still remains with me. From the start of the workshop to the end, I found myself in conflict with one of the participants. I very quickly had to put into practice what I was learning about conflict resolution. And I thank life, and that participant, for putting me in that situation. The lesson was all the more intense and revealing.

I also really appreciated the exercises in pairs outdoors, especially the falls. The discussions too, but not quite as much. I adored the group and our interactions. To sum up, it was a workshop that opened my eyes and opened doors to minute-by-minute reality.

**And Finally, Here Are Judy Ringer's Own Thoughts:**

It's been a long time since our weekend gathering and it seems like it was just yesterday. I remember the fun we had outdoors (and in) moving together, practicing aikido and applying the physical techniques to all the various arenas of life. I recall the group going deep with the material and creating meaning that expanded my own thinking as I saw my art through your eyes. My work with LEVIER taught me that centring is a moment of creation. When we choose to centre, we create life differently. I often mention that moment of realization in my workshops, and you are all with me then.

NOTES

1. See her participation in *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program* (2002), p. 35, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 82.

2. See her participation in the *Presentation of Three Experiences in Community Art*, p. 40.

## Workshop on **Collective Creativity**

A room at l'Université du  
Québec à Montréal  
320 Sainte-Catherine East,  
Montréal

October 18, 2003

*This meeting, which for the first time brought together all the artists, staff members from the community organizations and the grassroots members of these organizations from the community art projects that were funded in 2003, was part of the support provided by Engrenage Noir / LEVIER. As stated in the collaborative agreement signed at the outset of each LEVIER-funded project, all grant recipients had to take part in two such meetings per year during the course of their project. The purpose of these meetings was to allow everyone to share their experience and skills in a mutually supportive way and to nurture the creation of a network with a critical mass of people dealing with the same types of issues and problematics.*

*LEVIER invited the artist Élisabeth Couture to the meeting, whose theme was collective creativity, to facilitate a ritualized process of individual and collective creation using practical exercises. Soon after this activity, the participants were asked to divide up into three subgroups, made up respectively of artists, community organization staff members and grassroots members of the organizations who were hosting the different community art projects. The idea behind this division was to create peer groups across the different projects.*

*Surprisingly, or not, many of these grassroots members spontaneously joined the artists' group, because they considered themselves artists too, and not just project members. For LEVIER, this experience sparked reflection on the convenient categories that had until then been used to define the roles of the people involved in community art projects, and more particularly about the artist's status. This reflection, which resulted in a profound questioning of the division of responsibilities within the art projects, eventually led to a change in the way LEVIER granted financial support to collaborative projects of this kind. Indeed, up until that point, LEVIER had chosen to pay honoraria directly to the artists; ever since 2008 when the new funding cycle began, LEVIER adjusted this process so that the entire group manages the funding available for community art projects collectively and each member is paid. The change, however, was not only of a monetary nature; it also reflects a different and more equitable sharing of available resources as an affirmation of the collaborative dynamic of collective creativity.<sup>1</sup>*

### NOTE

1. For more on this subject, see the Conclusion *In Our Lifetime*, p. 369.

## Workshops on **Conflict Resolution**

At the International Centre  
for Conflict Resolution and  
Mediation  
774 Saint-Joseph Boulevard,  
Montréal

December 3, 2003  
and January 25, 2004

*A significant concern from the outset of LEVIER'S activities has been the interpersonal conflicts that may arise in the course of the collaborative creative process. LEVIER is concerned with this because it considers that conflict is inevitable — as it is the energy of change and evidence of the resistance to change — and because LEVIER believes that it is very important in situations of co-creation to develop an approach that invites everyone to act in such a way that conflicts, when they do arise, are treated as opportunities for learning and even creation.*

*There are many strategies for dealing with conflict. In the Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002), Judy Ringer's workshop<sup>1</sup> proposed a corporal approach based on aikido. In 2003–2004, two sessions led by professional mediator Johanne Robitaille focused on nonviolent communication.<sup>2</sup>*

### THE FOLLOWING IS AN ACCOUNT OF THESE TWO SESSIONS:<sup>3</sup>

Community art is based on interpersonal relationships formed before, during and after collective creation amongst artists, participants and community organizers, whose roles sometimes overlap. The objectives and interests of each person are various and different; there are many potential conflict situations, which can be springboards to a different kind of communication.

This was the challenge taken up by Johanne Robitaille, who had trained with Marshall Rosenberg, an psychologist from the United States and the founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, a non-profit organization that is active internationally. Nonviolent communication (NVC) relies not only on various communication tools but also on looking at oneself and one's reflexes and reactions to conflict.<sup>4</sup>

In the theory of NVC, as in the aikido approach, conflict is understood as inevitable; it is our reaction to conflict that makes it constructive or destructive. Johanne Robitaille presented four ways of reacting to anger and conflict as defined in NVC theory:

- Blaming oneself, feeling guilty;
- Blaming the other person;
- Getting in touch with one's own feelings and needs;
- Getting in touch with the other person's feelings and needs.

Conflict arises from poor communication with others but also with ourselves, poor communication resulting from judgments we make about ourselves and about others. Judging and categorizing cut us off from ourselves and the needs that we feel, as well as from our capacity to understand the needs of others through empathy.

## The Four Steps of Nonviolent Communication

Our current culture is built on making and expressing judgments, positive or negative. We thus are more likely than not lacking the vocabulary to express what we feel or the needs connected to those feelings. According to the proponents of NVC, the following four steps enable us to deal better with conflicts and learn to express our feelings in order to better fulfill our needs. And they are useful not only in expressing our own needs and feelings, but also in encouraging others to express theirs.

### Step 1 — Observation Without Evaluation or Judgment

This step has important effects. It may appear easy and obvious, yet we find it very difficult to formulate observations and feelings without making judgments. Johanne suggests that we practice observing situations and describing them without making judgments, simply being attentive and examining what is happening.

### Step 2 — Expression of Feelings

As simple as it may seem, it bears repeating that feelings are different from thoughts. They are often the expression of our vulnerabilities, and expressing what we feel (as opposed to what we think) can help open a door to others. It is also important to distinguish between what we feel and what we are. In order to help us express our feelings, Johanne gave us one list of words that expressed feelings and another list of words that concealed judgments. A tip: when a word describes an action taken by someone, it is not expressing a feeling, but making a judgment. For example: feeling abandoned, in spite of appearances, is not a feeling, since we feel abandoned *by* someone; it is thus an evaluation of the situation that is influenced by the satisfaction or non-satisfaction of our own needs. We may, however, feel hurt, frustrated, disappointed, disoriented, powerless, etc., in such a situation.

### Step 3 — Satisfaction of Needs

"Everyone fundamentally has the same needs," Johanne Robitaille said, "the need for meaning, the need for autonomy, the need for honesty, the need for empathy, the need for safety." NVC also stresses the importance of connecting feelings expressed with the corresponding needs. The expression of needs leads to the fourth step, that of formulating a request.

### Step 4 — Formulation of a Request

Positive, clear, concrete language should be used in expressing our request. This step can only take place if we have expressed our feelings without judgment; otherwise, we risk having our requests be expressed as demands. It can be useful to ask the other person to reformulate our request in order to make certain that it has not been misinterpreted. Faced with a demand, the other person will have the impression that there are only two possible avenues: submission or rebellion. Johanne also stressed the role of empathy, the capacity to be totally present for another person, listening deeply to the other and to oneself. When we formulate our request while being empathetic to the needs of the other, there is a much better chance that it will be well received and thus will help in the resolution of the conflict. The most challenging aspect of this last stage is to give up any expectation of having one's request met in any particular way, or even at all.

While these four steps may seem a bit mechanical at the outset, they can, with practice and time, become well-integrated reflexes that pave the way to emotional freedom. Emotional freedom comes through not feeling responsible for the feelings of others, because relationships can deteriorate if we always put other people's needs ahead of our own. We often feel angry when we no longer want to feel responsible for the feelings of others. We also have to learn to take responsibility for our own feelings. This often enables us to express consideration for the needs and feelings of others, while feeling respected at the same time — to honour our own needs and listen to the needs of others. NVC can be used to support others in their communications as well.



## From Theory to Practice

Although the participants in these two sessions appreciated learning about NVC tools, they saw certain limitations in the theory with respect to the conflicts that may arise in community art — given the time required to master this approach and the vulnerability required to express needs and emotions. How can we skilfully deal with the anger and disappointment, for example, of the people we want to share creative work with? Or how can we skilfully deal with our own emotions in ways that do not involve blaming others or ourselves? The simulations and role-plays following the presentation of the theory showed that NVC requires highly practiced skills, which not everyone possesses to the same degree, if at all. The path of NVC remains to be explored; it can help us become better aware of our feelings in everyday life, but it should not be considered an easy solution to conflict that can be used without long-term practice.

## Other Avenues to Consider for Dealing with Conflictual Situations in Collaborative Art

How much can I get involved in my community while maintaining the balance that is indispensable for my well-being? What takes me out of this comfort zone? Is this essential for any personal or social change? When? Why? How can I assess whether the consequences of venturing onto this shaky ground are too difficult for me to handle?

One artist involved in a community art project who wishes to remain anonymous wrote the following:

By working as an artist in a community where there was a lot of human suffering, I became aware, after many experiences that were not always easy and sometimes even painful, that relationships with others are at the very heart of the work that I do. I know from experience that the process is as important as, if not more so, than the end result. What is different is that the process is not experienced alone, but in constant relationship with others: in my case, with women going through significant difficulties. I think that the way these women related, which was often likely unconscious, was sometimes connected with situations in which they themselves had been, or still were, victims of abuse, manipulation or violence — attitudes associated with their psychological and physical survival. How can I integrate all these factors into a social and creative intervention and at the same time protect myself emotionally? It's not easy. How to be human and empathetic, to develop emotional bonds, while setting my limits, my private territory, when a "woman of the street" calls me at home and asks if I'll let her stay with me or else she'll commit suicide? How can I refuse without feeling guilty? After a few calls like this, I decided to get an unlisted telephone number and stopped making calls from home, because most of the women I was involved with in this project had call-display. At the organization where I work, the phone numbers of the staff are always confidential. I feel there is one crucial question in art as social engagement: that of setting your limits. And it is an essential part of the process of learning about relationships and creation.

This example was used as a case study in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*.<sup>5</sup> It shows how important it is to approach relational issues ethically: it is not so much a matter of moral correctness as of finding a way of aligning values and actions. And how can we create practices and conditions that will make those alignments possible?

### NOTES

1. See her participation in the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 35, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 82.
2. This approach was the subject of a workshop given in 2004 as part of the second *Community Art Training and Exchange Program*. See the presentation of this workshop led by Devora Neumark, *Nonviolent Communication*, in the program schedule, p. 69, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 82–83.
3. Account by Myriam Berthelet. See also her other accounts: *Is Community Art Therapy? Is it Healing?*, pp. 41–43, *Aesthetics and Ethics in Community Art Projects*, p. 43, and *Presentation of an Experience with Young Adults*, p. 44. See also the description of the humanist activist project *Podval*, which she created with Anne-Élisabeth Côté, pp. 251–252.
4. These workshops had a significant impact on at least two people who talked about them in their interviews for this book: Dean Nellis, alias Mélodie, from the community art project *On mijote ensemble*, p. 149, and Marc-Antoine Vermette, from the humanist activist project *Un festival perpétuel*, p. 240.
5. See the program schedule, pp. 66–70, and the text by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86, in which she compares this program with the one held in 2002.

*Conflict is understood as inevitable;  
it is our reaction to conflict that makes it constructive or destructive*

## Study Day: **Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices**

At La Caserne 18–30  
3622 Hochelaga East,  
Montréal

March 13, 2004

*I am co-director of a yoga studio dedicated to building community, living the principles of non-violence, self-acceptance and compassion. Our meditation project supports local and international causes.*  
— Joanne Gormley

*Some of our Elders compare colonization to a giant jigsaw puzzle that has been dropped, so that our worlds as Aboriginal peoples have been broken into millions of pieces. I have been working for a long time to gather up these fragments so as to put together my own life and that of my family, and as a member and leader of a community, to advance our understanding of how to rebuild healthy communities.*  
— Kim Anderson

*My work explores my questions about place, language, knowledge, and the body, and takes the form of installations, or bookworks, or films, or encounters and collaborations with others. I daily feel the privilege of making and exchanging meaning through whatever language might best engage dialogue.*  
— Pam Hall

*I love to walk barefoot in the snow. Beauty and nature calm my experience of living; an exigency sustained by the question “How to live, how to live here, together?”*  
— Louise Lachapelle

This study day, combining theoretical reflection and creative practice, highlighted certain crucial questions on both fundamental and applied ethics relative to the practice of community art. It was a follow-up to the previous year's meeting on the same subject<sup>1</sup> and explored the issues in greater depth. Although the participants in the earlier workshop recognized that ethics and aesthetics are closely tied and that the connection is expressed in the type of engagement that occurs in community art, everyone felt it would take more discussion to articulate the relationship of ethics to the practice of community art. Hence the decision to devote an entire day to the subject.

The word ethics has so many meanings in everyday language that it is often difficult, even for people who are deeply engaged and involved in community art, to articulate their definitions of ethics and its application to this form of practice. Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices, a session conceived and facilitated by Devora Neumark and Louise Lachapelle,<sup>2</sup> was an invitation to think about appropriate values and principles for artists working with and in communities. The event aimed to stimulate dialogue and discovery by inviting participants to look more closely at how to approach ethical issues.

Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices was realized with the financial support of the Inter-Arts Office of the Canada Council for the Arts Off the Radar: Initiatives in Critical Thinking program, whose purpose was to gather critical writing on interdisciplinary work, including artist-community collaborations. An anecdote: The amount requested for this event included an honorarium for the yoga facilitation, but the grant budget was cut because that expense was deemed not to be relevant. However, when the Inter-Arts Program Officer attended the session, he understood how it fit in, since it included exercises related to ethical issues. He said that if the relationship between the program and the yoga session had been more clearly explained in the application, the honorarium for that session would not have been deducted from the amount allocated.

Theorizing is one thing, but what do we do concretely? The following two examples of situations were submitted to the participants as case studies. These examples show that failing to take ethical issues into consideration can cause regrettable harm.

- A visual artist working with “problem” adolescent girls in a marginalized community (low income or social welfare; ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities; etc.) takes photographs (portraits) of the girls in their neighbourhood. She asks her subjects' permission to take their pictures. She then has a solo exhibition of her photographs in a prestigious art gallery, sells several large-format photographs to private collectors and receives favourable comments from critics. Parents and friends of the girls, who are mostly minors, object and speak publicly of exploitation and stereotyped representation.
- A group of community artists working on a project with seniors creates a 12-week program around their personal stories and autobiographical writing in order to mutually honour their history and experience. For 12 weeks, the seniors spend four hours a week with the writers and visual artists, who encourage them to mutually recognize their stories through theatre, poetry, writing, photography, collage and other visual arts. There are a lot of participants and the program seems to be a success. The project ends, and the artists stop visiting the seniors' centre. A few months later, one of the artists visits the seniors and realizes that since the end of the project, there has been a sharp increase in cases of depression as well as three suicide attempts among the seniors who took part in the project.

### THE SCHEDULE OF THE DAY WAS AS FOLLOWS:

#### Morning

**Centring Exercise for Body and Mind**  
guided by Joanne Gormley<sup>3</sup>

**Establishing Ethical Relationships in the Practice of Community Art**  
by Kim Anderson<sup>4</sup>

**Dialogue between the Invited Speakers and the Participants**

**Summary of the Morning Session**

**Potluck and Conversation in Small Groups**

#### Afternoon

**Transposing Ethical Models to Community Art**  
by Pam Hall<sup>5</sup>

**Dialogue between the Invited Speakers and the Participants**

**Summary of the Afternoon Session**

**Informal Discussion and Networking over Wine and Cheese in a Relaxed and Friendly Atmosphere**

*In addition to acting as co-facilitator for the study day, Louise Lachapelle had the task of producing a critical text—in accordance with the conditions of the Canada Council grant. In writing the text that follows, Louise worked with her own critical questions and reflections related to ethics and art, as well as those that were raised by others during the study day on ethics. The text includes a summary of Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices, which was based on the final grant report, written by Devora Neumark.*

Analysis of the *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices Study Day*

## **Community Art or Finding the Way Back Home?**

Louise Lachapelle

In the context of community art, ethical issues and related questions often arise only when circumstances challenge established, traditional, conventional and familiar ways of doing (art?) or ways of being (in relation with?). This irruption/eruption of ethics in community art practices certainly reveals issues that also challenge the conditions making many of our contemporary artistic and cultural practices possible. A situation, project or action suddenly makes a way of being or thinking, that up to that time seemed self-evident, lose its “obviousness.” A vision of what art is (or can do) suddenly appears opaque when confronted with another definition of art. The artist’s self-proclaimed social function differs from the role the community may envisage. A value considered “eternal and universal” becomes a mere historical category based on compromise when it turns out that not “everyone” supports it.

*Theorizing is one thing,  
but what do we do concretely*



Each person participating in the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices* received this lapel button designed by the artist Philomène Longpré.



Devora Neumark, Louise Lachapelle, Pam Hall, Kim Anderson and Joanne Gormley.



It is clearly important to recognize a sometimes fundamental dimension of the approach of artists who choose to explore the diverse forms of what are known as relational practices, that is, the area of criticism this approach (which is in the process of becoming institutionalized) entails with respect to certain (established) forms of contemporary art. We may wonder about the extent to which these *relational* practices and, more specifically, the community art practices discussed here, also represent a last attempt to consolidate a theory of art (i.e., to preserve a cultural practice as well as some sort of “refuge value”) at a time when “the place of art [has become] uncertain.”<sup>6</sup> Uncertain, like the place of human beings, one might add. Could it not be that an *uncertain place* creates the conditions of possibility for an ethical disposition?

Questioning the inscription of the ethical motive in contemporary art practice, asking if the ethical demand today acts on the conditions and forms of artistic activity, does not mean seeking to stabilize a definition of art, but rather, from the very place of this instability, opening up the question of art practice as ethical gesture. The encounter with ethics is a turning point in creative activity, whatever its aims (aesthetic, therapeutic, communal or other). When the ethical requirement “irrupts/erupts” in the space of creative activity, this movement opens up the possibility of hearing a demand that is not strictly individual or based on identity in the process of development of a work, a project or an act. *Irruption/eruption* here evokes a movement similar to what Levinas describes in *Ethics and Infinity* as an “explosion of the human in being,” “a breakthrough that occurs in being and *puts into question* the proud independence of beings in their identity which it subjects to the *other*.”<sup>7</sup> Is the relationship to what is other, trauma? Not in the clinical sense, but like a shock that changes the subject in his or her relationship with self and the Other.

Ethics has not always been included in the concept of art, and it is by no means *obvious* that the conditions and forms of artistic activities today are disrupted by ethical tensions. Is art exempt from ethical questions because these questions are an intrinsic part of art (art as ethics), even though the history of art would deny such a concept, or do art’s concerns simply lie elsewhere? After a movement towards autonomy that led art to a breaking point with some of its traditional and cultural foundations (particularly in relation to its cult-like foundations), if not to the loss of its necessity, are community (–based) art practices engaged (not without a certain nostalgia) in the search to *finding the way back home*? Or are these practices exposing themselves to the risk of being currently brought out of the realm of art?<sup>8</sup>

*Nous avons réfléchi à l'éthique, nous nous sommes débattues avec des questions d'ordre moral...  
Sauf que nous ne l'avons pas fait dans le contexte de notre pratique artistique individuelle,  
de nos préoccupations avec la construction de nos propres voix comme artistes.*

*Nous, les artistes, avons tendance à vivre un peu surprotégées  
dans l'espace restreint et l'isolement de notre culture  
(un peu comme les médecins dans la leur).*

— Pam Hall

*Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices* aimed from the outset to avoid an oversimplified view of ethics as a code of conduct or a set of deontological rules intended to regularize or legitimize a practice. The organizers (Devora Neumark and Myriam Berthelet<sup>10</sup> of Engrenage Noir / LEVIER, in collaboration with me) hoped to foster critical thinking about the values and motivations influencing and guiding artists working with and in community settings. We therefore favoured an approach in which ethics would differ from morality as an open system differs from a closed one, a disposition welcoming the return of the question “*What to do?*” a question continually renewed by an open relation with the living process.

“*What to do?*”, in the face of living, how to respond? How to relate to ourselves, to the Other, to materials, to a culture, to values and to the world? And in the face of such questions, how can we even think to respond *once and for all* or *once and for everyone* (as if anything could ever suffice *once and for all* and *for everyone*)? Therefore ethics is not only an attitude of questioning, a disposition and an intention, but also a project—a fallible and perishable project—that exists in tension with (and therefore bound to) a setting, history, tradition and language.<sup>11</sup> Could we imagine, then, that rules or guidelines, which are necessary for forming healthy relationships in the practice of community art, could effectively be generated through ethical reflection so that they support particular decision-making processes without taking the place of or evading the ethical requirement?

During this day of critical reflection, the speakers and facilitators encouraged and supported participants in their efforts to consider how their personal values are related to their intentions, behaviours, decisions and choices at each stage of their creative process. Participants were also asked to consider ways of approaching ethical questions (both theoretically and practically) in terms of their practices as artists and in relation to the context of community art.

The pedagogical objectives of this entire process, as well as many of the lines of questioning that defined it, emerge from the community art practices themselves. For one thing, participants contributed to identifying various expressions of ethical issues based on their own concrete experiences. At the invitation of Engrenage Noir / LEVIER, some of them proposed questions, problems and situations that during the preparatory stages became the case studies used in the planning of the day's activities. Among the themes identified in this way were the challenges created by pluralism and diversity (cultural, ethical, economic, religious and so on), the management and distribution of power and decision-making authority, the various choices that come into play when developing a project or activity, the division of responsibility and the varying definitions of a project's success or failure. In short, the issues raised pertain to one basic concern: how can we personally and collectively create the conditions that make collaboration and co-creative relationships possible in a community art context?

The theme of this day of critical reflection also belongs to the history of community art as artists now begin turning upon themselves the mirror they originally held up to certain communities. The context and conditions in which community art is practiced can on the one hand provoke a loss of naivety, or *reality shock*, for some artists. On the other hand, they can sometimes provide artists with opportunities to gain awareness of their own power (and the power of art), of their responsibilities, of the fact that certain problems exceed their ability or that certain consequences of their actions can be difficult to bear. Consequently, a reflective approach focused on ethical issues also invites one to develop a critical relationship with (community) art. The ethical motive is also a critical motive.

Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has become difficult to deny not only the amazing destructive potential of culture, but its limits as a force for integration, its limits as a cohesion principle and its limits as a relation to the Other: *the bond of humanity* is not a given, is not reciprocal, and can never be taken for granted. In the context of community art, where creative activity is intended as a catalyst for individual and social transformation, how can we assume that art is not an ethical practice in itself and that existence is not necessarily made more human by the forms its culture takes?

*Et en effet, si [les personnes qui créent du sens] ont un tel pouvoir... d'habiller,  
de vivifier, de ré-enchanter, de réveiller, d'inspirer, de provoquer...  
alors, manifestement, nous avons assez de pouvoir pour faire le BIEN ou pour  
NUIRE. Nous n'avons sans doute jamais l'intention de mal représenter,  
d'exploiter, de rouvrir de vieilles blessures ou d'en infliger de nouvelles... de promouvoir  
la haine, de provoquer le suicide ou la dépression, d'inciter à la violence...  
et pourtant, toutes ces choses sont possibles dans le domaine de la création artistique...  
et toutes sont présentes dans son histoire.*

— Pam Hall

## Art as Ethical Gesture?

The artist works alone in the studio and works with others in the "community;" community art is intrinsically social, and *autonomous* art is an asocial form; the artist is *outside* or *without* community: these models are too simple and too polarized to address the reality of community art practices and the question of how ethics presents itself to the artist. The question of whether or not ethics is an issue for art can be addressed today because over the course of its history art has claimed to have a transformative effect on the world. This desire to change the world (shared by many modernist cultural movements) found the conditions of its artistic expression within the movement of autonomization before it was reformulated as a reaction to this very autonomization, a reaction that soon became identified as engagement. The motivations for autonomy and engagement in a way represent the limitations within which many reflections on the ethical experience of artists are confined. Autonomy becomes the legitimizing principle upheld by artistic modernity, as engagement becomes an exclusion principle, or at least a principle of imposed hierarchy. This gives rise to two commonplace ideas that are still prevalent today: engaged art is less legitimate artistically than autonomous art, which is less "moral."

The practices of community art remain dependent on this artistic culture that aims to change the world. Sometimes they are naively governed by it, such as when they reproduce the prophetic or heroic modes of a modernism that still influences the contemporary artistic paradigm. At other times, they tend to free themselves from it, to take actions that are more modest in scope or work in an area of influence other than that of art. All these practices nevertheless complexify the exclusive opposition of the postures of autonomy and engagement to meet the need for a problematization of art that reflects the tensions characteristic of contemporary ethics.

*Dans la poursuite de leurs pratiques, les artistes ne sont pas dispensées d'une réflexion personnelle  
sur la justice, l'équité, et la prise de décision éthique,  
qu'elles travaillent seules ou en collaboration avec d'autres artistes,  
ou avec des communautés non constituées d'artistes.*

*Que l'on travaille en solitaire ou en communautaire,  
à partir du personnel ou du politique,  
vers le processus ou le produit,  
nous sommes entourées de questions d'éthique et mises au défi  
par les conséquences de CE QUE nous faisons et COMMENT nous le faisons.*

— Pam Hall

When the need arises for ethical reflection by artists or for training “in ethics” adapted to community art, what are the challenges or the problems that occur? When a situation calls into question the guidelines, values or means that have until then permitted us to make decisions and choices in *good faith*, in *good conscience*, what is it that is suddenly missing or lacking? In other words, when the uncomfortable question *What to do?* arises, what are we looking for? There is an individual and social reflex to seek help by appealing to “Ethics.” From “ethical” mutual funds to fashionable “ethical” sneakers, the current trend is to seek refuge by turning to “ethics” or claim “ethics” like some value-added label. This ethical flare-up, however, reflects a need for rules, a somewhat subterranean desire to be told what to do, to have our choices confirmed (*whom or what do we obey?*), to “effectively” resolve a conflict or to obtain some kind of legal protection. Sometimes, the process stops there. It will have reasserted an authority, substituted new rules for old ones (in the broad sense of codes, standards, laws and other imperatives), and allowed the avoidance of the sometimes painful or otherwise paralyzing effects of the critical requirements of ethics.

Even though we may acknowledge the loss of certain benchmarks or guidelines that sometimes reveal their limits or their inadequacies, we don't easily abandon the somewhat comforting model of morality (good/bad) in order to work with the complex propositions of reality. Whether we are referring to a morally invested art or a communal ideal — “come and share in the good life which is good, because it has to be good, because it contains the best”<sup>12</sup> — to question our own ethical conditioning and the underlying system of values can sometimes create the troubling impression that our very foundations will be jeopardized.

Nevertheless, questioning the posture we adopt with respect to the rules we have received or those we define for ourselves, questioning our ethical conditioning and the system of values underlying it, is the essence of this invitation to think about ethics in the context of the practices of community art. It is an invitation to explore a posture of tension. Opposition is a familiar posture among artists, and it is common in the history of community groups, who have sometimes constructed their legitimacy by *being against*. Opposition is of the same order as substitution: against the law, for a different law. How to be in relation rather than in rupture?

*Il ne s'agit de rien d'autre que de relations et de responsabilités.*

*De quelles sortes de relations venez-vous,  
et quelles sortes de relations développez-vous dans le travail que vous faites?  
Quelles sont vos responsabilités? Ceci présume que nous n'opérons jamais  
en tant qu'individus, mais bien à l'intérieur d'une ou de plusieurs communautés.  
Nous portons des responsabilités dans toutes nos relations,  
humaines et autres. Comment notre travail d'artiste entre-t-il en jeu dans tout cela?*

— Kim Anderson

*Ethics has not always been included in the concept of art,  
and it is by no means obvious that the conditions and forms  
of artistic activities today are disrupted by ethical tensions*

## Résumé de la journée<sup>13</sup>

Le fait de présenter ce programme dans les deux langues officielles, par le biais de l'interprétation simultanée professionnelle, fut apprécié par plusieurs personnes qui y ont participé, et a servi à mettre en évidence une des zones de questionnement majeures quand il s'agit d'établir des rapports éthiques — soit celle de l'accès par la communication.

En préparant cet événement, nous cherchions à créer la possibilité d'un dialogue où celles et ceux qui y prenaient part puissent apprécier le continuum des pratiques et des approches menant à la collaboration et la créativité communautaires. Grâce à la diversité de l'équipe d'animation, les participantes et participants furent encouragés à s'interroger sur leurs propres pratiques et à se situer sur ce continuum, inscrits dans une histoire qui est en flux, qui se crée avec — et parfois sans — effort critique de la part d'artistes et de communautés. Il était donc particulièrement significatif de constater comment participantes et participants ont pris une part active au dialogue, amenant à la discussion les questionnements particuliers qui ressortaient de leurs propres expériences. En même temps, demeurant ouverts à réfléchir et à communiquer à ce qui élargissait leur interrogation et leur compréhension du rapport entre l'art communautaire, l'esthétique et l'éthique, prenant parfois des risques considérables dans la révélation de vérités au sujet de leurs croyances et de leurs pratiques créatrices. Ce degré de confiance était rendu possible par la confiance établie entre les animatrices et animateurs, et la quantité de risques personnels encourus par chaque personne en présentant son matériel de manière transparente, autoréflexive et sincèrement mûrie. Ensemble nous avons exploré de quelle façon l'art communautaire est un engagement envers nous-mêmes et nos valeurs personnelles, tout en étant une négociation de celles-ci avec les autres.

Joanne Gormley s'est présentée comme professeure de yoga kripalu certifiée ayant de l'expérience en théâtre communautaire et en arts visuels. Elle est codirectrice du studio montréalais Yoga on the Park. Pendant qu'elle dirigeait les exercices de centration corps/esprit, Joanne nous a demandé de considérer le sens de « prendre soin de soi », surtout en rapport avec le travail que nous effectuons auprès des autres. Vu que nos pratiques de cocréation et de collaboration requièrent notre entière présence, on pourrait percevoir ce que Joanne a partagé avec nous comme relevant de questions d'éthique incarnée.

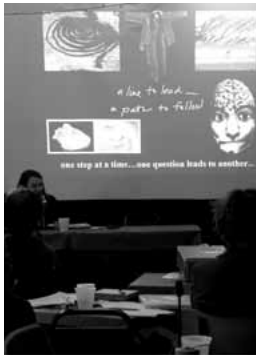
Kim Anderson s'est présentée comme femme crie / métisse, écrivaine, éditrice, chercheuse et éducatrice dont les genres littéraires incluent la fiction, la poésie et des ouvrages savants traitant de questions relatives à la société, la santé et les enjeux d'importance chez les femmes autochtones. En avant-midi, lors de sa présentation *Establishing Ethics in the Practice of Community Art* [Établir une éthique pour la pratique de l'art communautaire], Kim nous a dit qu'il y a des enjeux éthiques présents dans tout ce qu'elle fait. « Une bonne partie de mon travail consiste à documenter les vies et les situations de gens marginalisés (la pauvreté des enfants et des familles, la parentalité adolescente). Je travaille aussi dans ce qu'on peut appeler le mouvement autochtone de guérison — j'anime des ateliers pour femmes sur l'identité et le développement communautaire. Et parce que tout mon travail se fait sur et dans la communauté autochtone, il se fait donc à l'intérieur d'un contexte colonial de gens qui ont été bâillonnés, réduits au silence. Alors, que je sois en train d'écrire un rapport, un communiqué, un livre ou un poème, je dois tenir compte de l'histoire et du contexte dans lesquels je travaille, afin de produire quelque chose d'éthique. Ceci est, bien sûr, en rapport avec notre histoire et l'oppression toujours actuelle des peuples autochtones. » Après avoir parlé du silence imposé, de la représentation trompeuse et de l'appropriation culturelle, Kim a présenté l'ensemble des principes de base qui lui servent de guide, tels qu'ils lui ont été enseignés par Marlene Brant Castellano, une universitaire mohawk. En lisant des passages de son propre ouvrage, *A Recognition of Being* [Une reconnaissance de l'être<sup>14</sup>] à travers la lentille du savoir autochtone, elle a repris les six qualités que cite Castellano : le personnel, l'oral, l'expérientiel, le relationnel, le collectif et le spirituel. Elle est également l'auteure, avec Bonita Lawrence, de *Strong Women Stories: Native Vision and Community Survival* [Récits de femmes fortes : vision autochtone et survie communautaire<sup>15</sup>].

Pam Hall s'est présentée comme cinéaste et artiste ayant une double pratique de production et d'enseignement, et qui apporte un ensemble de traditions mixtes aux questions éthiques soulevées à l'intersection de la pratique artistique (atelier) et du travail communautaire. Elle vit à Terre-Neuve et travaille partout où elle se trouve au Canada et aux États-Unis; elle enseigne au Collège Goddard (Vermont, É.-U.) et poursuit des études en doctorat à l'université Memorial (Terre-Neuve). Alors que Kim s'est consacrée à la mise en place de relations éthiques, Pam a travaillé avec l'œuvre *Framework for Ethical Decision-Making* [Cadre de travail pour des prises de décision éthiques<sup>16</sup>] du professeur Michael McDonald, du Centre for Applied Ethics de l'Université de Colombie Britannique, et en après-midi, pendant sa présentation intitulée *Transposing Models for Community Art Practices* [Transposer des modèles aux pratiques d'art communautaire], elle a parlé des structures nécessaires pour faciliter une prise de décision éthique. « Les notions fondatrices de la bienfaisance, de la non-malfaisance, et surtout du "consentement éclairé", ainsi que les contextes bien développés entourant la recherche sur les sujets humains, semblaient avoir des échos importants dans les pratiques artistiques qui "utilisaient" ou engageaient les autres, autre que l'artiste, dans le processus artistique. [...] la prise de décision éthique autoexaminée est enchâssée de manière utile dans la pratique artistique, que l'on travaille en solitaire ou avec d'autres, et peu importe le sujet ou les



Yoga with Joanne Gormley.





Pam Hall's presentation.



Kim Anderson and Louise Lachapelle.

préoccupations quant au contenu de notre travail. » En prenant pour exemple sa propre pratique d'art visuel en atelier, son travail en cinéma, sa collaboration créatrice avec la communauté médicale<sup>17</sup>, et puis ensuite pendant les réunions en petits groupes, lors desquelles on a demandé aux participantes et participants de considérer les dilemmes d'ordre éthique dans des exemples d'art communautaire fictifs prescrits, Pam a suggéré que ce cadre de prise de décision comprenne l'évaluation de l'information disponible (ou sa non-disponibilité), la considération du contexte et la création d'un espace sécuritaire où partager, atteindre de la clarté et de la rigueur dans l'explication de l'intention, des principes de base et des valeurs, de même que dans la transcription, tenant compte de l'impact de toute décision / action donnée, faisant des compromis, vivant avec les conséquences et apprenant de chaque expérience.

Tout au long de cet événement, Louise Lachapelle a façonné son rôle en coanimant (avec Devora Neumark) les discussions qui suivaient les présentations et avec sa propre recherche et pratique d'écriture au sujet de l'éthique, la culture, l'art et le don. Alliant l'écriture, la photo et le travail sur le terrain, elle s'intéresse principalement aux problématiques relatives au don dans le processus créateur et l'art comme geste éthique<sup>18</sup>. Professeure et chercheuse au Collège de Maisonneuve, elle y enseigne la création multidisciplinaire, la littérature et la culture contemporaines. Elle fait partie de l'Équipe de recherche sur l'imaginaire contemporain, Centre *Figura* de l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Ses travaux actuels portent sur la maison comme expression des inquiétudes et des tensions qui caractérisent aujourd'hui nos relations au monde. Ses travaux sur l'imaginaire contemporain soutiennent donc un travail sur l'habitat, sur l'environnement bâti, de même que le développement d'une approche interculturelle et collaborative de l'habiter. La collaboration de Louise a débuté en amont de l'événement, grâce à l'attention qu'elle a accordée à la communication avec les présentatrices en préparation de *Éthique? Normes? Quelques approches dans les pratiques d'art communautaire*. L'influence de ce processus s'est avéré pendant l'événement, puisqu'il a contribué à la cohérence des présentations et de la synthèse, et à la rigueur de cette enquête sur les questions éthiques et les dilemmes qui confrontent (et trop souvent, confondent) les artistes qui travaillent en collaboration dans la communauté.

## To Give Ourselves a Language?

*Travailler au-delà la relation traditionnelle aux « autres »,  
où la « communauté » était construite comme « public »  
pour recevoir l'expression créatrice de l'artiste. Comme public,  
la communauté était le « spectateur » — l'artiste était le « faiseur », —  
l'Art « parlait » — le public « écoutait ».*

*[...] En effet, comment une visiteuse, une « étrangère », une « venue d'ailleurs »,  
fait-elle pour pénétrer un territoire qui n'est pas le sien avec l'intention de « parler » ?  
Ce fut le début de mon éducation « éthique ».*

*[...] J'ai appris que je devais être soucieuse des conséquences,  
en éveil constant quant aux « droits » des autres,  
et qu'il existait des lieux où je ne pouvais pas aller.*

— Pam Hall

Community art: art in community settings? Collective creative practice? Art as a community practice? Art as a practice of community? From a theoretical point of view, community art practices oblige us to explore the interpretive categories we use to conceptualize art. They also invite us in a very tangible way to explore the categories we use to communicate and the words with which we think the Other and ourselves. Would the first collaborative project not simply be to create the conditions for some form of communication, to give us a language, and to *mutually* establish ourselves as autonomous subjects? That is, free to accept or refuse to collaborate, free to assess, criticize, decide and create together the conditions for the emergence of a joint project (is it relevant whether or not it is art?).

Artists and community groups do not necessarily share the same theory of art or definition of what is a work of art, nor a similar definition (or experience) of what a community can be. Very often, they do not have a shared language to talk about art, or even about how communities are constituted or their potential collaboration. How do artists think about the Other in their practice, in their language, in their work with form? How do people connected with community groups think about the other in their practice, in their language, in the form of their actions? In community art projects, are the people in the community group considered in their diversity and granted the power to freely consent or refuse? Are they subjects acting on



the decision-making process *and* on the creative process, and not only objects represented, witnesses or recipients of the artist's actions? These considerations can be decisive with regard to how a co-creative project is defined and carried out. Tackling these questions, making our presuppositions, projections and a priori the object of our reflections, agreeing to work with the tensions and conflicts that may arise from the artists' lack of familiarity with "the meaning of community" or the lack of familiarity on the part of the members of community groups with "the meaning of art" depends on a willingness to put to critical and creative use what could otherwise become an obstacle to the process of collaboration.

What is a community for an artist? Is it an audience for an art without a public and for practices without an addressee? Are community settings just one more kind of working "material?" A place to work outside the studio? A space of influence, like a new extension of the territory of art, where artists remain able to exercise their prophetic or heroic power and thereby bring about "art as the real value" or save these "poor marginalized people?" Is community art sometimes synonymous with a kind of artistic proselytizing? From the point of view of the community groups' members, is art or the creative project a new kind of entertainment? Just another way of making work for themselves? An opportunity for some kind of self-enhancement by mimicking the attitudes of the artist or taking up an activity that society has invested with value and moral prestige? The discovery of one's own creative potential? What roles do art, artists and creative practice play in and for a community? What roles do the community setting, the groups and collaborative practice play for artists? And why turn to creative practice to *do this together*?

In other words, what brings the artist to community settings, what is s/he looking for, and what brings community groups and their participants to art or creative activity? Must these motivations necessarily be the same? When the goals of the artists clash with those of the group's members, how can the conflict be approached as a *creative conflict*? Amidst their sometimes divergent motivations and intentions, will the collaborators try to find intersections, meeting places that can also be tension points opening to an anxious space, an uncertain place where one can "be beside."

## What Do We Seek to Offer?

*On ne prend jamais quelque chose sans d'abord faire une offrande.  
D'habitude c'est du tabac, mais ça peut être d'autres sortes de cadeaux.*

— Kim Anderson

*Les enseignantes autochtones commencent souvent par se présenter elles-mêmes [...]  
Nous avons réfléchi sur le fait que, dans nos communautés,  
la pratique de l'enseignement commence souvent par une révélation  
offerte par l'enseignante à propos d'elle.  
Dans bien des cas, le récit de l'enseignante constitue en lui-même l'enseignement.*

— Kim Anderson (with Bonita Lawrence) with *A Recognition of Being*

In their desire to realize an artistic project in a community setting, to what extent do artists take into consideration the fact that art is primarily (and, in certain contexts, essentially) a necessity and a value for the artist, who, by definition, needs it? To what extent do artists ask themselves if the community group to which their path leads them shares this need for art or this need for creative collaboration, and to what extent do they ask themselves what takes them *personally* (and not only *professionally*) towards the "community" and towards *this* community in particular? Why, for example, in the history of community art, have artists so often chosen to work with "marginalized" individuals or groups? What do we seek to offer them?

Becoming involved in a collective creative process can help put into perspective the familiar desire to "change the world" that always creates a conflict between the real and the ideal; it is an ambition that has often proved disastrous. The private nature of certain gestures can also raise the question of the meaning and the effectiveness attributed to art. Can the effects of our actions be modest in scope; can they have a limited radius of influence, without losing their (artistic) legitimacy?

The practices of community art imply working *at* the boundaries, the boundaries of languages, traditions and practices (to mention only a few), as well as *on* the boundaries, that is, on what delimits, separates and connects. The gift does not resist boundaries well: a gift will "lose its value when it moves beyond the boundary of the community."<sup>19</sup> For example, in what cultural context other than her own would Kim's tobacco actually be received as a gift? Why, then, should we imagine that

things would be different *because* art is involved? Outside the circle of art, that is, outside the shared reality of a particular view of art, isn't art *unacceptable* as a gift, or as a value? Circulation beyond certain boundaries therefore has its risks: loss of value, loss of identity, and loss of status. But how can the artistic gesture meet the demands of the present if not by being open to these risks? And doesn't giving essentially mean giving of *oneself*?

The realization of a collaborative project therefore requires creating the conditions that make such a project possible. Once again, this is a creative project in itself: what to do? How to be together in relation to what? To whom? All these ethical questions can be given circumstantial and varied answers, answers based on values and beliefs that have direct repercussions on how decisions are made. But what is a value? And how is it related to everyday decision-making in collective creative projects?<sup>20</sup> This question, which was raised by several participants, clearly belongs to a sociohistorical context in which values are being redefined, but it also points to a fundamental ethical issue in community art: to create the conditions where community art becomes possible demands that the necessity for such art be clear both for the artists and the community groups, although this necessity may be different in each case.

### *How do We Dance on Fragile Ground?* (Pam Hall)

*Pour chaque voix que nous choisissons d'écouter,  
il y en a d'autres que nous laissons de côté... Pour chaque inclusion, il y a des dizaines d'exclusions,  
pour chaque autonomisation, il y a des pertes d'autonomie.  
Et bien que je sois consciente de l'impossibilité de l'autonomie,  
de la justice et de l'équité pour TOUTES...  
je sais aussi qu'il surviendra toujours des questions autour de ces principes  
lorsqu'on travaille avec les autres, lorsqu'on s'implique dans une communauté...  
[...] J'ai aussi découvert — et mes découvertes continuent — que de telles questions ne disparaissent  
pas lorsqu'on retourne à la pratique solitaire d'un processus en atelier.*

— Pam Hall

Artists and community groups that undertake an artistic collaborative project embark on a process whose rhythms in terms of time will be very variable. The conditions that make it possible to carry out the project will emerge in the first phase of their collaboration, during which the nature of the project will also be defined. *Dancing partners on fragile ground*. If we consider that a community art project is co-directed by the artist (or artists) and the community group, we can understand the importance of paying special attention to the way decisions are made. This means both the artists and community groups need to reflect upon their own decision-making processes and the values that guide their choices from an ethical perspective. In a A based on developing collaborative relationships and values aiming to be inclusive, the need to decide can be uncomfortable—the etymology of the word reminds us that deciding means *cutting off*. At this point, it can be tempting to give up thinking and choosing for oneself and to refuse to expose oneself to certain conflicts, certain renunciations, certain compromises, in other words, to remove oneself from the ethical demands by evoking a (hopeless) situation, (unavoidable) rule or (unassailable) value.

However, the importance of rigorously approaching the relationship between fundamental ethical questions and the emerging demands of concrete situations becomes clear as soon as we consider the respective expectations of artists and community groups with regard to the collaborative project and the aims of community art as defined, for example, by Engrenage Noir / LEVIER: "This co-creation is aimed at encouraging active participation, responsibility and self-esteem" through the implementation of a project that should contribute "meaningful responses to social and political inequalities."<sup>21</sup> Who encourages the participation of whom in this adventure? Who contributes and defines the responses? Responses that are meaningful to whom? What social and political inequalities are we talking about? And who is experiencing them? This is another whole set of questions that arise at the specific place where ethical reflection exists in tension with the immediate need for a concrete gesture.

During the day of critical thinking, we chose to explore this space of tension. The event *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices* attempted to bring out the fact that ethics can be articulated with the decision-making processes, choices and gestures involved in community art practices. Connecting ethical questions and community art practices can help in sustaining the demanding nature of the fundamental issues that arise from reality, and can assuage the dizzying or paralyzing effects these issues sometimes cause. In turn, the changing realities that call on us to take action and make choices complexify the ethical issues.

In conclusion, I will briefly review the themes covered, which reflect some current concerns related to the practices of community art. These subjects have also been examined with the assistance of the participants in LEVIER's *Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004). The description of these themes was formulated in collaboration with Devora Neumark.

## the sharing of leadership and responsibilities

An artist who wants to become more directly involved in the public sphere and who moves from solitary practice in the studio to collective co-creation in a community setting often feels resistance to giving up the part of his/her culture that is based on a mythical concept of the role of the artist. This resistance may be expressed in a desire to preserve a substantial proportion of artistic control and autonomy in the course of the project, in accordance with the modernist canon that gives the artist the right to make decisions supposedly based solely on formal or aesthetic considerations. This resistance can also be expressed in the simple transposition of personal artistic practice to a new context, that of the community, despite the fact that the approach of community art originates in a willingness to open oneself to new ways of doing and being.

In the decision-making processes, both the artists and the community groups may remain in a familiar posture and persist in their respective ways of functioning. Their collaboration can also potentially lead to the combining of practices and experiences that would, for example, highlight the degree of creative work that is present in the gestures and practices of community groups and bring out the ethical dimension of certain aesthetic processes. How can the sharing of leadership and responsibilities express the diversity of experiences, situations and contributions of the different partners as well as the mutual recognition of subjectivities and skills?

*Je fais beaucoup de recherches auprès de personnes pauvres et marginalisées,  
et je dois m'assurer que le produit final ne devienne pas  
plus important que la manière dont j'y suis arrivée.  
Si les personnes se sentent exploitées, exposées ou pas écoutées  
— alors il n'y a pas de sens à faire ce travail —  
peu importe les apparentes qualités du rapport final.  
Les types de relations que je développe avec les gens lors de mes recherches  
sont donc d'une importance capitale. La responsabilité entre en jeu  
lorsque nous reconnaissons que nous devons toujours honorer ces personnes  
qui nous ont accordé leur confiance en nous permettant de travailler avec leur matériau.*

— Kim Anderson



Kim Anderson.

## the question of authorizations

Certain factors hinder or encourage collaboration, sharing and dissemination. During the documentation and dissemination of any process of creation and, in particular, those that are collaborative in nature, the complex and essential question of authorizations arises. But what does the expression "informed consent" really mean, under what conditions is it given, by whom and to meet what needs: these are issues that need to be taken into consideration and negotiated among the various parties involved. Could we also envisage "informed consent" as not being reserved for the question of permission to publish, but as being called for at other times in relation to the various steps of the process of collaboration and the development of a community art project?

## personal problematics and respect for one's own limits

There is a certain level of risk inherent in the creative process, since it implies the possibility that personal problems may be unpredictably set off (personal triggers). Community art is affected all the more by this question, since it is based on the development of relationships that themselves involve their share of risk, situations of vulnerability, surfacing of certain fears, but also trust, responsibility and autonomy. This relationship between the creative process as aesthetic project and as catalyst for change (individual or social) therefore implies the negotiation of the space reserved for the requirements of the collective creative project in a way that also respects demands related to the expression of personal issues triggered among the participants (individual or group).

It is not always immediately possible to achieve the distance that would allow us to apply the effects of these mechanisms to the creative process, even for artists or for community organizers, who are not exempt from such risks (aren't they all, in various ways, participants?) and who also have to define and respect their own limits. How then to provide space for interventions involving statements of personal feelings and to respect the individual problems triggered by a process of collective creation, but also how to contain these problems or limit them so that they do not interfere with the creative project and so that they respect the other? What are the conditions necessary for everyone to be receptive? What are the healthy, flexible boundaries to be protected in order to remain open to oneself and to the other as well as to the demands of collective creation? How do we think about the consequences of what we open up, and how can we offer, and also seek out, appropriate support for others or ourselves before our own resources prove inadequate in a particular situation?

*J'ai été vraiment touchée quand vous m'avez dit :  
« Nous devons créer des possibilités, pas seulement de l'exclusion. »*

— Kim Anderson to Bonita Lawrence, in *A Recognition of Being*

## NOTES

1. See the account of that workshop, entitled *Aesthetics and Ethics in Community Art Projects* written by Myriom Berthelet, p. 43.
2. See her presentation in this section, p. 57. See her participation in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, pp. 66–70, in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 100–107, and in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, pp. 121–122. Louise acted as collaborating editor for this book and, in this capacity, she signed the Postscript entitled *La brûlure avant la voix or Could this be a love letter?*, pp. 353–365.
3. See her presentation in this section, p. 56. She led a similar workshop in 2004, during the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (see p. 66), and in 2006, during the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program* (see p. 102). See the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 72.
4. See her presentation in this section, p. 56. She has taken part in the development of LEVIER since the *First Orientation Meeting in 2001* (see pp. 22–24); see also her theoretical text, *Community Based Arts and Research Practices: What's Ethics Got To Do With It?*, p. 299–302; see also her participation in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 67, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 79 and 80–81.
5. See her presentation in this section, p. 56.
6. T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004 [1970]), p. 1.
7. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 121 and 116.
8. This reflection is part of an ongoing research project entitled *This Should be Housing / Le temps de la maison est passé*, which focuses on the house as an expression of concerns and tensions characterizing our current relationship to / in the world: how to inhabit the contemporary together? This work is supported by the Collège de Maisonneuve and the Fonds de recherche sur la société et la culture within the framework of the Équipe de recherche sur l'imaginaire contemporain, Centre Figura, Université du Québec à Montréal. A forthcoming essay entitled *Le Coin Rouge: l'angle de beauté* will present this research, which nevertheless has already resulted in several publications, conference presentations, workshops and roundtable discussions. See for example: "Ground Zero : la domestication des restes ou le pouvoir de disposer" (with original photographs by the author) in *ESSE arts + opinions*, "Dossier Déchets," 64 (September 2008), p. 10–15; and "L'intérieur est l'asile où l'art se réfugie," *Voix plurielles*, special issue "La maison et le livre," (May 2008). Note that this latter article is also available on-line, [www.brocku.ca/cfra/volumes/voix\\_plurielles\\_5\\_1/voix\\_plurielles\\_5\\_1.html](http://www.brocku.ca/cfra/volumes/voix_plurielles_5_1/voix_plurielles_5_1.html).
9. As per my request, the excerpts from the guest speakers' presentations appear in French. See the English versions in the French text, p. 55–62.
10. See her other accounts of *Is Community Art Therapy? Is it Healing?*, pp. 41–43, *Aesthetics and Ethics in Community Art Projects*, p. 43, *Presentation of an Experience with Young Adults*, p. 44, and *Workshops on Conflict Resolution*, pp. 48–50. See also the description of the humanist activist project *Podval*, which she created with Anne-Élisabeth Côté, pp. 251–252.
11. A good introduction to this approach to ethics is Paul Ricœur's "Avant la loi morale: l'éthique," in the *Encyclopédie Universalis*, under "Enjeux" (Paris: Encyclopædia universalis, 1985), pp. 42–45.
12. Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 132.
13. This section of the text includes many elements from Devora Neumark's final report for the Canada Council for the Arts. As per my request, the French version is integrated in the English text. For the English version, see the French text, pp. 57–58.
14. Toronto: Sumach Press, 2000.
15. Toronto: Sumach Press, 2003.
16. This document is available on-line at [www.ethics.ubc.ca/?p=document](http://www.ethics.ubc.ca/?p=document).
17. From 1997 to 1999, Pam Hall was the first artist-in-residence at the Faculty of Medicine at Memorial University in Newfoundland. This project was critical to enable it to expand the faculty to work on the female body while deepening its commitment to ethics and representation, and was one of the pilot projects supported by the Arts Council of Canada. See also [www.pamhall.ca/work\\_with\\_others/](http://www.pamhall.ca/work_with_others/).
18. See also the other texts I have published on this topic, among them: "Les cassures du vivant," in *As If All Were Well* (eds. Anne Bertrand, Hervé Roelants, Stephen Wright), a publication linking the 2006–2007 programming and the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Centre des arts actuels Skol, (Montréal and Strasbourg: Skol and Rhinoceros, April 2008, pp. 160–172); *L'art et la communauté : réflexions sur la médiation culturelle dans une perspective éthique* preliminary notes that were used to support my statement submitted as opening remarks during the *Rencontres sur la médiation culturelle* organized by the Direction du développement culturel de la Ville de Montréal on June 15, 2007 (text available on-line at: [ville.montreal.qc.ca/pls/portal/docs/page/culture\\_fr/media/documents/lachapelle\\_notes\\_mediation\\_culturelle.pdf](http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/pls/portal/docs/page/culture_fr/media/documents/lachapelle_notes_mediation_culturelle.pdf)).
19. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), p. 77.
20. In Paul Ricœur's article cited above, we also find inspiring ideas about the concept of values. Ricœur highlights the mixed nature of values, emphasizing that they are "related to preferences, to evaluations by individuals and ultimately to a history of mores." A value is thus "a concept of compromise between the desire for freedom of unique consciousnesses in their movement of mutual recognition, and situations."
21. Promotional material from the *Engrenage Noir / LEVIER Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*.

## Workshop on **Collective Creation and Copyright**

At the Centre Saint-Pierre  
1212 Panet,  
Montréal

May 4, 2004

*The issue of copyright emerged more and more clearly in the training and exchange programs as well as in the projects supported by Engrenage Noir / LEVIER as a basic question to be dealt with in collective creative processes. In addition to this workshop in May 2004, copyright was also the subject of a workshop with the same two guests as part of the Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004).<sup>1</sup>*

*Normand Tamaro, a lawyer who specializes in intellectual property, and Joëlle Tremblay, an artist, were the two guest speakers. Katia Macias-Valadez, who was in charge of rights management at SODART (Société de droits d'auteur en arts visuels [Visual arts rights management association]), also took part.*

*In May 2004, the workshop was called to address questions dealing with ethical issues, the status of creator(s) and the authorship of works.<sup>2</sup> Given the context of community art practice, the slippery ground quickly became apparent as the participants were concerned with defining how the rights should be shared. One piece of advice that emerged from the discussion was that participants in community art project cannot afford to enter into such processes naively: asking that there be an agreement worked out in advance was affirmed by the people present during this event as an important preliminary engagement and a sign of concrete commitment.*

*The workshop provided practical guidelines from a legal point of view and an actual case study upon which it became possible to explore other collaborative projects. It is important to clarify here that LEVIER's position on the question of copyright in community art projects includes the necessity of discussing agreements regarding copyright prior to the beginning of any collaborative process and the affirmation of collective rights involving all project members. The discussion of Joëlle's experience was interesting because it was a case where no agreement had been concluded beforehand, which led to problems. The artist was invited to participate in this meeting to present her point of view about the individual copyright process; a point of view that is different from LEVIER's, which also seeks to affirm collective rights.*

*FOLLOWING IS MATERIAL QUOTED FROM WHAT WAS SAID DURING THE WORKSHOP:*

### **Normand Tamaro**

You need to make agreements beforehand. Ideally, people should have some awareness of what they are doing and should be aware that their work might be used in the final community art piece. Everyone involved needs to know what is being planned; it's a matter of honesty, beyond the fact of the agreement being put down on paper that may or may not be read by all the participants. Often, the artist has some knowledge of the importance of the work, but the non-artist being exposed so closely to a professional art practice for the first time may wonder about what's involved. Such participants may eventually discover that they might have had some rights, but they don't necessarily know that at the outset.

Many of my clients are artists of limited financial means, so I advise them to write their agreements in their own words so that they are clear to everyone. If they have enough money one day, they can have them rewritten by a lawyer, but the essential thing is to be clear with oneself and the others involved in the project. Increasingly in the legal world an agreement is what suits the parties, in words that everyone can easily understand.

It is important to ask:

- What is the purpose of the agreement — does it aim, for example, to clarify the terms under which the work can be circulated and disseminated?
- What is to be done with the work once the project is over?
- Do you or do you not want to prevent the work from being used in other contexts by other people?
- Who is free to use the work and under what circumstances? The question of who is the author of the work is not important in itself; rather, it is whether or not you can claim it as your own. What other people are necessarily involved in this decision?

If members of the group involved in the community art collaboration have tried to respond to these questions then they are already off to a good start, even if the answers are not yet all clear.

Another issue is that of consent: all decisions related to what permissions are necessary to use objects and images within a collective project should be written down or recorded using audio equipment or video documentation. This recording process needs to be done with witnesses present. Consent in terms of the law is valid when it is informed, that is, understood, and

*I firmly believe that democracy depends on the advancement of knowledge, which in turn depends on the broadest possible dissemination of different points of view. Artists play an important role in presenting and circulating a rich variety of perspectives.*  
— Normand Tamaro

therefore it is vital that such consent reflects accurately what each consenting participant is agreeing to. It does not have to be in writing. Indeed, sometimes written consents are not considered valid, as in the case of an illiterate person. Such an individual could one day say she didn't understand the document, and her consent could be declared invalid.

Agreements today need to clarify exactly who has legitimate rights. People often imagine they have rights they do not. Everyone is responsible to know what their rights are and to exercise them legitimately. But there's no need to panic; copyright exists to encourage creation, not to hinder it.

*I have an art practice at the heart of and with communities, which I call "art that connects." The engagement of my creative work implies collaboration, producing a form of collective art combined with a quest for meaning, beauty and freedom. The uniqueness of each person is presented and shared for greater humanity.*  
— Joëlle Tremblay



Joëlle Tremblay, *Les oiseaux de paix*, 2002, project initiated by the De Montagne elementary school (Boucherville) with the participation of the Centrale des syndicats du Québec, community groups, school boards and 56 schools across Québec, in particular the Pierre-Dupuy school (Montréal).

### Joëlle Tremblay "If only I had known!"

I've been an artist in the community for some 20 years. When you create a work of art with your heart and with other people and the collective creation goes badly, it's very painful.

In 2002, 10,000 people took part in the project *Les oiseaux de paix* [Birds of peace]; children and adults from 56 Québec schools, neighbourhood groups and associations did drawings, wrote poetry and sewed things on the theme of peace. Throughout the process, they were asked to discuss what peace represented to them. The project culminated in the creation of six birds ranging from 10 to 24 metres high (with thousands of feathers) which were then used in performances. Artists, musicians and actors all got involved. It was a huge organizing effort and it was a great success with the public.

When the project was awarded an Essor prize in a ceremony broadcast on Télé-Québec, I was sad to learn from a press release that a school principal had taken credit for part of the direction of the project without any mention of my participation. Who exactly was the creator of what? I've concluded from this that it is better to make that clear at the start of a project!

I would like to state that it was not the children or the people in the community who acted that way. Unlike the more highly placed people, they knew we had done the project together. It's really a question of power. These people appropriated

the right to take all the works, without regard for their creators, whereas I had intended to return the birds to the different communities that had made them, because I know very well that the things we created meant a lot to everyone. When a bond of love is created, people tend to be proud; we understand its value and we preserve it. But the bond is different when it's only about prestige. What happens when, for certain people, the objective has been reached? After the publicity and the prizes, they don't care about the work and they let it get damaged.

It might have helped to agree on each party's exact role at the outset. Maybe I didn't fight hard enough at times. I worked with people who often were well paid, but as soon as I talked about copyright, they objected with all the power of their money.

Ideally, you should have the people concerned sign a consent form that informs them of the use you want to make of the work or photographs of it. But sometimes there's a problem: when you ask people to sign papers, there's a danger of damaging something that is already fragile.

### Normand Tamaro

If it hasn't been made it clear beforehand, there may be people who imagine themselves to be the author of a work that emerged from a creative process in which they participated. In the context of community intervention, there are even more shades of grey. And — this could be a political choice — it could be suggested at the outset that the work will be the property of everyone who participated in creating it. This is one more reason to draw up an agreement at the outset on how each person will use her rights.

### Questions From Participants Which Were Answered by Normand Tamaro

- If there is collective artwork and you haven't drawn up an agreement beforehand, can you do it afterwards?  
The law doesn't like obstacles; it wants society to move forward. You can go to court and say: "We're new. We've created a work that belongs to all of us. The situation is blocked for a purely personal reason and we have an interest in exploiting our rights." Even if a person claims that the work belongs to her, if nothing has been legally established beforehand, who the creator is will be determined on the facts, based on each person's testimony. This type of action is admissible in court.
- If a collective work created as part of a social intervention is later used in a publication, is that legal?  
Yes, perfectly. Because at the outset people consented to participate in creating a public, collective work, they have to live with the consequences of their participation. A person gives her consent according to the context she finds herself in. For example, if there's a camera filming, she already knows that her image may be used in some way. If she hasn't signed anything, it doesn't mean she hasn't given permission.

### NOTES

1. See the program schedule, pp. 66–70, and the text by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86, in which she compares this program with the one held in 2002. See also in that same text the critical questions about this workshop on copyright, p. 80.
2. See the specific questions in the schedule of the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 68.

## Workshop: **A Culture That's 100% Accessible?**

At la Caserne 18–30  
3622 Hochelaga East,  
Montréal

September 26, 2004



*I am a disability culture activist and community artist. My aesthetics revolve around the power of touch, the seduction of difference and the richness of all our lives.*  
— Petra Kuppers

*This workshop, which was prepared by Petra Kuppers in collaboration with Devora Neumark, and facilitated by Petra, dealt with the issue of disability culture. It took the form of a presentation and talk interspersed with physical exercises and experiments in movement in which the participants explored the issue of aesthetic accessibility. Petra is the artistic director of The Olimpias,<sup>1</sup> a wheelchair dancer, community artist, disability culture activist and Associate Professor of English, Theatre, Dance and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (USA).<sup>2</sup>*

*How do you live in a society that claims to be egalitarian and participatory, but which simultaneously creates marginalization? What do you do with the question of accessibility? Can a different way of being influence the norm, or are you obliged to bend to that norm? Framed in this way, the question becomes more radical, more political.<sup>3</sup>*

### OPPOSITE IS A HIGHLIGHT OF THE WORKSHOP.

### NOTES

1. An art collective involved in disability culture and the mental health system working for social change. See [www.olimpias.org](http://www.olimpias.org).
2. Petra is also the author of the following books: *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Arts* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) and *Community Performance: An Introduction* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2007). With her long time partner, Neil Marcus, and photographer Lisa Steichmann, she has also published a book of poetry, *Cripple Poetics: A Love Story* (Ypsilanti: Homofactus Press, 2008).
3. See also *To Dance in the Circle: Disability and Accessible Aesthetics*, pp. 313–316, in which Petra discusses the subject with colleagues Neil Marcus and Leora Amir.



What is the relationship of the culture  
of people with disabilities to the dominant culture?

This is not only a question of the need for spaces without stairs or budgets for Braille readers; it is important to rethink the processes of art and aesthetic standards, and to consider how artists with disabilities are challenging the dominant aesthetics.



Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)

At the Caserne 18-30  
3622 Hochelaga,  
Montréal  
  
November 20, 21, 27, 28, 2004



*Like the LEVIER-sponsored Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002), the contents of this program were designed to further the critical understanding of community art practice. This program benefited from the experience of the earlier one and from the reflections arising from the many other activities in the two-year interval. It also was enriched by the practical and theoretical research of the participants, the project's members and LEVIER. There was, however, a major difference between 2002 and 2004: a significant number of LEVIER-funded project members shared their experiences in order to introduce novice practitioners to the complexities of community art in a personalized way and to learn from each other.*

*This program, like the earlier one, was free, bilingual, and open to the public and thus it expanded the network of people sharing similar concerns and interests (while participating in the program remained a prerequisite for artists and community organizations who were interested in applying jointly for LEVIER community art project funding).*

*The four-day program, with its broad spectrum of topics related to personal and sociopolitical engagement, was planned collaboratively and co-facilitated by Devora Neumark and Louise Lachapelle,<sup>1</sup> who participated actively in giving form to many of the program's critical components. The program included information sessions and workshops about ethics, conflict management, body/mind equilibrium, documentation and copyright.*

HERE IS THE DETAILED SCHEDULE OF THE FOUR-DAY COMMUNITY ART TRAINING AND EXCHANGE PROGRAM (2004):<sup>2</sup>

Day One	
9:15 AM <b>Yoga</b> (optional) guided by Joanne Gormley <sup>3</sup>	suggested that such mind/body awareness is particularly conducive to acknowledging another's subject-self while fostering an interdependent creative experience.
Leading the yoga mind/body centring sessions, Joanne asked participants to reflect on the significance of self-care especially in relation to the work that we do with others. Given how co-creative and collaborative practices require that we show up wholly, what Joanne shared could be considered as a question of embodied ethics. She asked participants to consider how a personal practice such as yoga or meditation (as a gateway to self-knowledge, acceptance and compassion) might help to better listen and be receptive to the populations we work with. Joanne	10:30 AM <b>Getting to Know One Another</b> Creative icebreaker exercise
	11:00 AM <b>Introduction to Engrenage Noir / LEVIER Community Art Program and Grant Application Process<sup>4</sup></b> Johanne Chagnon
	11:30 AM <b>Establishing the Conditions for Communication</b> Note: The five project presentations offered in the course of

Louise Lachapelle  
(see p. 51)

Joanne Gormley  
(see p. 51)

this training and exchange program developed one aspect or another of community art practice. In order to do this, all the presenters tried to answer to a first set of general questions that had been provided in advance:

- Thinking about the process involved in your community art project, what have you found most difficult? If you were to do the project again, how would you approach this difficulty now?
- What is it about the creative process that interests you? In other words: Why use creative practice to do what you do?
- Has participating in this project challenged your understanding of yourself and society? If so, how?
- In what ways has participating in this project served you?
- What suggestions might you make that would improve the support available from the Engrenage Noir / LEVIER team?

A second set of questions also provided in advance has been written specifically with each project in mind (see the program outline, with each presentation).

1:30 PM

**Des pas sur l'ombre** [Footsteps on the shadow]<sup>5</sup>

Diane Trépanière

(Although this project was supported as a humanist activist art project, it raises issues relevant in the context of this program.)

Specific Question for this Project:

- Very often the trajectory of an artist wishing to engage more directly in society is one that leads the artist from a solo studio practice to co-creation in community. Almost as often, the artist may experience a resistance to renouncing the culture that is inherent in the myth of "the artist as hero" even as he or she attempts to embrace collaborative creativity. During the process of this project in which you retained a fair degree of artistic control and autonomy, you seemed to have recognized the need to propose a new way of working for yourself. What did you become aware of as you brought your solo creative practice into a community context that made you consider that a collaborative approach may be what you now want to explore?

2:30 PM

**Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors** [Open your treasure chest]<sup>6</sup>

Louise Laliberté, Director, Johanne Chagnon, Valmont Brousseau, Maryse Conti, Annie Girard, Micheline Lebel, Louise Martin and Chantal Rail, of Le CARRÉ

Specific Question for this Project:

- Within community art practice, the artist brings to the process a set of experiences and skills and the desire to work collaboratively, learning and growing at every stage. At the same time, in participating in a community art project, community members bring a multiplicity of skills, a rich dynamic and the knowledge and expertise about the issues that they want to address, along with

insights about their own social, material and political conditions. How has the co-leadership been established, and the "response-abilities" that come with creating in a collaborative manner been identified, allocated, assumed and valued?

3:45 PM

**De fil en histoires** [From wire/thread to stories]<sup>7</sup>

Lisa Ndejuru, Sylvie Tisserand and Alain Montambeault, Maison des Jeunes de Rivière-des-Prairies

Specific Question for this Project:

- Informed consent is a complex and crucial ethical consideration for the documentation and dissemination of any creative endeavour, especially those that are collaborative in nature. What informed consent really means and under what conditions it is granted, by whom and for what purposes, are all factors that must be addressed and negotiated among all implicated parties, perhaps even several times during the course of the collaboration. Given these complexities, how has the question of informed consent been an issue in the development of your project, in its documentation and in its dissemination?

4:45 PM

**Questions and Comments**

5:15 PM

**Informal Exchange Over Wine and Cheese**

**Day Two**

9:30 AM

**Yoga** (optional)

guided by Joanne Gormley

10:45 AM

**Communication Check-In**

11:00 AM

**Ethics and Community Art Practices**

Kim Anderson<sup>8</sup>

Linking scholarship and practice, this session highlighted some of the basic questions surrounding applied and fundamental ethics relevant to community art. Kim Anderson encouraged and supported the examination of personal values and invited participants to explore how these values are related to intent, behaviour and policy. What ethical dilemmas and obligations are inherent in community art practice? What models of ethical codes can be applied and adapted for community art? How do we individually and collectively create ethical climates for collaboration and co-creative relationships?



Presentation of the project  
*De fil en histoires* (Lisa Ndejuru).



Workshop *Ethics and Community Art Practices* (Kim Anderson).

Kim Anderson  
(see p. 51)



Workshop Documentary Processes for Community Art Projects (Jil P. Weaving).

*I have been an artist and cultural worker for over 30 years. My work stems from a belief that everyone is creative and has life experiences that need to be shared and reflected upon, in order to imagine and bring about a better world. To this end I have created artworks as an individual and in collaboration with other artists and communities, worked as a project facilitator, program developer, workshop leader, writer, funder, researcher and consultant.*  
— Jil P. Weaving

Normand Tamaro  
(see p. 62)

Joëlle Tremblay  
(see p. 63)

2:15 PM

### Documentary Processes for Community Art Projects

Jil P. Weaving<sup>9</sup>

Jil P. Weaving, Community Art Programmer for the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation and initiator of the Documenting Engagement Institute, presented the Institute's project that brought together eight mid-career Canadian artists with a group of senior artists and media producers for three weeks in the winter of 2003–04. Together this group investigated the practices of community-based art and explored the potential of digital video as a means of documenting the aesthetics of engagement inherent in this art form. After taking part in a series of discussions (some open to the public), workshops and screenings, participating artists each produced a short documentary video highlighting an aspect of their practice.

In addition to screening a number of these videos, the participants discussed some of the issues related to documenting community collaborative art practices, including whose voices are represented, what kind of documentation is most suitable for the specificity of any given project and how the creative practice gets altered by virtue of documentary processes.

4:15 PM

### Collective Creation and Copyright

Normand Tamaro and Joëlle Tremblay<sup>10</sup>

Since community art projects are most often collective creations, the question of copyright can be subject to many ethical issues. Projects are based on a collaborative process and on co-creativity between an artist or group of artists and community participants (who also become artists in the process). In such projects, who is considered the rightful owner of the artwork produced? Is it the artist who initiated the project, the community organization sponsoring it and/or the participants?

As community art is often based on egalitarian values and on a will to oppose normative hierarchies of power, how does the issue of creator status get negotiated? In other words, when artwork is inspired by and emerges from democratic principles, can an artist or group of artists claim sole copyright for a work produced collectively even if the initial ideas were, at least in part, those of the artist(s)? At what point are community participants considered artists in their own right and therefore deserving of joint intellectual property status?

5:45 PM

### Questions and Comments

## Day Three

9:00 AM

### Yoga (optional)

guided by Joanne Gormley

10:15 AM

### Communication Check-In

10:30 AM

### Creativity, Peaceful Coexistence and How to Cope When Personal Issues Get Triggered

Cynthia E. Cohen and Jack Saul (Part I)



Workshop Creativity, Peaceful Coexistence and How to Cope When Personal Issues Get Triggered (Jack Saul and Cynthia E. Cohen).

Often just at the moment when a person or a social group perceives the possibility for change and a way towards more peaceful coexistence, old patterns and beliefs that are rooted in fear, shame, guilt, anger or hurt reassert themselves with a vengeance, making nonviolent communication difficult, if not impossible. One might even speak of the addiction to individual and collective dysfunction that manifests itself in aggressive behaviour as arising from a desire for personal well-being. Creative practice acting as an agent to invite the possibility for change (at least symbolically) can be a trigger for such tension between the will to change and the fear of doing so. Because creativity is such a powerful mechanism and sometimes involves such a high degree of risk, understanding the processes involved in coming to terms with painful memories and unresolved trauma can support artists and communities to more carefully approach that which reverberates within us.

Both Cindy Cohen and Jack Saul have been working at the nexus between peaceful coexistence and the arts for many years, but they met for the first time in response to LEVIER's invitation to co-facilitate this workshop, in order to share their experiences and stimulate dialogue about this critical issue and how it relates to community art practices.



Cynthia E. Cohen is directing an international fellowship program entitled *Recasting Reconciliation Through Culture and the Arts* and is the Director of Coexistence Research and International Collaborations for the Slifka Program in Intercommunal Coexistence at Brandeis University in Massachusetts, where she facilitates conversations among artists working in regions of conflict. Jack Saul is Assistant Professor of Population and Family Health at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. He is also Director of the International Trauma Studies Program at New York University and co-founder of Theater Arts Against Political Violence.

2:00 PM

### **Creativity, Peaceful Coexistence and How to Cope When Personal Issues Get Triggered**

Cynthia E. Cohen and Jack Saul (Part II)

3:45 PM

### **Nonviolent Communication**

Devora Neumark

This presentation was based on the approach developed by the Center for Nonviolent Communication. Having been introduced to this approach last year through a series of workshops facilitated by the International Center for Mediation and Conflict Resolution in Montreal,<sup>11</sup> Devora Neumark continues the lifelong practice of mastering the skills required for compassionate communication — such as evaluation-free observation — and is pleased to share her understanding of this process with workshop participants.

Focused on becoming conscious of and clearly articulating what we are observing, feeling, needing and requesting, while strengthening our capacity to hear and respond to others with compassion, this approach has much in common with other conflict negotiation strategies such as those of the Harvard Negotiation Project<sup>12</sup> and the Aiki Works *Magic of Conflict*.<sup>13</sup>

5:15 PM

### **Questions and Comments**

5:45 PM

### **Informal Exchange Over Wine and Cheese**



## **Day Four**

9:30 AM

### **Yoga** (optional)

guided by Joanne Gormley

10:45 AM

### **Communication Check-In**

11:00 AM

### ***Et si j'y étais... histoire de se connaître, de se reconnaître un peu*** [And if I was there...]<sup>14</sup>

François Bergeron, Director, Christine Brault, Alice Tixidre-Girard and Jacinthe Leduc, of Oxy-jeunes



Presentation of the project *Et si j'y étais...* (François Bergeron, Christine Brault, Alice Tixidre and Jacynthe Leduc).

### **Specific Question for this Project:**

- Very often as we engage in the collective creative process, we have to confront our own desires to do something that will "change the world." It can be quite challenging to accept a certain modesty of scale in influencing personal and social change. Please discuss the question of scale of influence with regard to values, meaning and effectiveness in relation to the relative intimate nature of your gestures. For whom is this work intended? And how has the way that others address the question of scale of influence when referring to your work impacted your decision-making processes?

*As a psychologist based in New York City, I have created a number of psychosocial programs for populations that have endured war, torture and political violence, and I am known for my innovative work with communities that integrates testimony, healing, media and the performance arts.*  
— Jack Saul

*I am concerned with exploring the contributions of the arts and cultural work to the creative transformation of conflict. I believe that artists need spaces to reflect critically on our work to explore the dilemmas that almost always accompany work on the boundary between human suffering and human possibility.*  
— Cynthia E. Cohen

1:15 PM

**Manipuler avec soin** [Handle with care]<sup>15</sup>

Vichama collectif (Rachel Heap-Lalonde and Karyne Filteau)

Presentation of the project *Manipuler avec soin* (Rachel Heap-Lalonde and Karyne Filteau).

## Specific Question for this Project:

- Given that the creative process inherently assumes a certain degree of risk involving personal transformation that is neither prescriptive nor predictable, what approaches have been taken in order to negotiate the space between the collective creative process and the personal triggers that have been experienced individually by many in the group (both community members and artists)?

2:30 PM

**Community Art Grant Application Process**

Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon

3:30 PM

**Questions, Comments and Closing Remarks**

## NOTES

- See her participation in the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices*, p. 51-52, and the text she wrote following that event, *Community Art or Finding the Way Back Home?*, pp. 52-61. See also her participation in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, pp. 121-122. Louise acted as collaborating editor for this book and, in this capacity, she signed the Postscript entitled *La brûlure avant la voix or Could this be a love letter?*, pp. 353-365.
- See also *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, the detailed critical reflection written by Rachel Heap-Lalonde in which she compares this program with the one held in 2002, pp. 71-86.
- See her participation in the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Arts Practices*, p. 56, and in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 102.
- Given the degree of dissatisfaction expressed by a number of individuals at the end of the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, the LEVIER grant program was presented in a clear fashion at the start of this one—in the morning on the very first day.
- See the description of this humanist activist project, pp. 268-269, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 76-77.
- See the description of this community art project, pp. 154-158; see also the participation of this organization's director in LEVIER's *First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22-24; see the participation of this project's members in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, and the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122; see also the references to these activities in the critical summaries by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 77, and *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 115. See also the comments by Bob W. White in his text, *The Power of Collaboration*, p. 321. See also the video *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors*, made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
- See the description of this community art project, pp. 166-167, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 79-80.
- See her participation in LEVIER's *First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22-24, in LEVIER's *Second Orientation Meeting*, pp. 25-27, and in the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Arts Practices*, pp. 51-52. See also the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 79 and 80-81. See also her text, *Community-Based Arts and Research Practices: What's Ethics Got To Do With It?*, pp. 299-302.
- See the presentation of some of these videos associated with the Institute of Documenting Engagement in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, pp. 103-105, and the reference to these videos in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 112-113 and 119.
- See their participation in the *Collective Creation and Copyright* workshop, pp. 62-64. See also the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 80.
- See the proceedings of these workshops written by Myriom Berthelet, pp. 48-50.
- Since 1979, this consortium of the Faculty of Law at Harvard University (Cambridge, USA) has developed the theory and practice of negotiation and conflict resolution through a variety of training programs, publications, a blog, etc. See <http://www.pon.harvard.edu>.
- Thomas F. Crum, *The Magic of Conflict* (New York: Touchstone, 1987).
- See the description of this community art project, p. 139-141, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 75. See also the participation of Christine Brault in the roundtable *SEX! art action*, p. 90.
- See the description of this community art project, pp. 159-160, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 75.

Photographic documentation: Johanne Chagnon.

The following text is the outcome of an unusual process, and it is interesting to look at how it came about. Rather than merely providing accounts of the two community art training and exchange programs (2002 and 2004), LEVIER asked Rachel Heap-Lalonde<sup>1</sup> to write a critical reflection based on a comparison between the two. This demanding work involved not only compiling material from eight intense days, but also shaping the comparative analysis. In doing so, Rachel drew on transcriptions and preliminary accounts by Louise Dubreuil,<sup>2</sup> who had done very useful preparatory work.

LEVIER proposed this writing project to Rachel as a way of inviting her to further develop her critical thinking and her own community art practice. She attended the Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002) and was a presenter within the context of the Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004). She also was a member of several LEVIER-funded community art and humanist activist art projects. This text is the result of a process of development undertaken in collaboration with Devora Neumark and Louise Lachapelle,<sup>3</sup> which required multiple meetings and several re-writings.

## Comparative Analysis of the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)* and the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*

### **And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey**

Rachel Heap-Lalonde

*...My relationship to art, society and change is paradoxical, asymmetrical, mystifying... black, gold and green, CrapN'esque. Art is a tool for me to play, to set the stage for potential without limiting it to reality. I am happy when I hear the laughter of a child, enchanted.*  
— Rachel Heap-Lalonde

LEVIER's journey can be seen as the story of an evolving, participatory process. This story takes place in various contexts: local, regional and global — within different communities, art worlds and political circles. It is told by many people, which increases the diversity of readings and highlights the multidimensional nature of its historical roots. This story is an open book to which new pages can easily be added so as to keep on building and enriching the saga begun by a small group of people in 2001, and supported and developed since then by a growing community.

In 2002, LEVIER invited representatives of community groups and artists to take part in a first training and exchange program on community arts<sup>4</sup> which was four days long. Although the program was linked to the awarding of grants for joint projects, it consisted of practical, theoretical and even philosophical learning on issues related to community art. LEVIER organized a second training program in 2004, this time with more specific criteria for the grants, and dealing with certain concepts differently. One of the aims of both training and exchange programs was to take a critical and theoretical look at community art(s) practices in order to avoid a naive approach. In this article, I will try to highlight out the main questions that were discussed during those eight days of collective reflection, and the differences between the two programs.

### The Program, the Training Sessions and this Text

*Why offer programs for training, discussion and reflection on community art?* There are many possible answers to this question. Because when art, people's personal lives, change (social, cultural or political), community, emotions and processes are brought together, there's a serious risk of upsetting people, and you have to think about that so as to approach this process in responsible ways. Because the initiators of LEVIER, Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon, wanted to share the skills and experience they had gained over the years in the art world and as community activists. Because they wanted to draw on the questions and experiences of others working in these areas. Because in our consumer society, where art is elitist, the world of the arts and grassroots communities very rarely intersect. Because LEVIER's co-founders considered it essential to create spaces and help build bridges, possibilities for coming together and recognizing the issues, methodology and vocabulary of each of these two worlds. And finally, because the co-founders wanted, as part of the creation of a space for change, to put into practice a realignment of the perception of the relationship among partners in a funded project (that is, LEVIER, the community group members and the artist(s)), while taking care of the emerging networks and taking responsibility for the grants awarded and their viability. In order to do this, they combined the funding with non-judgmental critical support, provided by Devora Neumark, that extends beyond the projects funded. This support begins with the community art training and exchange programs. For the same reasons — to invite a greater sense of responsibility and establish a coherent praxis — they decided to invest time and thought in documenting LEVIER's memory and the community art projects that have led to the growth and development of a community that, after five years, is beginning to be aware of itself, to recognize itself and to tell its own story.



During the Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002).





During the Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004).

The 2002 and 2004 community art training and exchange programs were carried out independently of each other, although the second one was obviously based on feedback and comments that came out of the first one.<sup>5</sup> The programs included presentations by resource persons; plenary discussions and work in breakout groups; and practical exercises and creative games. Something that was present throughout the eight training days but that is hard to express in writing is the emphasis on the use of various physically expressive techniques. One such technique is Kripalu yoga, which the participants practiced with Joanne Gormley<sup>6</sup> at the start of each day of the 2004 program. Other guests also explored theoretical concepts through practical exercises; these included Judy Ringer<sup>7</sup> with Aiki Works and Norman Nawrocki,<sup>8</sup> who facilitated a creative workshop. This approach, which is a priority for LEVIER, is based on the belief that the capacity to learn is enhanced if the learning is not only transmitted theoretically but also experienced physically.

The context in which I am writing these words<sup>9</sup> strongly influences my perception of the history and importance of these training and exchange programs, and, more generally, of the nature of the discipline of community art in Québec. I am writing this in 2008, six years after my encounter with LEVIER at the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, in which I participated actively. The perspective I have gained enables me to put the events into context and make connections among them. On the other hand, I am limited by the written documents that I have had access to that recount the events in ways that I would not necessarily have, and by my distance from the events, which took place in a historical context that is already of the past and therefore difficult to retrace.

It is impossible in just a few pages to express the depth of the thinking that took place during these eight days of sharing. After I explored different ways of describing the training sessions, what stood out most were the questions and observations on the role of the community in these projects and the ethical issues and communication that were an integral part of them. These are the major themes around which I have chosen to structure my thoughts.

I feel it is important to be sensitive to the different voices participating in a community art process when creating an archive of the collective memory. Given the materials and documents I am drawing on to write this creative account — my memory, the experiences of Devora Neumark and the written records of the two programs (an account of the 2002 program and the verbatim proceedings of the 2004 program<sup>10</sup>) — some voices may have been forgotten or confused, but most of the communications, fortunately, were written down. In order to clarify the instances when an additional voice — mine — was included in the archiving process, I will make it clear when I am expressing my own opinions or perceptions of what was said in the two programs. That will also facilitate a multidimensional reading of what really took place. By multidimensional, I mean that several dimensions exist simultaneously: those of the facilitators, those of each of the participants, those created by the sociopolitical context, the one I experienced, the one I remember experiencing, the one transformed by the exercise of recounting it, the ones that are read and understood by each person who participated, the ones that are read and perceived by people who did not participate but are interested in the subject, etc. All these dimensions reflect something of LEVIER's community art training and exchange programs.

Furthermore, my territorial references are those of a colonizing people: I think it is important to point out that Québec is part of Turtle Island, the territory of the Aboriginal communities that welcomed us here a few centuries ago, and that continue to welcome us in spite of everything.

*When can we start talking about social engagement?  
Is it when questions are raised or when an action achieves its purpose*

## Art Within a Community

### From the Artist at the Heart of the Project to the Community at the Heart of the Project

In 2002, the program offered by LEVIER was called the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program*. The program, which was designed to provide an overview of the elements to be considered in planning and developing a community art project, was attentive to the different art disciplines (theatre, photography, visual arts, etc., as well as interdisciplinary arts). Since this program was the first time most of the community groups and artists were taking part in collective reflection on the subject, a lot of time was devoted to exploring the conditions of “success,” that is, to the training aspects of the program. In 2004, the program was based on actual experiences, and therefore emphasized spaces for personal testimony and dialogue. But in a deeper sense, there had been an evolution in the definition of the term *discipline* and what it means in a community art project. Is the discipline photography? Is a photographer who uses this art form in a collective and community context doing community photography according to all the aesthetic criteria for photography? In using this technique, is the artist doing a community art project according to other ethical considerations and aesthetic criteria? And is an artist who does a project she considers interdisciplinary doing a project combining two means of artistic expression or combining a means of artistic expression with a means of human expression? Seeing community art as a discipline in and of itself allows this art form to be considered and critiqued for and about its own political, ethical and aesthetic dimensions. Art that is both interdisciplinary and profoundly antidisciplinary, community art — in the singular — reflects LEVIER’s progress in thinking about the place of art in society. This art puts certain concepts at the centre of practice, concepts such as interpersonal relationships, alliance building, participation and process. This first section of the article will deal with the reflections on the processes of collaboration between both partners and levels of engagement in community art projects: collaboration between artists, members of community groups and community workers, and collaboration between the spheres of art, the community, and personal and sociopolitical engagement.



During the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program* (2002).

### *The concept at the heart of community art projects was, and still is, transformation*

#### Collaboration

At the heart of community art projects is the process of collaboration among the different actors in the project. What is collaboration? Are there different types of collaboration? How can art, social consciousness and political engagement be combined?

During the 2002 exchange and discussion workshops, the participants explored a specific aspect of collaboration in which the artist becomes involved with an engaged community group, the artistic dimension is introduced into the group and all the participants are active at all stages of the project. One thing that seemed to help in characterizing the collaboration was clear definitions of the respective roles of the project members (the artist, the professional staff of the community group and the grassroots members). Another was jointly articulating the priorities and needs because it is not a given that all participants will necessarily agree a priori to focus on the same problems and objectives. Should the objectives be individual or collective? Should they correspond to the three levels of action that had been named during the earlier LEVIER orientations meetings — that is the personal, the social and the political — or can they concentrate on just one of these levels? From 2002 on, building and understanding interpersonal relationships was the primary objective of the projects, although there were subsequently many discussions of specific ways of conceiving and sustaining these relationships.

One discussion of collaboration that took place during the 2002 program concerned the voluntary nature of participation in projects. Does it have to be voluntary? In the project of the Théâtre des petites lanternes with the Centre Le Perlier<sup>11</sup> — which was asked to present its account of the experience — theatre creation was at the centre of the organization’s project to help women get into the job market. What are the members’ motivations and objectives in a case like this? Does mandatory involvement facilitate the process? Is there greater resistance? Does the achievement of the objectives — in this case, pride, accomplishment and personal success for the women — by the community organization and the theatre partner





During the Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002).

organization make up for the not entirely voluntary involvement of the members in the first stages? The questions about the voluntary aspect of involvement led the participants in the training to better define the non-hierarchical nature of community art projects, projects in which everyone is involved on a consensual basis.

In fact, it is the exploration of collaborative relationships created through the interactive and egalitarian spaces that are established in the process of working together to create a community art project that makes individual and community development possible. The participants in both series of exchanges felt that art has the potential to help externalize individual ideas and experiences so that they can be shared and become more collective. In this act, the personal becomes political and the political personal, making it possible to identify patterns of oppression. It is then that groups move toward community development and then to social or political development.

How can we change a society based on injustice? What is the role of the artist? When can we start talking about social engagement? Is it when questions are raised or when an action achieves its purpose? Can art contribute to individual development? What are the repercussions of the personal on the political, and vice versa? Through the exploration of these questions, our perception of collaborative relationships evolved, with respect to both the interpersonal relationships and the links between the artistic, community and sociopolitical spheres. While, in 2002, the artists present spoke of becoming involved "with" community groups, the participants in the 2004 program referred instead to the people involved in the projects, without emphasizing their specific roles.

## Engaged Art and Social and Political Engagement

*How should the pain from the re-opening of old wounds during the process be treated?*

Norman Nawrocki (during the workshop *Social Response-Ability and Progressive Change*, 2002 program) used the concept of losing inhibitions<sup>12</sup> as a tool for change and an exploration of new ways of working together. The loss of inhibitions is closely related to the importance Norman places on the resistance movement in which an engaged artist becomes involved. He defines a resistance movement as a free space that permits people to think, to become aware, to believe it is possible to change reality or look at it from other perspectives. To achieve this, he feels you have to move from reaction mode to that of affirmation and taking (back) power. He feels it is important to not limit imagination, so as to discover the greatest possible number of ways of working differently with oneself and others while participating in individual and collective change.

Although community art is a form of engaged art, and community groups are usually part of a broad resistance movement, one participant in the 2004 program wondered about the role of community art in and beyond protest. Is community art a tool or an end in itself? Can it go beyond opposition and protest? While the act of creation always has an aspect of protest (since if the need to create symbolically is felt, it often means the existing options are not satisfactory), it goes beyond protest, because creativity involves imagining new possibilities.

In 2002, it rather quickly became obvious to the participants that there was not much difference between the definitions of engaged art, social engagement and political engagement. While political engagement was seen quite broadly, both at a micro and macro scale (everything is political), social engagement was seen as the result of an ongoing commitment that begins before a project and continues after the project is completed. This social engagement can lead to involvement



Presentation of the project *Et si j'y étais...*, during the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004)  
(François Bergeron, Christine Brault, Alice Tixidre, Jacynthe Leduc and Devora Neumark).

in politics per se, or it can be understood as taking a risk to affirm oneself, or taking a position and being consistent in that position. On the other hand, whether engagement takes place at the individual, community or political level, the concept at the heart of community art projects was, and still is, transformation. But does every project aim for change, or can projects be constructed to reinforce or validate what is already there? Must change occur in the members or can they use projects to change the social perceptions that surround them? What is the goal of change? When I compare the various community art projects supported by LEVIER, it seems obvious to me that there are many purposes, and that the tools of creativity can, for example, change the conditions of coexistence without changing society, or they can aim to act at the societal level by challenging social injustices. What varies is the means, the way of using the artistic tools and the objectives served.

One of the community art projects that reflected this concept of engagement and change was the project *Et si j'y étais... histoire de se connaître, de se reconnaître un peu* [If I Were There...].<sup>13</sup> François Bergeron, director general of Oxy-jeunes, and Christine Brault, an artist involved in the project, asked: "Do we want to change the world, or to humbly change a small part of it?" Often when a community embarks on a collective creative process, one of the challenges is to modestly accept the scope of the personal and social change possible. Christine Brault, along with the other project members, looked at the contrast between the desire to do something that will change the world — which is usually urgent, but is also very contemporary<sup>14</sup> — and the real impact of a project with modest but deeply held long-standing ambitions. Doesn't it sometimes happen that big, bold actions give rise to unwanted consequences while fragile, humble actions do not? How are the actions perceived? Are small, modest changes considered less legitimate than big, ambitious projects? In the project *Et si j'y étais... histoire de se connaître, de se reconnaître un peu*, one of the observations was that, sometimes, the smaller the action, the deeper and more long-term its effect. Being respectful of people's pace, even if it means moving slowly, makes it possible to create alliances and let them develop organically, without having to impose anything. This is the paradox of an action that lasts a relatively short time and is not particularly spectacular, but has a long life — a little like a cell that multiplies.

The participants also discussed the risks involved in personal and social change. Members of Vichama Collectif (an art collective) and of the Organisation populaire des droits sociaux [People's organization for social rights, OPDS], the partner organization, reflected on this concept and the problems experienced during the project *Manipuler avec soin* [Handle with care].<sup>15</sup> Coming back to the fact that not everyone in a collective project has the same level of engagement or the same objectives, how can we reconcile individual needs and desires with the needs and aims of the group? How can we respect each / as we create a we? When the creative processes themselves are a challenge for the project members and the artist(s), how can we move away from personalizing the problematics? Sometimes, personal triggers can serve the creative process, because they represent the oppression experienced by everyone and can become the basis for collective work, but sometimes, individual limitations make it necessary to take some distance from the project. How can we discern these differences and work with them? What approaches can we adopt to negotiate the space between the collective creative process and the personal triggers that are experienced individually, both by the participants and by the artists? This tension, this vital movement that demands dialogue, makes it possible, according to the members of Vichama Collectif and the OPDS, to establish an open, reciprocal, collective process. In spite of the collective desire to orient the project towards activist social objectives, its impact was felt much more in terms of personal healing and interaction. What can be learned from this is that community art projects involve a highly subjective, emotional process, and it is to their advantage to remain flexible in order to react and adjust to the constraints and obstacles that arise. The objectives can thus change in the course of projects, according to the personal, collective, social and temporal context that surrounds and fuels them.



During the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004).

The theme of collaboration was discussed from the perspective of participation, inclusion and engagement, taking into account the fact that it is closely linked to the social context. And in 2002, that context was the beginning of the millennium, a time when globalized neo-liberal and neo-conservative capitalism was instigating dissident movements to connect beyond the local scene (as is still the case today). For LEVIER, collaboration meant more than just engagement: the question was how to collaborate in all aspects of collective co-creation?

*Collaboration meant more than just engagement:  
the question was how to collaborate in all aspects of collective co-creation*

Creation

In 2002, the participants in the program considered the individual and community dimensions of the creative act. What differences did they see between the individual creative act and the collective act? Does the facilitating artist always initiate creation or can the other members of the community group initiate it?<sup>16</sup> What is the relationship between the professional artist and the community?

"We Ask the Medium a Question and the Medium Answers Us."<sup>17</sup> If the work of community creation satisfies the need to examine a social problem and the group is trying collectively to find a means of expression to highlight this problem, can people be the artist's primary means of expression, supported by other artistic techniques such as theatre, photography or painting? On the other hand, can the artist be the tool of expression for the community? In broadening the concept of creation, the participants had to define for themselves what they wanted to create and what it meant. Whether creation is situated in the collaborative process or the final work of art, pushing back its boundaries makes it more accessible, inclusive and multidirectional.

Continuing these reflections in 2004, the participants discussed collaboration in terms of co-creation. In 2002, when the terms *artist* and *community worker* were used, they were implicitly understood as referring to professional artists and professional community workers, and excluding the other project members. After the first program, the question of who are the professionals and who are not, and that of whether to include or exclude the professional aspect, were often at the centre of the discussion, particularly in relation to this concept of co-creation.

To illustrate this concept, Diane Trépanière shared her experience and questions that came out of a project entitled *Des pas sur l'ombre* [Footsteps on the shadow].<sup>18</sup> Often, when an artist wants to become involved in the public sphere, she takes an approach that leads her from solo creation to co-creation or collective creation. The role of the artist has often had a mythic aura that confers upon her — or upon the act of creation — a distinct status, despite the possibility of collective involvement. In her project with battered women's shelters across Québec, Diane maintained a significant part of the artistic leadership and control. Since she saw her work in community art and her work as an artist as related, each of her meetings with the community workers began with a discussion, a sharing of her previous creations, in order to quickly forge links with them.<sup>19</sup> However, visiting so many shelters soon forced her to suspend this way of creating connections. A sense of belonging was created between the community workers and the artistic technique used, writing, which was then taken up by certain workers with the women in the shelters, but not between the workers and the artist. Following this experience, Diane considered moving towards an approach to co-creation that implied greater artistic collaboration with the project members. *Des pas*

*sur l'ombre* was a community project in which many people were involved in the process, but not in managing the creation. Usually co-creation brings together a smaller number of people but has them involved at the heart of the creation exercising co-leadership. The sense of belonging that developed between the community workers and the women in the shelters following the project might have developed earlier with Diane if she had shared the space of leadership where the direction of a project would be determined together.

The principle of co-administration is essential in order to develop a sense of belonging and identification with a collective project. What can be done to ensure that a project becomes a group project and does not remain that of a community worker or an artist? How, for example, should the project *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors* [Open your treasure chest] be presented?<sup>20</sup> As a project of the organization Le CARRÉ in collaboration with Johanne Chagnon? As a project of the artist, Johanne, and Le CARRÉ? Over time the project came to be defined as that of “the group” including the Le CARRÉ staff, grassroots members and the artist. This definition helped clarify the basis for the work, which enabled the group to take its place and made it possible to create a framework that included the needs of all the members. This then also makes it possible for all the community art project members to contribute skills, talents, artistic and life experience, energy, knowledge and expertise on the issues they want to bring to the fore and an understanding of their material, social and political conditions.<sup>21</sup> Thus, everyone went through the process together at the same time, looking for artistic forms to explore, themes to deal with and a structure to adopt. The sharing of leadership within this project did not come about easily, however, and the artist learned to face her own limitations; but the members of this project attempted to distribute the responsibilities from the beginning in order to deal with the questions of self-esteem, sharing of power and memory, and diversify points of view (in the documentation process, for example). A new community emerged from the project that included artists, community workers and other members, with no hierarchy of participation, but rather distinct roles (composer, costume designer, etc.) assumed by each of the members.

## Some Collective Considerations

During the 2002 program, several sessions were devoted to discussion in subgroups to define strategies for increasing the chances of success in community art projects and to decide what questions should be considered during the various stages of projects. The word *success* was brought up by the organizers, but was open to interpretation by the participants and was not intended in an elitist, competitive sense, but rather as a lever to be used in carrying out collective projects. The following concerns suggested by the organizers and participants guided the discussion on the constructive aspects of the collaborative development of projects. In 2004, some of these questions were taken up again from different perspectives.

**PLANNING:** How well does the artist have to know the host community organization prior to the project? What type of intervention is planned? How long will the project last? What will be the individual and collective objectives? Are there legal aspects to be taken into account? What human and material resources are available? What are the main components of the project? Who makes the decisions? The assembled group in 2004 also concentrated on exploring the legal aspects of projects and the decision-making process; these will be discussed below.

**MAINTAINING INTEREST AND INVOLVEMENT:** What characteristics encourage the members to maintain their involvement through to the end? What characteristics may discourage members and cause them to abandon or neglect the project? How can the community members be mobilized to become involved? How can the project be kept moving forward so that it remains responsive to whatever changes arise?

**EVALUATION:** Is it necessary to evaluate a community art project, beyond any possible funding bodies' requirements, and if so, why and when should such an evaluation be done? Should it be structured or informal? Which is more appropriate, a single evaluation at the project's end and/or periodic check-ins? What should the evaluation criteria be? What exactly should be evaluated and who should be involved in the process? What evaluation tools are most appropriate? In 2004, the discussion of evaluation shifted toward the question of documentation, in part because LEVIER's founders were more interested in the possibilities of documentation than evaluation because of the ways in which documentation creates continuity with community art projects' processes and productions. Through documentation, it is possible to include a certain amount of evaluation and reflection on the process and result, without making evaluative judgments.<sup>22</sup>

**RESULTS:** Although collective processes and creating interpersonal connections are long and laborious, it is sometimes tempting to make concessions to speed up a project's development: but at what price? While the needs of funding bodies have to be taken into account, the community also has its own needs with respect to the project and the expected results. A few questions can guide discussion in order to make choices that are coherent with the priorities in terms of time and results: What is being produced? What process has been put in place to arrive at the final product? How do people see themselves in relation to this product? Do they feel pride in it? Does it represent their lives, their experience and their perceptions of the world well?<sup>23</sup>

Finally, TIME is always an issue and always pressing in projects, including community art projects! While the members of a project may consider their availability in a rather open-ended way, the social urgency of the situation often influences how the project is carried out. Keeping strategies simple was suggested as a possible way to strike a balance between the two. Additionally, developing a community art project from the outset in keeping with projections of the desired impact in terms of social change was another recommendation relative to managing time. Similarly, addressing the question of what will remain for the group or the community once the project has been completed was suggested as something to be taken up together at the very earliest stages of the project.

The question of time was discussed again in 2004 in particular with respect to the ethics of projects taking into account how often in community art it is difficult to juggle time (there's never enough!), aesthetic concerns (does the work created meet society's aesthetic criteria; does it meet the personal criteria of the members?) and ethics (was the process consistent with the values of the community and its ethical principles?). What emerged from this discussion was that the responsibility for balancing these tensions was something that each group needed to assume themselves and often more than once in the course of the project since the balance is usually changing and unstable.

The *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)* gradually shifted its focus: from the needs of the artists (and their role in the projects) to the needs of the communities and their leadership role and active involvement. The very definition of community was also challenged. There was less emphasis on the broader questions about creative processes and collaboration and more focus on specific aspects of these issues. This was possible because the participants in the 2004 program had experience and language in common, and they therefore had less a need to be "trained" than a need to reflect collectively about the challenges of collective artistic creation. Some of the questions that arose include: Does a community consist of the members of any given community group? Is it the new entity created around the project, including the community organizers and its members (including artists)? Is it desirable to create projects that challenge the usual structures of community organizations by forming non-hierarchical relationships that move away from the power dynamics inherent in groups set up to *help* or *support* their members, and if so, how is such a process possible? What are the ethical issues that can influence the development of these new communities of interest?

## Collaborative Projects... and Ethics

During the two programs, certain aspects of collaboration received special attention, in part because the organizers associated them with higher risks. Most of the "risky" aspects of projects involved ethical issues such as how to build healthy, egalitarian relationships among the various members.

The discussion of ethics in community art began in 2002. The participants considered *whom* they wanted to work with, *how* and *why*. The emphasis from the beginning was on *how*. Some strategies were explored for raising ethical issues and minimizing the possibility of conflicts of interest. Drafting an *equitable* contract, jointly defining collective decision-making processes (by consensus, preferably) and procedures for conflict resolution, demystifying and recognizing each person's roles and limitations, flexibility, listening and respect were all mentioned as key to a coherent collective ethical process. But some themes related to ethics are not so simple to deal with and demystify during a project. Someone said that ethical issues are by their very nature an issue of presence and are therefore constantly changing. In 2004, an attempt was made to find a common definition of ethics. Devora Neumark and Louise Lachapelle<sup>24</sup> proposed one that focused on the fundamental ethical issue: "How to be with oneself, with the other and together." This proposition brought out questions related to the conditions of communication, exchange and relationship.

In this part of the article, I will explore three *risky* stages in community art projects, with an emphasis on the ethical issues involved. To look more closely at the nature of the relationship between community workers and the community, I will examine the question of building relationships. Consent and consensus are two other important aspects involving many ethical questions, especially when projects try to ensure that the interests of the community and the artists, as well the culture and the environment in which the project is being carried out, are respected. Finally, I will examine how projects are documented, since power dynamics come into play and this is potentially a step toward rewriting a popular history that expresses greater egalitarianism and solidarity.

## Relationships

*Members of an artistic project provide themselves with shared tools to ensure that their process is used to build alliances*

The *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)* stressed the importance of establishing conditions of communication conducive to dialogue. This aspect had been taken into consideration in 2002 by providing opportunities for informal encounters: having some participants recount their experiences, making documentation tables available to everyone and



During the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*.



During the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004).

holding casual get-togethers at the end of two days of the training. In 2004, these conditions of communication were presented at the beginning of each discussion period to encourage understanding of everyone's needs, both in interpersonal and interdisciplinary terms. The language and conventions of the art community and of community groups are not necessarily the same, and the two can attribute different meanings to concepts and symbols. Since the spaces for communication are often key places for discussion of group dynamics, providing a context conducive to communication makes these spaces more accessible and horizontal. Developing a common language can facilitate dialogue, or at least facilitate a common understanding of the collective spheres of work and the issues identified. The same was true for communication among the participants in the training and exchange program; hence the emphasis on communication processes.

In a practical exercise illustrating this concept, Louise Lachapelle used the first paragraph of the *Engrenage Noir / LEVIER* Community Art project description text, which was in circulation at that time: "This *co-creation* is aimed at encouraging *active participation, responsibility and self-esteem* of a small number of *members* by providing *meaningful responses* to *sociopolitical inequalities*."<sup>25</sup>

The concepts in italics are elements that can be defined and interpreted in many ways, according to Louise. What does co-creation mean? Whose participation are we talking about, that of the artists, the members, the community group? Who needs to work on self-esteem? Who are the members? What is a meaningful response, and for whom is it meaningful? What inequalities are we talking about, and who is experiencing these inequalities? In a space where a project will be co-created, it is important to take the time to develop common definitions of key concepts in order to start off with the same images and symbols with respect to the basic principles of a project.

According to Kim Anderson<sup>26</sup> (facilitator of the workshop *Ethics and Community Art Practices*, 2004 program), it is important to take into account the relationships, responsibilities and social and historical context of the community with which the project is carried out. There are no simple answers as to how to proceed and what decisions to make. Although engaging in ethical discussions may sometimes be unappealing or paralyzing for artists and community groups, this exercise of openness, however difficult, can provide a healthy dose of humility for the members in a project (it should be noted that the *members*, in 2004, usually included the artist). It can also spare them ill effects, because artistic and cultural work touches the roots of communities, and it is easy, if care is not taken, to uproot a culture, to misunderstand an artistic symbol or to inadvertently offend, and thus to burn the bridges that are being built in a project.

As an engaged artist, Norman Nawrocki feels it is important to establish relationships on an egalitarian basis, and not to believe that being an artist confers preferential status. Rather, the artist is a special guest who is fortunate to be welcomed into a community and who should respect this openness and learn from it. Likewise, it is desirable that community groups think about how to receive the artists, about the ways to promote dialogue and develop a project in keeping with the creative forces already present within the group.

With regard to becoming involved *with* or *in* a community, Kim Anderson questioned whether a person from outside could ever appropriately tell part of a community's story. Without claiming that this is impossible, she warned against the misrepresentations that can result from hasty judgments and reinforced stereotypes (despite good intentions) following projects created by "outsiders" who don't necessarily understand all the nuances associated with the sociohistorical context and the oppression experienced by the community. As an Aboriginal writer working with members of Aboriginal communities who have been reduced to silence by centuries of colonization, Kim feels the weight of the responsibility that goes with the power to change or perpetuate stereotypes. She tries to understand the language and images that have harmed her community in order to better take part in the struggle to break the cycle of oppression. She feels there is a need to be vigilant regarding people who come into a community as "experts" to study it and tell its story. She proposes thinking about who benefits from the final product and to what extent the members of the community were involved in the creation of the product or the work as well as who has the right to create this product. For example, do non-Aboriginal people have the "right" to make soapstone sculptures? Does the process help to deconstruct the clichés and stereotypes perpetuated by the systems of oppression? In the context of intercultural work, Kim mentioned the value of a relational approach that aims to create dialogue while taking into account questions related to the level of understanding of the temporal impacts of the systems of oppression on interpersonal relationships.

## Consent and Consensus

Following the 2002 program, the artists Lisa Ndejuru and Sylvie Tisserand began working with students in the annex of the École secondaire Jean-Grou. Their first concern was to create connections with these young people. Yet as the project *De Fil en histoires* [From wire/thread to stories]<sup>27</sup> developed and the time to exhibit the works approached, another ethical question arose: in co-creation, to whom does the final creation, the work, belong? Whom do you ask for permission to exhibit it? When





During the Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004).

young people are involved, who is authorized to grant permission to exhibit or distribute the works? When the subject of the work is the conditions that the youth are critiquing, isn't requiring parental authority tantamount to censorship?

In this project, Alain Montambeault, coordinator of the Maison des jeunes de Rivière-des-Prairies [Rivière-des-Prairies youth centre], inquired of the Québec Director of Youth Protection<sup>28</sup> and other government officials to find out what were the ethical obligations and responsibilities. The situation was especially complex because of the evolutive collaborative nature of the work wherein the artists and youth did not initially set out to create the work that ultimately resulted from their collaboration. How can informed consent be formulated when the primary process is exploratory and the final product is not yet known?

This question was also discussed by Normand Tamaro, a lawyer specializing in intellectual property, and Joëlle Tremblay, a community artist (presenters during the workshop *Collective Creation and Copyright*, 2004 program).<sup>29</sup> At one stage in the dissemination of her project, *Les oiseaux de paix* [Birds of peace],<sup>30</sup> Joëlle saw her copyright attributed to others. According to Joëlle, she was the author of the project. But according to the school staff, it was the children who had created the birds, and the credit also belonged to the school and the children. At such an advanced stage in a project, this kind of dilemma can be very frustrating and challenging. When many people participate in a collective art project that is guided by an artist, who is the author: the artist, the organization or institution sponsoring the project and/or the members?

Normand Tamaro compared this situation with a poetry anthology: the author is the person who initiates the collective project. This person is not the author of the individual poems, but of the work created by assembling the poems in this new collection. In copyright law, the concept of a collective work permits an author to create a work that incorporates contributions of others. Another possibility is to establish at the outset that the work will be the property of all those who work on it, without making any distinction between the artist (in cases where the artist actually had an overall vision of the project and guided the collective creation) and the project members. In these cases, the work is co-owned. But who makes these decisions and at what stage in the process?

Since community art projects are often collective creations based on egalitarian values and a desire to challenge traditional hierarchies of power, the question of copyright is also an ethical question. According to Joëlle Tremblay and Normand Tamaro, as well as Alain Montambeault, Lisa Ndejuru and Sylvie Tisserand — perhaps precisely because they learned it the hard way — the best time to discuss the question of the intellectual ownership of the work, copyright and the processes of consent and permission is at the beginning of a project, when the members are building the structure. A few questions can help to orient the discussion: What is the purpose of the agreement? What will become of the work after it is created? Will others be able to reproduce or disseminate the work? Who will decide where it will be exhibited, how and why? The preservation of the work needs to be taken into account both from the artist's point of view (e.g., in order to build and maintain a professional reputation) and from the community's (e.g., in order to build their cultural agency). Similarly, risks need to be assessed in order to come to an equitable, transparent agreement.

Kim Anderson also raised the question of who the community is and how to define it. She gave the example of urban Aboriginal communities across a province. In this case, who gives permission or should be consulted? The band councils, the elders or the local authorities? And if no representatives or councils exist for a community as diverse as the urban Aboriginal

community, how does anybody go about getting permission? Sometimes, in the absence of clearly identifiable authorities, the artist becomes her own ethical judge. In this case, once again, a few questions help to guide the artist who enters into a relationship with a community for the purpose of a collective artistic project. The artist can ask herself what she is offering and what she is receiving in return; what the importance of reciprocity is in the project; how respectful the interpersonal relationships are that are being created.

This discussion, which started with Lisa and Sylvie on the first day of LEVIER's 2004 program and continued with Normand and Joëlle on the second day, was related to the discussion on the place of ethical documentation in community art projects, a theoretical discussion to which jil p. weaving and Kim Anderson contributed on various levels.

## Do We Document the Work or the Project?

Documenting a project means "freezing" part of the history of a community and the lives of the members, as well as one version of the project. It should not be done lightly. There are many ethical questions involved in creating a common history around people who have too often had their identity treated with contempt in narratives of their collective past written by others.

jil p. weaving (facilitator of the workshop *Documentary Processes for Community Art Projects*, 2004 program) observed that it is difficult to talk about the engaged work of artists in communities. It is a context that is little known and that leaves room for interpretation, even for those who take part and identify with it. That is why jil started a project called *Documenting Engagement*, which included eight video documentaries focused on the artistic practices of artists who had developed community-based projects.<sup>31</sup> The artists were asked why, when and how their projects should be documented, as well as by whom (someone internal or external to the project) and for what purpose (to meet what needs of the artist, the organization or the members; to meet personal needs, collective needs or the needs of funding bodies). The object of the process was also explored: is it the result (the documentary) or the process itself (making the documentary) that is central? What is the difference between a documentary on a community art project and research on community art? Who is the documentary intended for? How can we ensure that the documentary is given back to the community that took part in it? In fact, how can we ensure that the process will encourage the creation of more lasting links among the various members, and how can we ensure that the memory created will accurately reflect the collective experience and not the experience of the person doing the documenting? Is it possible to envisage the creation of a video that would be usable by all the partners, either as a tool for grassroots education, part of a portfolio, a tool for expressing demands or for social change, or simply as collective memory?

Some questions were also raised on the processes used in editing the videos. What information did the artists want to transmit and where did it come from? How did additions such as a soundtrack improve or influence understanding of the message? Was the artist's voice present in the document? To what extent should it be present? What is documented and what is not? Who decides on the aesthetics of the documentary? These questions led the participants to ask how documenting the project changed it or the members' participation in it, and how editing could bias or do justice to both the process and the members. All these questions were asked of the artists in *Documenting Engagement* and were asked again during the LEVIER training and exchange program — addressed to the artists again, but also to the representatives of community groups and the members of the groups who were present. Although these questions are vital for an artist who becomes involved in a collective process, it is also useful for the members of the community concerned (who do not necessarily identify as artists) to deal with them, in order to be actively involved in the documentary process during both recording and editing.<sup>32</sup>

By keeping in mind the importance of accurate documentation in decolonizing the stories of oppressed communities and thinking collectively about the question of informed consent, the members of an artistic project provide themselves with shared tools to ensure that their process is used to build alliances. To favour successful and satisfying community art projects, it is important to take into account the community's past and its structural obstacles and deal skilfully with what arises relative to this history and dynamic. It is important to consider the place of the creative process in the individual and collective healing of damaged communities and to consider what skills are necessary to turn a destructive conflict into a creative one.

## The (Positive) Risks of Creation

Devora Neumark, who has for more than 25 years been studying and working at the intersection of art, conflict and healing, noted that all three are inherently creative processes. All three also involve a certain level of risk (since they imply the possibility of loss and change) and are responses to something that disturbs the individual(s) concerned.



During the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program* (2002).



During the two community art training and exchange programs, the themes of conflict, conflict resolution, personal healing and risk were repeatedly discussed. They were more clearly part of the 2004 training, however, possibly because these themes had been part of the experience of the community art projects of the various groups and because the organizers devoted a good portion of the training to them.<sup>33</sup>

Conflict, risk, creativity and healing intersect in community art to become the means for forming new communities. By exploring these themes, it is possible to understand the nature of what has changed, is changing and could change, since these themes are the basis of the projects. After considering collaboration, engagement, creation, processes, ethics, relationships, consensus and documentation — in other words, the positive conditions for the development of a project — it is possible to look at the place of conflict, creativity and healing in the specific context of community art in Québec at the beginning of the millennium. Conflict cannot always be avoided, nor should it be, and personal or collective healing is part of the social change desired. On the other hand, it is easier to accept the existence of conflict and allow healing when the conditions for success relative to collaborative projects have previously been established.

## Conflict *When society ignores social oppression, that oppression is often internalized and transmitted from generation to generation*

Often community art projects relate the processes of artistic creation, at various levels or degrees of intensity, to the effects of structural, systemic violence, exclusion and marginalization. The effects of this violence make themselves felt in conflicts that arise in the course of projects. Dealing with this violence is an arduous process that is often central to the themes dealt with by collective artistic projects.

In 2002, the theme of conflict was explored mainly through conflict resolution. Judy Ringer shared some aikido techniques to demonstrate various ways of interacting with conflicts (workshop *The Magic Potential of Conflict*, 2002 program).<sup>34</sup> Through physical exercises known as “punch”<sup>35</sup> and “the unbendable arm,”<sup>36</sup> the group perceived the difference between resisting conflict and redirecting it with rigidity or flexibility; between simply reacting to an anticipated conflict and choosing an appropriate response. According to Judy, the popular myth that conflict is negative leads to dealing with it in a competitive way, creating an emotional or physical struggle so that one’s point of view will prevail. When conflict is seen as a space of learning, it can be better anticipated and experienced. By taking enough personal space to be able to be aware of what is happening in one’s environment, it is easier to choose appropriate responses to conflict situations, and do so without using aggression as we often do when conflict takes us by surprise.

According to Judy, this allows us to move from problems to solutions, and to be partners rather than adversaries. In another exercise, the “two-step dance,”<sup>37</sup> Judy showed the group that the way a conflictual action is received could either perpetuate the conflict or redirect it and turn it into a creative force, a combined strength. By moving away from the intention either to manipulate or to appease, it is possible to grasp the perspective of the other person, to understand how the other’s point of view can change one’s own and to use the conflict as a catalyst for learning and creation. By creating a third perspective, a combination of the first two points of view, it is possible to initiate a true multidimensional collaboration.

To do this, Judy suggests that conflict is not experienced as related to judgment but rather to discovery. In the judgment (or perfection) model, conflict is negative, competitive, based on the idea that life is above all a struggle. The discovery model defines conflict simply as *being*, and sees this state of being as an opportunity to discover new things. This approach to conflict is consistent with the principles of nonviolent communication. According to Marshall B. Rosenberg, one of the founders of nonviolent communication, when people attempt to clarify their observations, feelings and needs in the context of communication, it is possible to communicate with respect, attention and empathy and thus to create a true mutual desire for openness and conflict resolution.<sup>38</sup>

For Devora Neumark, the importance of conflict resolution through nonviolent communication lies in part in the parallel she draws between her experience of intergenerational violence and the way society perpetuates the cycles of oppression and structural violence. When society ignores social oppression, that oppression is often internalized and passed on in family and interpersonal dynamics transmitted from generation to generation.

Using various exercises, Devora (facilitator of the workshop *Nonviolent Communication*, 2004 program) highlighted some basic principles of nonviolent communication, emphasizing awareness of personal patterns of transmitting and internalizing violence. By asking the participants to do an automatic writing exercise on the first conflict they remembered, and, later in the day, on a conflict they had dealt with recently, Devora brought out the role of blaming in poorly managed conflicts. Whether it is turned against the other person or oneself, blame is often expressed in the form of judgment and is closely related to feelings of frustration. The feelings of frustration come out of not knowing or not being able to express one’s needs and feelings in a conflict situation. Learning to express needs, accepting that others may have different ones and



Workshop *Creativity, Peaceful Co-Existence, and How to Cope When Personal Issues Get Triggered*, during the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)* (Jack Saul, Cynthia E. Cohen, Louise Lachapelle and Devora Neumark).

dissociating feelings from the interpretation of other people's actions are ways to reduce blame, and thus violence, in communication. But beyond conflicts during projects, there are also conflictual events that are part of the individual experience of the members of projects.

Creativity has the capacity to change the power relations that shape our personal histories, encouraging us to take control of our lives by becoming conscious of our personal choices. Devora explored the connections between traumatic events, the surprising connections between the personal, familial and sociopolitical, the desire to deny and the desire to express the wounds, the dialectic between truth and memory—all sensitive subjects that are often modeled through creative processes and that can be used as tools for resolving or finding closure for events of the past.<sup>39</sup> Using a children's story, *O'Sullivan Stew*,<sup>40</sup> Devora (facilitator of the workshop *Creativity and Consciousness as Contiguous Processes of Change*, 2002 program) pointed out that learning and change (both personal and sociopolitical) come about from both the way any story is told (whether in a secure or an oppressive context) and the mere act of telling it. Bearing witness to one's own story and the stories of others, is a creative, transformative act that often leads to new self-determination, and what we don't know about our past and the past of a community can still have significant effects on us and our own community.

Beyond the social need to break patterns of violence by talking about it in the community affected by it, people who have experienced traumas often feel a need to seek justice by re-establishing contact with community and telling their stories. This is a need that goes beyond the therapeutic and healing processes; it is rooted in the need not to denaturalize suffering by taking it out of its sociopolitical context. Beyond nonviolent communication is the recognition of the structural violence of the current neo-liberal/neo-conservative system, of social inequalities that perpetuate profoundly violent social dynamics (poverty, racism, sexism, marginalization, war, to list a few) but are rarely cited as the source of what is labelled as individual violent behaviour. Notwithstanding individual resilience in the face of traumatic events, it is often the support of a community that makes the difference between reliving traumatic episodes and healing from them.

## Creative Process, Collective Healing

According to Cynthia Cohen (co-facilitator of the workshop *Creativity, Peaceful Coexistence and How to Adapt When Personal Issues are Raised*, 2004 program), it is essential to remember that communities are full of strengths and resources. The artists (or cultural workers) who have been invited are there to create conditions that will make it possible to see and make good use of the resources that are already present in the social fabric of the community. The arts can play a key role in bringing together a community since they help people to embrace the paradoxes in "real life," the community, and conflicts by using symbols that convey many meanings simultaneously. The arts involve people cognitively, emotionally and physically, and conflict resolution has to take place at these three levels. To help the participants understand the use of art in conflict resolution following a trauma, Jack Saul (who co-facilitated this workshop with Cynthia) shared his knowledge of the human brain. According to him, the body and movement play an important part in healing processes, because traumatic events create increased activity in the sensory-motor part of the brain and are therefore hard to access through the more verbal part of the brain. It can therefore be difficult to express traumatic memories verbally. By working with other tools, such as the body and movement, people can begin to recover violent or traumatic memories. This is why, according to Cynthia, conflict-resolution processes that rely on rationality can only succeed partially with patterns that are deeply ingrained in a person or a community.

In addition to creative tools, a significant amount of time and a capacity to listen are needed, since any trauma that surfaces will have to be handled respectfully, which takes time and listening. However, although listening is the key to healing and conflict resolution, it is often lacking in communities that have survived trauma.

The work of healing through collaborative projects is primarily based on the concept of listening, not only to individual and collective experience but also to the needs expressed in projects. In community art, one of the activities that enables survivors of traumatic episodes to regain control over the disturbing events is the sharing of perceptions of the project, the themes that will be covered and the means that will be used to deal with them. This is a key opportunity to give the members power over what will be said, where and how the conversation will proceed, how long it will go on and how the resulting material will be used.

In spite of the best intentions of artists and professional community organizers, community art projects use as their medium the creative and personal baggage of the people taking part in the project, which means exposing their individual and collective vulnerability. That is why the artists and community workers should think about how to manage these risks, that is, how to provide a safe environment in spite of the intensity of the creative process. How should the pain resulting from the re-opening of old wounds during the process be treated? How can the project be ended without leaving these wounds open? How can people feel a certain sense of healing closure before the project ends? How can we ensure that the community will not be left



Workshop *Ethics and Community Art Practices*, during the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)* (Devora Neumark, Louise Lachapelle and Kim Anderson).

with more problems that it had before the creative project? How can we include this healing in community art projects, but without letting the healing *become* the project if it is not meant to be? These are questions that were suggested as points of reference to be examined collectively from the outset of a project. This makes it possible to provide collective mechanisms to ensure that the wounds caused by conflicts are not underestimated, and to open up safe spaces of respect and trust. Identifying vulnerabilities also helps in differentiating between conflicts that are internal to the process of the project and those that are more related to processes of individual healing. For the artists and community workers in a community, these ethical questions are, once again, key to making community art projects respectful and constructive.

Given that the projects are carried out by a community and that community workers and artists take part in shaping it anew, of this new community it goes without saying that they are also subject to turmoil. Jack Saul talked about the experience of artists when they come into contact with stories of suffering and injustice. How can people not feel alone in a world that is so dark and inhuman? Cynthia and Jack recommend that participants take care of themselves and form peer support groups to help them externalize emotions experienced in the course of the process and prevent these emotions from being redirected toward the internal dynamics of the project, which does more harm than good. However, before taking care of the effects of the process on their lives, they have to situate themselves in the process and recognize that they will be involved in a personal way. Cynthia and Jack demonstrated this with two simple exercises in which they asked the workshop participants to place themselves on a continuum according to their comfort level with respect to their work on a community art project. At one end of the continuum were the participants who felt "confident in the project, with nothing to learn;" at the other end were those who did not feel secure in the project and felt they had nothing to offer to the group. The second exercise involved placing participants who drew on their personal experiences for their projects at one end of a continuum and those who did not find their life experiences relevant as creative material for projects at the other end. These two exercises showed how the artists, like the professional community workers, become personally involved in the projects, just as the other members did.

As community art projects often give rise to conflicts and expose vulnerabilities, it is good to create spaces for recognizing these feelings, not only during, but also after a project. Many projects simply end with a public event. Cynthia and Jack, however, saw the end of a project as the last review by the members, the last summing up that allows them to reconstruct the story of the project, rather than the last public event. This process can take place several weeks or months after the completion of the artistic aspect of the project, and the sharing can be initiated by the members, including the artists—who cannot go through such a process without themselves, too, being changed. One question that may arise at this time is: What happens next? Because community art projects are part of a collective process of change, the transformation required is the assimilation of the artistic and human learning, which goes beyond the project itself and influences other aspects of the lives of everyone involved.

*The value of asking questions lies not in searching for answers, but in searching for new pertinent questions*

### Conclusion: Toward a New Beginning

The value of asking questions lies not in searching for answers, but in searching for new pertinent questions. LEVIER's days of reflection and discussion were important times for collectively raising questions and sharing ideas on possible answers.

After the first *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, the participants left with some suggestions for starting their projects and exploring ways of establishing and strengthening of relationships, roles and communities. The second program provided an opportunity for more detailed discussion and exploration on communication, conflict and the ethics involved in creating a community around artistic projects. The participants went away with some things to think about and many new questions, especially with regard to the lasting nature of the creative act, engagement, the creation of a new community, or at least of groups sharing certain affinities, the roles of participants in projects and the power dynamics that permeate and colour these roles and this engagement.

LEVIÉ's community art training and exchange programs — the discussions in subgroups on the success or the stages of a community art project, presentations by guest resource persons on their experience with issues related to community art practices, and individual learning through exercises involving body work and profound creativity — contributed to the creation of a space conducive to the collective development of a practice suited to the current context of community art in Québec and elsewhere. These days encouraged everyone taking part to make connections with their personal experiences and their social roles; their desires as artists, members of the community or community workers; and their needs as individuals involved in community art projects.

Personally, five years later, I am still learning about how I relate to the questions that were raised, in particular with respect to the sharing of voices in the collective memory of projects, the time required to create a safe, non-hierarchical group where people feel secure, and the ethical questions associated with the quest for an aesthetic that really reflects the values of the community involved. Each context brings up a new aspect of a situation, a new way of approaching it, but also new questions. These programs full of exploration and analysis have helped me learn to question and keep my perceptions and observations fluid, thus keeping my community art practice open towards change. They taught me not to judge, but to question — a simple act that opens so many doors. They also made me aware that there are many of us challenging the power dynamics between the art world, the community, and the economic and social spheres, and that it is always worthwhile to take the time to question how, during projects, our actions can promote liberation or reinforce oppression, and to act accordingly.

The questions that came up during the programs were often the subject of other sessions organized by LEVIÉ in subsequent years. Thus the ideas discussed in this text are at the heart of further chapters in the life of community art in Québec and in LEVIÉ's co-creative process.



During the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*.

#### NOTES

1. See the descriptions of the projects she took part in as a member of Vichama Collectif: *Manipuler avec soin*, pp. 159–165, *Mémoire de grève*, pp. 230–231, and *Caravane solidaire*, pp. 256–257. Rachel also wrote *Between the Means and the Ends*, a critical account of the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program* offered by LEVIÉ in 2006, pp. 108–120.
2. Montréal multidisciplinary artist. See the description of the humanist activist project *État d'urgence*, in which she participated, pp. 210–211.
3. See her participation in the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Arts Practices*, p. 51–52, and her text *Community Art, or Finding the Way Back Home?*, written following that event, pp. 52–61. See also her participation in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 101, and in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, pp. 121–122. Louise acted as collaborating editor for this book and, in this capacity, she signed the Postscript entitled *La brûlure avant la voix or Could this be a love letter?*, pp. 353–365.
4. "Community arts" in 2002, "community art" in 2004: is this simply a semantic change or a new definition of the discipline? See p. 73 for further discussion of this question. See also the note 1, p. 31.
5. See pp. 34–36 for the complete schedule of the 2002 program and pp. 66–70 for the 2004 program.
6. She led the same type of workshop during the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Arts Practices* (see p. 56) and the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program* (see pp. 102 and 105).
7. See the description of the workshop she facilitated, *The Aikido of Performance and Performativity: Practice(s) of (Co)creative Presence*, pp. 46–47.
8. See the descriptions of the humanist activist art projects he participated in, *Une chanson pour un logement*, pp. 196–197, and *La Virevolte en musique et en chansons*, pp. 198–199, and the analysis of the project *Le Cirque en Ca\$h: où rien n'est caché*, in which he also took part, in Caroline Alexander Stevens, "How shall I live?", pp. 279–281. Norman acted as coordinator of this book and in this capacity he wrote the Foreword entitled *When Activists and Artists Become One*, pp. 9–10.
9. I am a white heterosexual woman who grew up in Montréal, attended FACE (Fine Art Core Education) school for almost twelve years, and then followed a path that led me to do a BA in social work. At the same time as I was pursuing this formal education, I also joined Vichama Collectif, a polycentric, socially accountable art collective, with which I lived and worked from 2002 to 2005 and which is still part of my daily life. With the collective, I explored the arts of the street and demo-actions, community art with LEVIÉ, and (inter)cultural dialogue with our partner and big brother, Vichama Teatro ([www.vichama.org](http://www.vichama.org)). With Vichama Collectif and in related activities, I also took part in social struggles and groups, including, most recently, Solidarity Across Borders ([www.solidarityacrossborders.blogspot.com](http://www.solidarityacrossborders.blogspot.com)), CrapN', the Coalition pour la réappropriation de l'art (petit a) par N'importe qui (grand N) [Coalition for the re-appropriation of art (small a) by anybody (capital a)] ([http://citoyen.onf.ca/node/3716&dossier\\_nid=1269](http://citoyen.onf.ca/node/3716&dossier_nid=1269)) and the Autonomous Camp ([www.uncampement.net](http://www.uncampement.net)).
10. Both were written by Louise Dubreuil.
11. See the description of a meeting this theatre group took part in, *Presentation of Three Experiences in Community Art*, p. 40, and the description of *Miscellanées*, the humanist activist project in which the group participated, pp. 253–254.
12. As a practical exercise, Norman presented a fictional scenario on the housing crisis in Montréal, and divided the group into three subgroups. The participants had ten minutes to brainstorm and find a simple and effective strategy for creative resistance in the face of uncaring landlords, which they then presented to the others. They then had five minutes to translate their ideas into a concrete symbolic action, which they presented to and discussed with the whole group.
13. See the description of this community art project, pp. 139–141, and the specific questions addressed to the project's members in this project, in the 2004 program schedule, p. 69.

14. This desire to change the world, when it becomes the aim of the artistic act, is based on a modern Western view of the role of art. In this approach, art has gone from a way of celebrating the world to a tool for changing it, for having an impact on it. This is characteristic of the post-industrial era, which stresses efficiency, performance and the need to make an impact, and the need to transform raw materials.
15. See the description of this community art project, pp. 159–160, and the specific questions addressed to the members of this project in the 2004 program schedule, p. 70.
16. An issue that has broad implications if one considers that the Canada Council for the Arts, for example, only funds professional artists.
17. Quoted in Louise Dubreuil's account of the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program* (2002).
18. See the description of this humanist activist project on pp. 268–269, and the specific questions addressed to the artist who initiated it in the schedule of the 2004 program, p. 67.
19. This is a reference to something Kim Anderson said during the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Arts Practices*, about the Aboriginal practice of giving gifts: "You never take something without giving something first. Usually tobacco, but it could be other gifts."
20. See the description of this community art project on pp. 154–158, and the specific questions addressed to the members of this project in the schedule of the 2004 program, p. 67. See also the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, and the references to these activities in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 115, and the text by Bob W. White, *The Power of Collaboration*, p. 321. See also the participation of the members of this project in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122. See the video *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors*, made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
21. Excerpt from a definition of community art written for LEVIER by Caroline Alexander-Stevens and Devora Neumark, as presented to the participants of the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004).
22. For more about documenting projects, see also pp. 36, 68 and 100–107.
23. The connections between ethics and aesthetics were explored during a study day organized by LEVIER in March 2003, i.e., between the two community art training and exchange programs. See the account of that session, pp. 51–61.
24. See note 3.
25. Text distributed by LEVIER during this event. In 2004, it was on the Engrenage Noir website, but it was later removed when the site was revamped to reflect LEVIER's change in orientation. See the note 13, p. 99. See also in the closing words *In Our Life Time*, p. 370.
26. See her participation in *LEVIER's First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24, *LEVIER's Second Orientation Meeting*, pp. 25–27, and the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Arts Practices*, pp. 51 and 56. See also her text *Community-Based Arts and Research Practices: What's Ethics Got To Do With It?*, pp. 299–302.
27. See the description of this community art project, pp. 166–167, and the specific questions addressed to members of this project in the 2004 program schedule, p. 67. Lisa Ndejuru, one of the artists in this project, later participated in another project supported by LEVIER. See the description of this humanist activist project entitled *Tuganire*, pp. 224–225. See also the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 111, 118 and 119. See also the participation of the members of this project in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 121. See also the video *Tuganire* made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
28. The person responsible, under the *Youth Protection Act*, for protecting children and youth under the age of 18 whose security or development is in danger.
29. The issue of copyright in collaborative projects had also been the subject of a previous workshop organized by LEVIER with the same guests. See the account of that workshop, pp. 62–64.
30. See the description of this project, p. 63.
31. Some videos from this collection were subsequently used during the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program* (see pp. 103–105). See also the reference to these videos in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 112 and 119.
32. LEVIER's *Documenting Collaboration* project was a result of this discussion. For further information, see the presentation of the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program* held in 2006, pp. 100–101, and the information (and DVD) in the centre of this publication. See also the reference to *Documenting Collaboration* in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 110–111.
33. In the text for the 2004 program, the organizers defined these concepts and their importance: see the presentation of the workshop *Creativity, Peaceful Co-Existence, and How to Cope When Personal Issues Get Triggered*, which was facilitated by Cynthia E. Cohen and Jack Saul, p. 68.
34. Judy Ringer was invited back by LEVIER in 2003 to facilitate a workshop on applying the principles of the Japanese martial art of aikido in life and creative practice (see note 7).
35. An exercise with two partners: One approaches the other with a closed fist and punches the other's shoulder. If the second person resists, she is pushed, and there is a struggle. However, if she reacts by redirecting instead of resisting, she takes a step backward while pivoting to one side, thus letting the blow—the conflict—pass without losing her balance—her centre. By choosing to always keep several centimetres' distance between others and ourselves, we can perceive the beginning of the punch. We then have enough time to react calmly before there is even any physical contact.
36. Another exercise that is done in pairs. One person stands, without centring herself, holding her arm out in front of her. Her partner tries to bend her arm, which can be done quite easily despite her efforts to resist. Then she takes the time to centre herself and to visualize the energy circulating through her body like water, and extends her arm as if it were a fire hose, visualizing the water/energy circulating the full length of her arm and gushing out through her fingers in the direction of her gaze. The energy is not rigid, but fluid, like water in a river, which gives a solid flexibility to her arm, making it almost impossible to bend.
37. One person pulls on the other's arm. The second person reacts by pulling back with the same force. The result is a struggle of resistance. The same action is repeated, but this time, the second person uses the principle of redirecting the energy instead of resisting it, and initiates a change. Instead of moving away from the conflict, she takes a step toward it, and simply pivots around the arm. Consequently, the two people end up side by side, looking in the same direction instead of facing each other. The purpose is not to prevent or change the other person's action, but to react differently to it. By not fighting against it but rather moving toward it, conflict can be transformed. By changing perspective, the dynamics change, as in a *pas de deux*, when one person changes her steps it affects the other person's movements.
38. The principles of nonviolent communication were presented at two workshops organized by LEVIER (see pp. 48–50). For more information, see Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2003).
39. Devora presented a summary of clinical data on trauma, drawing on the work of Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), a collection of essays including "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and The Engraving of Trauma" by Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart; Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (London: Routledge, 1992); Janice Haaken, *Pillar of Salt: Gender, Memory, and the Perils of Looking Back* (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 2000); Jack Saul of the NYU International Trauma Studies Program, workshop presented during the annual meeting of the Oral History Association, 2001; and Jane Middleton-Moz, *Healing Generational Trauma: From Legacy to Choice*, materials for a course taught at Concordia University (Montréal), 1999.
40. Hudson Talbott, *O'Sullivan Stew* (New York: Puffin, 1999).

Photographic documentation:

Images taken from the video documentation by Jean Cédras for the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program* (2002); Johanne Chagnon for the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004).

Since LEVIER was receiving more and more partnership requests to support the organizing of critical encounters and its capacity to maintain a steady pace in its programming was reaching a limit, a grant program for the autonomous coordination of these events was created in order to continue promoting critical reflection on community and humanist activist art within the Québec network and elsewhere. Financial, conceptual and logistical support was made available to individuals and organizations offering dialogue circles, roundtables or workshops, etc., focused on any subject in keeping with LEVIER's values. As of the time of this writing this grant program is still ongoing.

THE FIVE MEETINGS THAT RECEIVED THIS SUPPORT DURING THE PERIOD COVERED BY THIS PUBLICATION ARE THE FOLLOWING:

## Workshop: **The Ups and Downs of Partnership**

In the community hall of the Arche de Noé co-operative, 157 Roy East, Montréal

February 16, 2005

*When I am not busy with the artistic coordination of Skol, I produce airy assemblages made of everyday materials chosen for their shapes, colours and rhythmic patterns.*  
— Anne Bertrand

*I belong to the community of the enraged. Rage is the engine of my action. I want my action to be creative, explosive and collective. I am both Don Quixote and Auguste.*  
— Dominique Malacort

This workshop was organized through the initiative of the two facilitators, Dominique Malacort<sup>1</sup> and Anne Bertrand. Social artist, Dominique Malacort is a founder of the group UTIL (Unité théâtrale d'interventions loufoques [Theatre unit for zany interventions], Montréal, 2003) and the theatre company INDOCILE (Lower St. Lawrence region, 2008). She has collaborated with many troupes doing "théâtre d'intervention" in Québec, Mali and Burkina Faso. Anne Bertrand is an interdisciplinary artist and artistic director of the Centre des arts actuels Skol [Skol contemporary arts centre] in Montréal.

Through the use of a popular education approach, the two artists wanted to invite an exchange about the issue of partnership, an element that is part of their own experience and that of people involved in community relationships. As it turned out, the organizers had to deal with the expectation on the part of some of those present that ready-made answers would be provided.

THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXCERPT FROM THE DOCUMENTS PRODUCED BY THE ORGANIZERS PRIOR TO THIS WORKSHOP, WHICH ALSO INCLUDED A CREATIVE EXERCISE:

All community art projects develop in partnership. This word — *partnership* — may suggest good and not-so-good experiences to anyone who has carried out a cultural or artistic action with, or as part of, a community group. The definition of partnership varies a lot from one person to another and even within a group of partners. A healthy partnership aims to share objectives, a vision, resources, participation and ownership. Depending on whether you are a cynic or an idealist, partnership is a trap or a passionate commitment. How do we react to inequalities of power among partners? How can we maintain healthy relationships throughout the project? How do we clearly communicate our expectations and respect the objectives of each partner?

The following are some of the suggested conditions for success according to the workshop facilitators:

- The project should not be proposed in its final form: it must be co-created; it is better to begin with an open discussion rather than a predefined agenda, and to recognize that the collaborative process may change into a very different form from what was initially planned.
- Partnership should not be hierarchical, and it should not be directed by the funding bodies.
- The relationship should be continually consolidated over time.
- The initiative should change the participants, both individuals and organizations.
- It is important to put in place conditions that will ensure that the project continues to the extent that the members want it to.

### NOTE

1. See the description of the humanist activist project *Tournée « enquête-action » en Belgique et au Burkina Faso* in which she participated, pp. 249–250, and the text *Away and Here in Community Theatre, or the Power of Paradox*, which she wrote following that experience, pp. 303–312.





## Transdisciplinary Gatherings: **Artivistic**

*Artivistic*

2013 Saint-Laurent  
Boulevard,  
Montréal

September 22–24, 2005

[*Un.occupied Spaces*]

5455 de Gaspé,  
Montréal

October 25–27, 2007

*TURN\*ON*

1350 Saint-Laurent  
Boulevard,  
Montréal

October 15–17, 2009

Founded in 2004, the Artivistic collective — which includes Sophie Le-Phat Ho,<sup>1</sup> Anik Fournier and Catherine Melançon — has been organizing international gatherings on the interPlay between art, information and activism. Artivistic emerged out of the proposition that not only artists talk about art, academics about theory, and activists about activism. The events go beyond merely the critical in order to promote transdisciplinary and intercultural dialogue about activist art, and to create and facilitate a network of diverse peoples. *Engrenage Noir / LEVIER* was implicated in the 2005, 2007 and 2009 editions of Artivistic.



Bread and Puppet Theater, *Untitled*, street performance in an empty lot next to 2035 Saint-Laurent Boulevard, Montréal, during the 2005 edition of Artivistic. Photo: Owen Eric Wood.



Nicole Fournier, *Live Dining*, polyculture project, Maguire Meadow (corner Saint-Viateur and De Gaspé), Montréal, during the 2007 edition of Artivistic. Photo: Sophie Le-Phat Ho.

### **Artivistic**

What unites activism and the street? Who owns your body-spirit? Who is entitled to communicate? These questions, raised during the 2005 event, continued to orient the *Artivistic* events in subsequent years. Artists, academics and activists from Canada, the United States, Great Britain, France and Brazil gathered to explore the concept of space and inherent political dynamics therein, as well as the authority of scientific knowledge and how communication and information act as vectors of rights and liberties. The program also included an art exhibition, a series of performances and public interventions. Devora Neumark was invited to participate as a critical respondent throughout the three days, and to convene the closing dialogue circle wherein participants were asked to name the questions that they were taking away with them.

As a largely independent effort, the 2005 edition of Artivistic was an opportunity to lay the groundwork for a network linking artistic and academic communities in order to connect the different approaches and highlight the commonalities between them relative to current politics.

### **[Un.occupied Spaces]**

*What is indigenous? What is natural space? What is (there) to occupy?*

The third international edition of *Artivistic* focused on the issue of occupation and the interrelated articulations of nature, land, territory and public urban space. In addition to LEVIER's participation in this event, the following Montréal-based art centres were involved in the many public interventions, presentations and roundtable discussions: DARE-DARE, Studio XX, Oboro, SAT, La Centrale and articule.

While *Artivistic* expanded in terms of organization, international participation and financial support, the 2007 edition also revealed several challenges: the difficulty of establishing strategies of self-organization, the difficulty of creating platforms for rigorous discussions of the topics, and the difficulty of creating links between international participants and local organizations. Furthermore, [*Un.occupied Spaces*] was faced with the difficulty of outreaching to a public outside of the invited participants. After the event, the organizers also realized that while they attempted to address various forms of occupation, both physical and ideological, the realm of gender was not addressed. This latter issue became one of the catalysts for the 2009 edition of *Artivistic*, entitled *TURN\*ON*.

### TURN\*ON

In keeping with *Artivistic*'s intercultural and multidisciplinary exploration of power and control, the 2009 edition focused primarily on the potency of pleasure and the dynamics of sexual politics. LEVIER's participation in this event was limited to the financial support of *KIMINIKE*:<sup>2</sup> *Indigenous Voices Rise Up Raw!... From Under the Blanket*, a cabaret-style event expressing Aboriginal women's perspectives on erotica and sexuality. Created by Émilie Monnet, this series of 15-minute performances featured Kary-Ann Deer (Mohawk), Émilie Monnet (Anishinabe), Moe Clark (Métis), Donita Large (Cree) and Nahka Bertrand (Dene).

One of the objectives of this performance was to illustrate the direct relationship between colonization and contemporary Aboriginal reality, particularly with respect to sexuality. Sexual violence is rife in Aboriginal communities, and it is important to make the connection between colonization (residential schools, for example) and what is happening today (Aboriginal women murdered or disappeared, statistics showing that 80 percent of Aboriginal women are victims of conjugal or family violence). The performance, however, was also intended to celebrate the voices of these Aboriginal women who accepted the invitation to take the stage and share their relationship to sexuality and eroticism, and thus break the taboo.

Émilie Monnet writes: "I know that in my case, going on stage and revealing my own story had a huge impact on my relationship with myself and others. As if things started to vibrate differently around me after that performance. It was really healing in some way: giving ourselves permission to bare our souls, to express our anger, to free ourselves of shame, to finally celebrate our sensuality, our femaleness. This theme is a big part of my thoughts, because sexuality is the basis of everything. Without healthy relationships in couples, you can't have healthy families. And without healthy families, it's hard to have healthy communities where pride, self-esteem and love prevail. It's hard to have communities that have what it takes to be autonomous and functional."

*My work is situated between practice and theory, constantly inspired to find new ways to think through and activate urgent questions relating to gender, class, and intercultural exchange in specific localities. My work as a cultural organizer allows me to activate, stimulate, and partake in a broader discussion across cultural practices in a more immediate way. I am strongly committed to joining with others in shared political projects that effect change.*  
— Anik Fournier

*In addition to the intersections between art and social change, I am particularly interested in the role of art institutions in communities. I am curious about the constant co-optation of art by institutions, and I wonder about actions that would prevent this.*  
— Catherine Melançon



*I am a researcher and cultural organizer from Montréal. With interests in biopolitics and technological arts, among other things, I also participate in anti-racist and migrant justice campaigns. I work at the intersection of art, science and activism.*  
— Sophie Le-Phat Ho

*KIMINIKE: Indigenous Voices Rise up Raw!... From Under the Blanket*, at Cabaret Cleopatre, Montréal, during the 2009 edition of *Artivistic* (Moe Clark and Émilie Monnet). Photos: Sophie Le-Phat Ho.

### NOTES

1. See her "involuntary" participation relative to the Soma workshops, p. 130.
2. *Kiminike* is a Cree word for people feeling sexual.



## Roundtable: **SEXE ! art action** [Sex! art action]

The Saint-Michel public bath  
5300 Saint-Dominique,  
Montréal

October 1, 2006

*The “I” that I use is established in relationship to the Other, the outside, from a perspective of non-duality and non-hierarchy. I believe in sharing knowledge and decentralizing that sharing. Writing; mass and independent media; work on sound, music and narration; drifting in space; and the deconstruction and reconstruction of the myths and beliefs of modern society are all part of my concerns and of the perpetual, infinite hybridization of my “I.”*

— André Éric Létourneau

*This roundtable discussion was presented as part of SEXE ! art action, the first edition (to date) of the International Sex Festivals,<sup>1</sup> during the event VIVA ! art action.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the festival was to explore sexuality beyond stereotypes and prejudices, and to contribute to changing society’s perceptions of sexuality, with a special focus on people considered to be at high risk: youth, members of different cultural communities, seniors and people with disabilities.*

André Éric Létourneau<sup>3</sup> was the organizer and moderator of the discussion. The guests were Renée Nadeau of AIDS Community Care Montréal and Christine Brault,<sup>4</sup> who came to present the results of a sculpture workshop they had facilitated with several teenage girls earlier that day; Kathryn Delaney, a representative of Stella (Montréal), an association of artists and sex workers whose aim is to improve living conditions for its members; and Craig P. Ross, a representative of the Two Spirit Association of Montréal, an Aboriginal community group that explores traditional rituals related to the “two-spirit” phenomenon — people attracted to the same sex or who self-identify with the opposite sex, who traditionally had a special status comparable to that of a shaman.



Workshop facilitated by Christine Brault and Renée Nadeau exploring female sexuality hosted by la Centrale (2006): sculptures created with adolescents made from fruit and candy. Photo: Magalie Bouthillier.

### NOTES

1. This event, which combined expertise in art and sexology, was organized by Catherine Boedmer, an artist and coordinator of contemporary art events; Magalie Bouthillier, an editor and translator with specialized training in alternative sexual practices; André Éric Létourneau (see note 3) and Douglas McColeman, an expert in prevention and sex education with AIDS Community Care Montréal.
2. A contemporary art event organized in 2006 by six artist-run centres in Montréal.
3. See the description of the humanist activist project *Standard II* and *III*, which he carried out, pp. 266–267.
4. See the description of the community art project *Et si j’y étais...*, in which she participated, pp. 139–141. See also the participation of this project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004), p. 69, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were To Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 75.

## Workshop: **Why Art?**

At la Caserne 18-30  
3622 Hochelaga,  
Montréal

October 23, 2005



Dramatization by Creative Alternatives.

*This workshop, like the one on collective creativity,<sup>1</sup> was mandatory for all LEVIER community art grant recipients as per the contractual agreement associated with this grant program.<sup>2</sup> In order to extend the dialogue that had already begun to emerge amongst the members of all the LEVIER-supported community art projects and to continue to develop the networking process, all humanist activist grant recipients were also invited to participate in this workshop. As with the collective creativity workshop, participants were encouraged by other people's experiences; they affirmed how important it was to connect with others dealing with similar challenges.*

*The theme chosen for the October 2005 workshop came from an observation made after previous workshops and training and exchange programs. Effective means for encouraging social change had been discussed from various points of view, but there had been no discussion of art as such. It therefore seemed appropriate to raise the question at this time: Why art? Why use art in sociopolitical struggles? What does art do that other means of activist intervention do not? What specifically does art contribute? There are many ways of questioning and acting against the systemic social forces that perpetuate oppression in all its forms, but what is it that attracts individuals and groups to creative practices, and how do these practices fit in with all the other kinds of efforts directed toward changing society to make it more equitable and humane?*

*As in the past with other programs, LEVIER had a desire to use artistic means to explore the issues in question. For this occasion, Creative Alternatives was invited to help initiate the conversation about "Why Art?" The Montréal-based Playback Theatre<sup>3</sup> group was contacted through Lisa Ndejuru,<sup>4</sup> who was already a member of a LEVIER-supported community art project and active in the Creative Alternatives group. This first collaboration with the group eventually led in 2007 to a three-day Playback theatre workshop on social justice.<sup>5</sup>*

*In addition to Playback theatre, automatic writing exercises — facilitated by Devora Neumark — were integrated into this day-long workshop as a way of accessing and expressing one's thoughts and feelings without one's internal censor kicking in. The first exercise, five minutes long, was about the earliest memory of an artistic experience. The second one, also five minutes long, was about the influence of that first experience on one's present engagement with art. It came as a surprise for many participants that their adult encounters with art had such deep roots in childhood.*

*The question "Why Art?" led to another one: "When is Art?", which became the subject of two following LEVIER workshops in February and April 2006.<sup>6</sup>*

*THE FOLLOWING ARE SOME OF THE COMMENTS COLLECTED FROM WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS AT THE END OF THE WHY ART? WORKSHOP:*

### **Because...**

Art is one of the ways to reach emotions, thoughts, attitudes or beliefs that cannot be expressed solely in words.

Art, in its least commercial expressions — those that are the freest of the influence of the "art market" — is one of the last areas of life that have not been colonized by economic rationality. More precisely, engaged art is diametrically opposed to

*An organization that uses Playback theatre to stimulate cultural participation and critical engagement by individuals, organizations and communities as part of their mandate to provide continuing education on the role of the arts in health care, education and advocacy.*  
— Creative Alternatives

the dominant capitalist culture. In placing the subject at the centre of the aesthetic process and experience, it defies the aberrations of the system, with its tendency to dispossess the subject as the agent of her experience. — Guy Levesque

Art and social change can be considered as one when using creativity to find new solutions. Yes, I'm poor; yes, I've got problems, all related to material issues. Creativity stimulates us in unaccustomed realms. Because of my poverty, I don't like what I see around me; creativity gives me access to beauty. — Isabeau

Creativity helps us find better solutions to everyday problems. We're on welfare and all our time is spent just surviving. Creativity allows us to live. We are able to be human, to develop our minds and spirits, to be less earthbound, to take care of what is vital. — Maria

The question "Why art?" leads us to see the importance and the pertinence of small things, the creativity to be found in everyday life and its transformative power through the simple connections it makes between people and the new visions of themselves that it projects. — Sophie Le-Phat Ho

It allows us to surpass ourselves, to break out of the mould made by others, to know ourselves and recognize ourselves. — Maryse Conti

It makes us question ourselves. It lets us look at the world "through new eyes" (as a participant said). It is a celebration of being and of being together. Art is listening to yourself. — Marie-Christine Meunier

Art zooms in and zooms out: it involves looking at yourself / yourself and others / society. Art is a process of listening, compassion, support and respect for the other. Art, to me, is a way of going beyond my limits, a leap into the void, trusting that a parachute will open up. — Diane Trépanière

The changes each one of us is waiting for start with community art because this form of art raises people's consciousness of themselves so that they can then make changes around them. — Huguette Léveillé

I found it interesting to understand the different ways that groups use the tools of art to reach various goals. Some groups use art as a catalyst to spark discussion within the group, others use it as a form of popular education to raise consciousness about the issues they are passionate about, and still others have had people in conflictual situations create together in the hope of reconciling their differences. — Anonymous

This confirms that in life, there's the back road and the highway. The highway will get you to your destination fast, but the back road lets you meet people who, at a crossroads, may show you the way to amazing discoveries. That's life. — Marie-Noëlle L'Espérance

Art gives us opportunities to think about our lives and our society. — Chika

#### NOTES

1. See the account of that workshop, p. 48.
2. At the beginning, LEVIER took for granted that it was sufficient to have verbal agreements with organizations and artists, and therefore did not have them sign contracts. But in the first year of its activities, a conflict led to a legal action by an artist who had been involved in a community art project and with whom the community organization had been unable to establish a feeling of trust, even after several attempts to solve the problem. LEVIER had accepted the organization's wish to end the collaboration and offered the artist compensation, which unfortunately did not satisfy the artist, who still felt unfairly treated. It should be noted that LEVIER received the ongoing support of the artists in the other LEVIER-supported projects during this legal challenge, and the court decision recognized that the community organization had the right to end a project if the conditions for its smooth functioning were absent. After this, LEVIER adopted the policy of establishing contracts, not in order to impose rules, but to record in writing the shared intentions of the project. With time, the writing of these collaboration agreements increasingly became a joint process between the parties concerned.
3. See also the account of the workshop *Playback and Social Justice: What's at Stake Relative to Diversity and Anti-Oppression* in which this group took part, pp. 123–128. For the presentation of Playback theatre, see in the summary by Nisha Sajani, *Playback Theatre and Social Justice: What's at Stake Relative to Diversity and Anti-Oppression – Reflections from a Montréal Workshop*, pp. 124–125.
4. See the description of the community art project *De fil en histoires*, in which she took part, pp. 166–167, and the participation of the members of that project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 67, as well as the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 79–80. See also the description of the humanist activist project *Tuganire* in which she took part, pp. 224–225, and the participation of the members of that project in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, as well as the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 121. See also the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 111, 118 and 119, and the video *Tuganire*, made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
5. See the presentation of this workshop, *Playback and Social Justice: What's at Stake Relative to Diversity and Anti-Oppression*, p. 123, and the account of the workshop by Nisha Sajani, pp. 124–128.
6. See the presentation of these workshops entitled *When is Art?*, p. 93, and Devora Neumark and Ève Lamoureux's account of them, pp. 93–99.

## Workshops: **When is Art?**

1301 Ontario East,  
Montréal

February 25 and April 29, 2006

*Community art and activist humanist practices often lead to surprising results that raise the question: "But is it really art?" Of course, the concept of art is constantly changing — that is part of its very nature — but isn't there some approach to the subject that would allow us to define and maintain certain parameters while keeping an open mind toward new practices? The question "Is it art?" is often used to introduce an argument denigrating a work of art. It also creates confusion, and even controversy, around issues such as intention, meaning, beauty, function and value. In addition, there often seems to be confusion between creative process and artistic effect. With more and more people developing community art and humanist activist projects, it seemed important to discuss the subject collectively. Ève Lamoureux<sup>1</sup> was approached and asked to develop, in collaboration with Devora Neumark, the content for these workshops. Ève specializes in the relationship between art and politics, and her doctoral thesis in political science explored the forms of contemporary sociopolitical engagement by visual artists in Québec.<sup>2</sup> She is a professor in the Department of Art History at the Université du Québec à Montréal.*

*The discussion "When is art?" was finally extended over two workshops, because at the end of the first meeting almost all the participants felt a need to continue this stimulating and animated collective experience and to keep working with the concepts proposed as aesthetic "symptoms," using examples of problematic artistic practices. It should be noted, however, that the theoretical vocabulary used during these two workshops was more specialized than that used at previous meetings organized by Engrenage Noir / LEVIER, and was thus challenging for some participants, especially since there was a lack of concrete examples. Those interested in developing this theoretical language appreciated this type of presentation, but at the same time, it excluded many others. The different register related to the reflections presented at these meetings illustrated the gap between art as seen by artists and art as understood by other community members, and perhaps contributed to the beginnings of greater mutual understanding. In spite of the lack of interest in theoretical reflexion on the part of some representatives of community groups, these workshops met a need for many artists, who also form a kind of community and need spaces for reflection and discussion that are appropriate to their experience.*

THE FOLLOWING TEXT, WRITTEN AFTER THE TWO WORKSHOPS, COVERS THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS THAT SERVED AS THE BASIS FOR THE PROPOSITION PRESENTED, AS WELL AS THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PEOPLE PRESENT:

Analysis of the Workshops: *When Is Art?*

### **When Is Art?**

Devora Neumark and Ève Lamoureux

*I am fascinated by art and politics, drawn to theoretical discussion and interested in original initiatives in the struggle against domination, injustice and poverty.*  
— Ève Lamoureux

Two days of reflection on the aesthetic dimensions of community and humanist activist art practices, organized by Engrenage Noir / LEVIER on February 25 and April 29, 2006, were marked by sociopolitical concerns. Why? Because these practices are rather surprising and frequently jarring in the landscape of contemporary art. They raise the oft-repeated question: is this really art? This question comes from "outside" and is used to denigrate this type of work or exclude it from the world of art. It is also of concern to committed artists who ask questions about their own creation, the aesthetic dimension of which remains important even though they are trying to move beyond the more usual definitions of the work of art. These artists desire recognition of their artistic and sociopolitical contribution.

Rejecting the doubt and even contempt underlying the question "Is it really art?" we, as co-facilitators,<sup>3</sup> opted for reflection on an alternative question proposed by Nelson Goodman:<sup>4</sup> "When is art?" Or to formulate it another way, how to problematize the question of aesthetics when analyzing a community and activist art practice? And how can we address the question of ethics, since aesthetics and ethics are inevitably intertwined in works that raise sociopolitical questions or issues?

Combining an initial theoretical proposition intended to stimulate reflection with discussion, workshops and practical exercises, these days were essentially intended to begin an exploration of the "symptoms" that make it possible to determine



"when is art?" At what point does aesthetics manifest itself in a creative process that is community-based or activist or both? Under what conditions do these practices belong to the realm of art? How can we integrate and analyze the essential questions raised by ethics?

## Key Questions

From the first workshop, there was clear interest in this question on the part of many artists and members of community groups. Not only did a lot of them attend but, whatever the sociopolitical issue discussed (literacy, homelessness, student strike, consumption, environment, etc.) or the artistic medium used (theatre, performance, photography, relational aesthetics, poster, graffiti, music, etc.), those present had already considered the aesthetic dimension of either their own works or others discussed in recent years. There were many questions people wanted to think about, which posed a real challenge for us as discussion facilitators!

With regard to the aesthetic dimension of community and activist art projects, many people spoke of the tension between the aesthetic and activist dimensions of works. What is the place of imagination? Is a work whose message is too explicit still art? Can any material be used to create works of art? Can offering tools to people affected by a social, economic or political problem, or sharing tools with them, be an artistic act? Can a work that combines aesthetic innovation and activist intention be read or understood in both its dimensions? Or will viewers see only the more political dimension? Can artists control the reception of their works? In practices in which it is the process that is decisive (and not the creation of an art object), is explaining that process equivalent to making art? Finally, is a change (material, communicational, personal, etc.) necessary between the beginning of the project and the result? Is it there that art is situated?

The sociopolitical and ethical dimensions of community and humanist activist art projects were also examined. Is it legitimate for artists to express opinions in the public sphere when they are not experts on the issue at hand? Is it appropriate to use sensationalism in order to be seen and heard? Can a work be considered engaged even if the views it expresses are not very critical, are generally accepted or are politically correct? Isn't there a danger that artists working in collaboration with other participants will reify or instrumentalize them? Who is "the artist" in these projects? Who signs the work and receives the recognition? Is it enough to participate in an art project to be considered an artist? What is the place of the "conceptual" artist in the process? What decision-making and creative leeway is left to the participants? How do we deal with the fact that community relationships give rise to a symbolism that goes beyond the people involved? How much should the personal aesthetic of the artist influence the content of the work and the way it is disseminated? Can artists become engaged in a sociopolitical issue or a community group only for a limited time? What place should be given to the final product since these projects focus on the process?

*The most expressive works are those that capture meaningful aspects of life, experience, perceptions, intuitions*

Finally, those present expressed many fears and questions regarding institutional and economic issues. Is there a danger of a certain instrumentalization of the artist or the participants by the community or activist group, or vice versa? If a commission and mandate come to an artist from an organization, isn't the creative process diverted at the outset? Is it relevant to exhibit the work or accounts of the process in art spaces when those spaces were created elsewhere, in a very different context? Don't the art institutions co-opt the subversiveness of the project? What is the value of a community or activist work, in particular in relation to the time invested to produce it? Is it possible to differentiate reflection on the aesthetic value of a work from reflection on its material and financial value?

## When is it Art? The Search for Symptoms

A reflection<sup>5</sup> on the *symptoms* that allow us to answer the question "When is art?" was presented in order to fuel the subsequent discussion. Drawing on the views of Goodman as presented by Howard Gardner,<sup>6</sup> we proposed avenues for analysis in answer to the following question: why and how does something function as an art object? This placed the emphasis on the interpretation of objects or symbols in certain circumstances, rather than on properties specific or intrinsic to the symbols, and put forward the circumstantial aspects in determining what is art and how the work is construed.

The word *symptom*, which is taken from Goodman, comes from medical vocabulary. It was chosen intentionally to underline the idea that practices concerned with sociopolitical questions, at least in community and humanist activist art as defined by Engrenage Noir/LEVIER, necessarily involve “healing practices” to some degree. Thus, this type of artistic-social or artistic-political process involves an action intended to modify or correct a situation considered to be unjust or inappropriate, but also a more interior, more subjective project aimed at (re)establishing conditions of well-being, respect and trust on the personal, social and political levels. The health and equilibrium of the people involved in the art projects and of the collectivity are thus at stake.

### Goodman's Symptoms of the Aesthetic

Goodman comes out of the tradition of Ernst Cassirer<sup>7</sup> as interpreted and built on by Susanne K. Langer.<sup>8</sup> This tradition holds that symbolism is a fundamental human cognitive process through which human beings give meaning to their experiences. According to this view, intelligence involves two types of symbols: (a) discursive or denotative symbols, which belong to fixed symbolic systems (language, numbers, etc.) and practical intelligence; (b) presentational symbols, which are connotative, subject to interpretation, and are used to express the subjective aspects of human experience that language is not capable of expressing. Artistic symbols are of the second type. Still according to Langer, they foster an essential understanding of the world of emotion. They are therefore directly related to values and ethics.

Goodman (as presented in Gardner) goes beyond this dichotomy between discursive and presentational symbols. He proposes a philosophy of art constructed around the designation of types of symbols and the way they function. He is seeking to understand the *formative function* of symbols, how indeterminate symbols are interpreted, since they evolve over time and according to the perspective from which they are apprehended. He thus developed a concept that makes it possible to see how different psychological processes are mobilized in the analysis of symbolic systems.

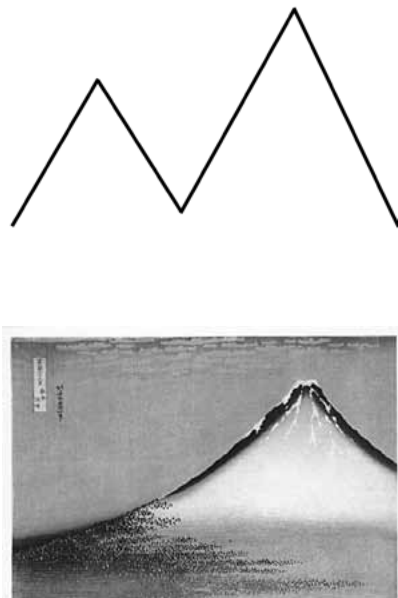
Goodman also asked how symbols function. What is their way of symbolizing? His answer: a symbol operates as an *artistic symbol* because a person focuses on certain properties. To better understand this, let us look at one of the examples he used. When you look at a scribble with two peaks, it is possible to read it as a graph of the Dow Jones average; in this case, the symbol only functions as a representation (or denotation) of a non-subjective value, a numerical value. On the other hand, if these peaks are construed as two mountaintops in a painting by Hokusai, the attention brought to the symbolic properties will be totally different and more complex. There will be “denotational aspects,” since a mountain chain can be analyzed with respect to its height, its regularity and the number of peaks. It would also be necessary to analyze the “primary or intrinsic characteristics” of the painting, such as colour, the thickness of the brushstrokes, etc. Then, the “expressive properties” would have to be taken into account, for example, the grace and the “repleteness” of the illustration, the fact that every detail, every nuance in the line contributes to the total impact of the work.

In short, according to Goodman, the fact that these properties are recognized and function meaningfully proves that this painting has been construed as an artistic symbol. It also shows that the distinctions between various symbolic functions are not solely logical. Hence the importance of asking the question “When is art?” An object can be a symbol at certain times, under certain conditions, and not be one at other times, just as an object can be or not be a work of art.

Goodman thus proposes “aesthetic symptoms,” which, according to him, will be in the foreground in cases where the symbol functions aesthetically. Based on the model of medical diagnosis, this system functions as an ideal type: the more symptoms the symbol has, the more easily and reliably it can be recognized as an aesthetic symbol. According to this system, there are five symptoms:

- Syntactic density, that is, when the smallest or finest modification gives rise to a difference between symbols (for example, a drawing in which subtlest variation between two lines changes the meaning).
- Semantic density, when the referents of the symbols are distinguished by subtle differences (for example, in English or French, the same word may have many narrow meanings).
- Syntactic repleteness, when several aspects of a symbol are meaningful and the number or richness of the elements contributes to the meaning of the symbol (for example, the difference between the Dow Jones graph — numerical value — and the Hokusai painting in which the symbol functions extensively, since there are many perceptible aspects).
- Exemplification, when the symbol conveys its symbolism as an example of the properties it also possesses literally (for example, a piece of music may literally illustrate a certain speed, and metaphorically grace, rage, pain, etc.).
- Multiple and complex reference, that is, when a symbol performs several integrated and interacting referential functions. The symbol does not create a single clear, unambiguous, readily accessible meaning. It conveys many interwoven meanings, each of which contributes to the effect of the work.

Goodman's conception allows us to apprehend the depth, expressiveness, density and multiple meanings of a work of art. The work is thus viewed as a sample that literally or metaphorically reflects forms, emotions and sensibilities related to real life.



Hokusai, from the serie *36 Views of Mount Fuji*, print, 1830–1832.

In this view, the most expressive works are those that capture meaningful aspects of life, experience, perceptions, intuitions; in other words, works that are successful in representing an experience that other people recognize as an authentic version of reality.

The function of aesthetics is to alter the way this experience is conceived and to change people's attitude with regard to what is important, right or correct. And this is very important, because there is a dialogic relationship here that creates movement. A symbolic representation changes the worldview, creating a new worldview that in turn demands a new symbolic representation, and so on.

## Goodman's Theory Challenged

This theory, while very interesting, raises certain issues, two of which are particularly important when considering community art and humanist activist art practices. In the first place, it is based on material works and therefore applies mainly to them; thus corresponding to a rather traditional view of the work of art. Secondly, this analysis is situated not only historically, but also in terms of relationships of power. It was produced by a person from the dominant class identifying "symptoms" that are characteristic of the art of that class and are presented as universal criteria. Goodman presents a view of aesthetics that is masculine, heterosexual and Eurocentric.

However, what is special about community art and humanist activist art is that they propose aesthetic practices that differ from this supposedly universal view of art, because, among other things, they come from people who often do not fit into this vision: gays and lesbians, cultural minorities, people living in difficult social or economic conditions, etc. They thus present a profound challenge to modernist conceptions of art and aesthetics. In addition, these practices attack not only artistic structures, but also political and social structures of domination and power. The goals of the artists are many: sometimes to overturn these structures, most often to make them visible so that they can be changed, and also to contribute to a certain healing of traumas in order to allow a transition to something else.

In spite of the multiplicity of forms of these aesthetic practices, they share, according to Grant H. Kester,<sup>9</sup> two important differences from the usual model of aesthetic experience. First, they challenge both traditional aesthetics and politics, refuting the pretention of aesthetic criteria to universality and objectivity and denying the need for a universal discursive system. They respond to the contemporary incredulity with regard to metanarratives and to changes in the very conception of aesthetics and politics. They do not claim to need this kind of universal or objective foundation. They are based on the construction of local knowledge that is fixed only provisionally and that has its basis in collective exchanges. Communicative interaction crosses the boundaries of differences without a legitimizing framework, since its framework is established in and through interaction itself. In this way — and this is the second element of differentiation — subjectivity is formed through intersubjective exchange. This exchange is not a tool used to communicate content established a priori, but is itself intended to model subjectivity.

Thus, again according to Kester, attacking the immanence and universality of traditional aesthetics enables activist artists to reach communities and individuals excluded from art and political debate, those Jacques Rancière<sup>10</sup> calls the voiceless because they have not mastered the aesthetic and narrative forms that are accepted in artistic and political spaces (traditional aesthetics and the use of public reason), and because they do not share the interests of the majority that determines these rules or are considered unworthy of participation in it. Kester therefore proposes replacing this aesthetic form with performativity and localism, with an emphasis on practices that demand adaptation and improvisation rather than on origin and stability. These practices thus become processes of dialogue and collaboration among people<sup>11</sup> engaged in the process of co-creation. They reject the "paradigm of consciousness" in favour of that of "communicative action." Performativity demands local action and a particular positioning of "the artist." The dialogue established cannot be effective if this person considers himself or herself someone from outside, neutral, privileged. Artists should feel deeply concerned by the preoccupations or issues of the community.

In this sense, the most effective community and humanist activist projects require subtle, sensitive practices imbued with a profound understanding of the issues involved and a moral and ethical vision. "The artist," as a result of real involvement rooted in a community and the development of a performative process in collaboration with people, fosters the emergence of a shared subjectivity that is formed through the experience itself. The work, and the public speaking-out that goes with it, is forged in action. It enables people who are excluded both from art and from public debate to participate in a creative process, to emerge into public space and take part in discussions on how we live together.



## Rethinking the Symptoms of Aesthetics

This very heuristic understanding of aesthetics, proposed by Kester to understand community art and humanist activist art, does not necessarily discredit Goodman's symptoms, but it forces us to formulate others that take into account the specific characteristics of these practices:

- The emotional response, since art acts as a stimulus that creates in the addressee a feeling, an emotional reaction (for example, the power of music to calm or stimulate).
- The relational quality, that is, the form of communication or relationship that is established between the artist and the participants, but also between the people involved and the performative place, between these people and the creative processes, etc.
- Distancing of values and beliefs, since the work and its process of creation enable the artist and the participants to question their beliefs and values with regard to a specific, contextualized situation.
- The combination of ethics and aesthetics, since the work and the process should be coherent and ethical in relation to the intentionality of the artist, the participants in the creation and the groups involved in it.
- Formal or aesthetic coherence with the content, since the structure of the work and the creative process should be coherent with the content.
- Artistic lineage, that is, the fact that the work is in relationship, in dialogue and in interaction with other works of the same kind.

These six new symptoms seemed relevant to the people involved in the days of reflection. This being said, it became clear that there were still some missing, and the following two were also proposed:

- The place, since the artistic and sociopolitical context is important in order to determine if the work or the project is art.
- The project members and audience, since it is necessary to specify to whom (and for whom) community art or humanist activist art is addressed.

## Questions, Issues, Challenges

These new symptoms are the result of development of the theory by Engrenage Noir / LEVIER and should be subjected to further analysis and discussions. They do not answer all the questions raised in the reflection on the aesthetic dimensions of community and humanist activist art projects. Many issues remain to be explored; they were raised by one or more people, but were not really discussed. They are therefore avenues to be opened up, explored and examined in the years to come.

*Attacking the universality of traditional aesthetics enables activist artists to reach communities and individuals excluded from art and political debate*

## Symbols

The criteria proposed would apply primarily to community art. They could be expanded to include many other artistic processes. In this view, there would be three main types of symbols: (a) the Santa Claus type, that is, those fabricated by the market; (b) the symbolic type, those created by artists; and (c) the collective type, which are often buried and in need of revival by communities and their artists. By rescuing these forgotten symbols from oblivion, communities, as one participant stated, "take their revenge on time."

A closer link could be made, for example with the shamanic healing process, as in the artistic practice of Yves Sioui Durand.<sup>12</sup> Such a process could help us deal with such dimensions as the involvement of members in the process of a work; the importance of finding a creative voice in order to recognize wounds, distance oneself from them and then move beyond them; and to conceive the idea of re-enchantment through art.

The symbol is relational and performative. How then, in a collective project, can the intentionality at the heart of the project be expressed? When and how should the process of creation be evaluated? What place should be given to affect as what drives the work? In addition, the symptoms proposed emphasize the aesthetic result, so how, then, do we analyze the creative process itself? And how do we deal with the reception of the work, with the fact that the co-creators never know how it will be perceived?

Symbols are related to the power that monopolizes them; domination encompasses the very reference of the symbol. In this sense, art cannot and should not be considered universal; the artist must be situated. This capture of symbolism by power also leads to an important question: how, in this context, do we hear the voices of the people who are excluded?



## Creating Art with Whom and for Whom?

During the workshops, we attempted to clearly define our understanding of the concept of community and highlighted the importance of diversity. LEVIER has been attentive to questions of exclusion and injustice. The challenge is to find a shared vocabulary so that everyone feels involved both in the actual collaborative projects and in the ways in which they are represented and reflected on. The art world and community context are often seen as two distinct universes; bringing them together requires sensitivity and effort on the part of both.

The lack of importance or the lesser importance placed on the art object in many projects seems to be a problem for some; the artist, the members and the organization do not always share the same view of art. The members of the organization often expect an "object" while the artist puts more emphasis on the process. The documentation of the project is therefore important, but it may become an irritant for some artists if they feel they are required to constantly justify their practices.

## Activism and Art

Some find the tendency to dissociate the "activist" and "artistic" dimensions difficult. To what extent is there really a separation between the two? Indeed, which dimension is more important? Similarly, certain individuals favour a "consumerist" vision of activism. Well-known artists are sought after in order to defend certain causes. However, it would make sense to keep a critical eye open to the difference between "activist" artists who are committed over a long period of time and the artist who signs up to defend a particular cause.

There is often tension, which arises in a collective work between artistic freedom, the idea of "working for a cause," and the question of effectiveness that activism often demands. Finding the right balance among these three elements can be very demanding! As well, the idea of activism through art includes the difficult task of convincing others, first of all with regard to the aesthetic dimension and then the social or political dimension of the work. The artist has to deal with people whose receptiveness to the work may be very different: convinced, open but still recalcitrant, neutral, opposed, etc.

## Grants and Recognition

Finally, the funding of community and activist art projects raises certain questions. Many feel that artists should demand to be paid and recognized. In this sense, the art object remains important, since it can facilitate inclusion in the art world. This being said, some emphasize the fact that there are also benefits other than funding and official recognition. Artists are deeply nourished by this collective work of creation; if they become involved in this way, it is not out of mere generosity, but because they gain something from it personally.

Grants provide both the means to carry out creative projects and the time to devote to them. At the same time, they also demand a huge amount of time just to fill out the applications. In addition, activism through art is marked by the fact that artists often want to react spontaneously and quickly to events. This urgent need to act makes the long-term planning of works and the waiting time for grants difficult.

## Evaluation of the Meeting and Follow-Up

The number of people present, their enthusiastic participation and their significant contribution to the reflection showed that these two days met a real desire and need to explore this issue. Many participants said these discussions encouraged them to become aware of the importance of their artistic-political work, to better define themselves as artists and, in turn, to better articulate and analyze their practices. In addition, many said they found the discussions unsettling, because, for one thing, they raised as many, if not more, questions than they answered. However, this destabilization was considered positive as it pointed to a process of critical analysis and self-reflexivity – a process, that is often destabilizing no matter what the subject.

Difficulties and criticisms were noted. Some people found it hard to take part in the discussion (especially the first day) since there were a lot of people and not enough time to fulfill the objectives. In addition, according to many, the reflection was a little too theoretical and detached from their practice. The symptoms need to be more clearly defined, and also better illustrated. This being said, the more practical exercises and the discussions enabled many participants to gain a better grasp of the symptoms. Some people felt the level of language that we used, and also some of the speakers, were too specialized, in effect excluding those who did not possess the necessary linguistic and theoretical tools. Finally, while many artists were

happy to have a place to think about their practice, at least some of the workers and members of community or humanist activist groups had the impression of having been somewhat forgotten. They did not feel involved or addressed by the way in which the question "When is art?" was dealt with.

Follow-up was requested: a summary of the theoretical content presented, a collective exploration of the definitions of symbols and a list of theoretical references in French and English. In addition, some people wanted Engrenage Noir / LEVIER to find a way to better include the community organizations.<sup>13</sup> Finally, some wanted to think about the grants awarded by the organization: should they be given to artists or to groups?



#### NOTES

1. See her text *Alterglobalist Practices and Community Art Under Observation*, pp. 337-349.
2. This work was published under the title *Art et politique: Nouvelles formes d'engagement artistique au Québec* (Montréal: Écosociété, 2009).
3. With the collaboration of Rachel Heap-Lalonde for the second day.
4. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1976 [1968]).
5. Devora Neumark formulated this analysis initially. We subsequently expanded it together and presented it during the workshops.
6. Howard Gardner, "Chapter 6. Nelson Goodman: The Symbols of Art," in *Art Mind and Brain: A Cognitive Approach to Creativity* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), pp. 55-64.
7. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (3 volumes) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953 [1923-1929]). See also: Michael Friedman, "Ernst Cassirer", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [on-line: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cassirer/#4>], 2004 (page consulted in January 2006).
8. Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite and Art* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1957); *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, abridged edition, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988 [1967]).
9. Grant H. Kester, "Ongoing Negotiations: Afterimage and the Analysis of Activist Art," in *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 1-22; *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
10. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement, Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
11. This process of co-creation also attacks the institutional division between the "professional artist" and the "members" in order to deconstruct the idea that the former possesses artistic knowledge and aptitudes and the "others" must be guided to develop their creativity and cannot consider themselves artists.
12. This author, director and actor proposes a vision of artistic creation as a process of introspection into the soul and its conflicts, using, among other things, the rediscovery of traditional Aboriginal myths (translated into contemporary form) to enable these creators to connect with their deep cultural identity and heal their wounds and to represent and denounce the "cultural dissolution" of which they are victims.
13. It is important to point out that Engrenage Noir / LEVIER has since substantially modified its ways of working in order to put the community groups at the centre of its projects. Among other things, the theme is now the struggle against poverty; relationships with the groups have been strengthened and the selection criteria and procedures have been changed: it is now the groups who first define the broad orientations of the projects according to their needs, and only later that an artist is approached to join the process.

## Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program

### Within the Context of the Documenting Collaboration Project

At the Centre Saint-Pierre  
1212 Panet,  
Montréal

November 18 and 19, 2006

Since the beginning, Engrenage Noir / LEVIER has placed a great deal of importance on the documentation of community art projects in addition to addressing the sometimes thorny issue of collaboration (with all the various questions related to power, decision-making processes and co-creativity, to mention only a few). During the first Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)<sup>1</sup>, for example, the representatives of community groups and artists that were present were invited to reflect on the following questions: What, how, when, why, and for whom are community and humanist activist art projects to be documented?

#### An Inspiring Experience

The challenge of documentation was also the subject of workshops and panels during the second *Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004).<sup>2</sup> On that occasion, LEVIER invited jil p. weaving – the initiator of the video compilation of the Vancouver-based Documenting Engagement Institute – to be one of the presenters.<sup>3</sup> jil screened a number of the videos from that project and asked the following questions: For whom is the documentary intended? How will it be used? What is being shown and what is not being shown? How does the presence of the camera impact the project? She also facilitated a discussion about the types of documentation most appropriate for community art.

Video is a powerful form of documentation because of the immediacy of the representations it provides through image and sound. This immediacy opens the possibility for community members to see themselves as active cultural agents through the lens of a medium that is all-so-familiar and ubiquitous in our Western culture. Through the use of video, community art projects can be disseminated in all kinds of intimate and public contexts and made relatively accessible through community television, the Internet and academic institutions, for example.

*Video is a powerful form of documentation because of the immediacy of the representations it provides through image and sound*

*I am now an independent producer of reality-based film projects for use in multiplatform environments.*  
— Patricia Bergeron

In 2005, after several years of activities and when some of the LEVIER-supported projects had already been completed, it seemed rather pressing to encourage the documentation of these projects and put into practice the critical reflection that had been developed through the training and exchange programs. LEVIER therefore initiated the *Documenting Collaboration* project<sup>4</sup> – a project that included the production of a video compilation (DVD included in the centre of this publication) and a related training and exchange program.

#### LEVIER's Different Approach: Documenting, an Ethical Responsibility

Critically reflecting on how to satisfactorily meet the need to document community art projects in a manner coherent with the ethical responsibility that has guided LEVIER from the beginning led to the emphasis on collaboration. It seemed inappropriate for only the participating artist to be authorized to tell the story of a project in which she had been involved – and even more so in light of the current discourse on the power of narrative in which questions regarding who participates and who is excluded from the historical memory of community art are specifically raised. In undertaking the production of a video documentary compilation, LEVIER wanted to create the conditions of production in terms of time, resources and training that were consistent with its commitment to critical thinking, ethics, the creative process and collaboration.

Thus, the development of this video suite was guided by the following two main choices:

- Telling the story of the collaboration between the community groups and their artists, rather than just presenting the results of this collaboration;
- Using a production process that would be in keeping with the community art collaboration it was documenting, rather than leaving it to the artist alone to recount the collective experience.

According to these principles, the emphasis in the video would not be on the works created in the course of the project, but rather on recounting the collaborative experience of the group. All community and humanist activist art project members would share the responsibilities at all stages in the production of the documentary – conception, script-writing and technical

*Some of the subjects of my documentaries have been the impact of new computer technologies on women's work, the feminization of poverty and women's economic and emotional dependence, on the World March of Women against violence and poverty and on the effects of the sexualization in the media on children and youth.*  
— Sophie Bissonnette

production — in keeping with their interests. Although such a process is longer and more complex than one assigned to a single person, it ensures that people decide for themselves how they will be represented and what story will be told. This choice also assumes that there will be sufficient time and resources, which is why this initiative was spread out over a period of four years. LEVIER then selected projects for the examples they provided in terms of ethics, aesthetics and process in the practice of community and humanist activist art.

### The Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program

The first step towards completing *Documenting Collaboration* — well before the community groups began the script-writing phase — was to develop a project-specific training and exchange program; and in a manner familiar to LEVIER, this was done collaboratively. The *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program* was thus an extension of LEVIER's commitment to community and humanist activist art and upheld the collaborative principles that have guided it from the start.

*I would describe my intellectual process using the metaphor of listening, listening that has a transformative potential personally and politically. I have always been concerned about the abuse of authority, and I explore the mechanisms of collaboration in order to decolonize relationships in an intercultural context.*  
— Bob W. White

*When I was a child, Filomeno, my father, a Chilean socialist worker, taught me about justice. I also spent my evenings in the neighbourhood movie theatre, watching three or four movies a night. So in a natural, spontaneous way, justice and cinema became the combined passions that have guided my life.*  
— Patricio Henriquez

Devora Neumark, Louise Lachapelle<sup>5</sup> and Johanne Chagnon designed the program, held in November 2006, in partnership with the Parole citoyenne [Citizen's speech] program of the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). Facilitated by Devora Neumark and Louise Lachapelle, the program included critical screenings and case studies; presentations by the members of the various projects and others who offered their experience as additional resources; workshops, roundtables and plenary sessions on the ethics, aesthetics, consent, distribution and impact of and associated with community art documentaries. In accordance with LEVIER's accessibility policy, this training and exchange program — as was the case with all the others organized by LEVIER — was free of charge, bilingual and open to all interested persons.

The guiding principles for this program were:

- Critical Reflection as an Essential Part of Documentation Work

In preparing this program, the research to find video documentaries that could be presented as examples proved futile; none of the existing videos corresponded fully to the collaborative approach that LEVIER wanted to take. Some of these documentaries were presented nevertheless in order to encourage critical and creative reflection. The facilitators provided questions to guide the viewing of these "case studies" in preparation for discussion in the workshops and plenary sessions and also as a way to orient the work of the different project members who were, by then, beginning to think about the production of their own videos.

- The Importance of Self-Representation

Some members of the community and humanist activist art projects involved in *Documenting Collaboration* participated in this training and exchange program by sharing preliminary documentation of their own projects and presenting their experiences in the various discussions and workshops.

- The Importance of an External Perspective

Working in close partnership with Patricia Bergeron of the NFB's Parole citoyenne program, LEVIER identified a number of practitioners and invited them to help facilitate critical discussion on the issues related to the making of collaborative documentary videos. These guests spoke briefly about their work, shared their research and professional personal experiences with the group, but mostly they participated by listening. They also were involved in the discussions and, like everyone else, commented on what they saw and heard. These guests had a role as "special observers" in what may be described as an opportunity for mutual learning; the exchange that was made possible by the collaboration between LEVIER and the members of the *Documenting Collaboration* project benefited them and served to further their own creative practices.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to Patricia Bergeron, who designed and produced the Parole citoyenne website, these special observers included Sophie Bissonnette, founder in 1983 of the independent production company Les Productions Contre-jour and founding member of the *Rencontres internationales du documentaire de Montréal* [Montreal international documentary festival] and of *Réalisatrices équitables* [Fair directors], an association of women filmmakers; Patricio Henriquez of Macumba International, a production company that makes documentaries filmed in other countries, and whose most recent documentary *Sous la cagoule, un voyage au bout de la torture* [Under the hood, a voyage into the world of torture] was awarded the Jutra prize for the best documentary in 2009; and Bob W. White, a professor of anthropology who focuses on questions of collaboration.<sup>7</sup> Patricia Bergeron spoke about strategies of distribution; Sophie Bissonnette, about the aesthetics of collaboration; Patricio Henriquez, about the ethics of filming and editing; and Bob W. White, of the power of collaboration. At the start of each day, Joanne Gormley<sup>8</sup> led a yoga session in which she invited participants to consider how the practice of yoga promotes a centre of balance within ourselves and in our exchanges with others.

As the designated recorder of the event, Rachel Heap-Lalonde<sup>9</sup> was present throughout, taking notes and speaking individually with many of the project members — again demonstrating LEVIER's emphasis on documentation.<sup>10</sup>

Louise Lachapelle  
(see p. 51)

THE SCHEDULE OF THE COMMUNITY ART VIDEO DOCUMENTARY TRAINING AND EXCHANGE PROGRAM WAS AS FOLLOWS:

Joanne Gormley  
(see p. 51)

## First Day

8:30 AM

### **Yoga** (optional)

guided by Joanne Gormley

Joanne explained that the definition of *yoga* is “to yoke” or “to unite.” “By adopting a posture, maintaining it and then moving out of it in a conscious and curious way, we experience the process of uniting our deep intention with the execution of this action. We learn to locate our centre of balance, to find our source of inner support and to be open to the next moment in a process of exploration and expressive presence. When we practice postures in collaboration with a partner, we learn to support and to be supported, and to find the centre of balance both within ourselves and between us. What unites us is the experience of creative, dynamic play.”

documentation based on reflecting on issues related to ethics, aesthetics, consent, distribution and impact.

### **Introduction to the Critical Screenings**

Questions were suggested to support the participants’ critical reflection and creation. They were also intended to orient the critical screenings so as to make them “case studies” on which to work together.

A critical relationship to the documents does not mean that we “don’t like” them, but that we are drawing on them to create alternative, collaborative ways of documenting community art. Thus the need to work creatively as much with what is seen and what the documentary does as with what is not seen and what the documentary does not do. These questions also represented an invitation to adopt a stance that for some people was different from their customary relationship to documents they view: they had



Images taken from the video *L'art est vaste*, from the compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.

9:40 AM

### **Presentation of Engrenage Noir / LEVIER and Introduction to the Documenting Collaboration Project**

10:00 AM

### **Introduction to the Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program**

The program was presented in accordance with the critical process and pedagogical and creative approach adopted by LEVIER in this training: the aim of encouraging collaboration among all the participants; offering critical screenings, plenary sessions and workshops as opportunities for creative practical work on the participants’ own projects, in the case of the participants in *Documenting Collaboration*; guiding the training toward the development of a collaborative approach to

to go from the position of viewer of a documentary video to that of creator of a documentary video.

The questions identified a number of considerations that have a direct influence on certain ethical and aesthetic decisions made before and during filming, during editing, and even at the time of distribution. Thinking about these considerations together was also a way of creatively exploring the possibility of collaboratively documenting a community art project.

A simple technical vocabulary was introduced that made it possible to name and think about things during analysis and creation (editing, shooting, lighting, scene-pacing, music, sequencing, subtitles, on-camera / off-camera, framing, relationship between sound and image, narration and image, camera movement, cinematographic process,



image-processing, structure, duration, opening and closing credits, set, shooting location, costumes, art direction, etc.).

### Questions to Guide Viewing

- Is documenting community art a collaborative practice?
- For whom, why and how to co-create a documentary video on a community art project?
- What is being documented? What is not? Consider, for example, changes in the community or individuals, the creative process, the results, etc.
- What are the social concerns represented in the documentary? How and from what point(s) of view are they represented?
- Does the documentary present solutions? If so, what are they, and to whom, for whom, by whom and how are they presented?
- How are the people who appear in the documentary represented? How do their roles differ?
- What evidence of collaboration do you observe in the project documented or in the way the documentary has been made?
- Do you observe any power games, and if so, what are they?
- Do you observe anything about consent or permission to document?
- What aesthetic choices do you observe in the making of this documentary; do they seem consistent with the project documented?
- Who do you think the target audience of the documentary is? What type(s) of relationship(s) does the documentary establish with the audience?
- What are the motivations and intentions behind the making of the documentary?

### Case Study and Discussion

*Reparative Culture* by Edith Regier, 2004 (8 min 35 sec)<sup>11</sup>  
From the compilation of the Documenting Engagement Institute<sup>12</sup> (which were not the result of a full collaborative effort with the communities involved).

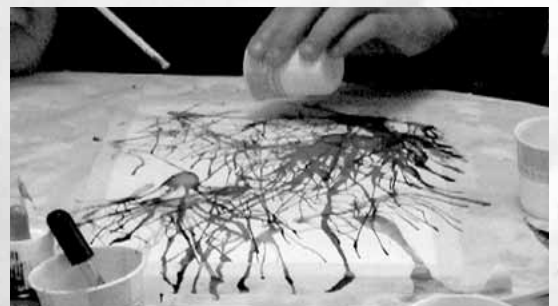
Edith Regier, founder and director of The Crossing Communities Art Project in Winnipeg, worked in collaboration with the Elizabeth Fry Society of Winnipeg. This project involved women and girls marginalized by justice issues. It led to exhibitions, a publication, a postcard project, several workshops and the documentary video *Reparative Culture*.

This first case study was a kind of practical introduction to the program. This video provided a comparative reference right at the beginning of the critical screenings. It also made it possible to explain the suggested working questions and put them into practice in keeping with these objectives:

- To explore the meaning of the questions, to make sure that everyone had a shared understanding of them and

to provide a shared memory and common language on which to build

- To present the necessary nature of the questions in relation to the corpus of documentaries and the approaches to documenting community art projects, bringing out the connection between the filmmakers' formal choices and the intentions, values and meanings expressed, as interpreted by the participants
- To begin to situate one's own approach in relation to different practices and aesthetics in documentation and documentary video, as well as to the broader sociopolitical context
- To identify the similarities and differences between the videos and begin to bring out what could distinguish the approach LEVIER was seeking to develop from the screened documentaries.



Images taken from the video *Raising Mom*, from the compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.

11:00 AM

### Case Study and Discussion

*Born Into Brothels* by Ross Kauffman and Zana Briski, 2004 (1h 23 min)<sup>13</sup>

Red Light Films in association with THINKFilm & HBO/Cinemax

This documentary film provides portraits of seven children who live in the red-light district of Calcutta, where their mothers work as prostitutes. Each of the children was given a camera and taught to use it to capture his or her environment in images.

Presentation of an excerpt from the film and two extracts from the special features included on the DVD:

- The first short excerpt (Chapter 7, "Puja") provided the context and described the process and documentary approach used;

- The second excerpt (the trailer) provided an overview of the project and introduced some doubts with regard to the “collaborative” aspect of the project;
- The extract from the special features, in which the children are seen watching scenes from the original film for the first time, more than a year after its release, revealed the impact of its distribution on the participants, the limits of their consent to its distribution, the unequal sharing of the benefits and disadvantages among participants and artists — a series of questions regarding possible tensions or even conflicts in the ethical and aesthetic choices of the artists, producers and distributors.

This second case study concluded with a discussion comparing *Born into Brothels* and *Reparative Culture* from the critical and creative perspective the training program was seeking to develop.

1:00 PM

### Critical Screenings of a First Series of Videos and Excerpts

These videos were shown one after another without pauses in between in order to compare them and relate them to each other from the perspective of exploring documentation, rather than to comment on them individually. The objectives of the screenings were as follows:

- Comparative discussion on this series of videos;
- For the participants in the *Documenting Collaboration* project, creative exploration of the questions submitted in relation to the elaboration of their own projects.

*Something From Nothing* by Cathy Stubington, 2004 (10 min 16 sec)<sup>14</sup>

From the compilation of the Documenting Engagement Institute

This video documents the community play that Cathy Stubington initiated with the people of the rural community of Enderby, in Secwepemc territory, and the neighbouring Spallumcheen band of the Shuswap First Nation, in British Columbia.

Facilitators’ viewing notes:

- Narration from the point of view of the artist;
- Several short interviews with key people involved in the project’s administration, not with actual participants;
- Although the narrative of the video document admits that there are various ways of telling the story, the documentary only expresses one point of view — that of the artist in charge of the project;
- The video describes the personal motivations of the artist, who is involved in her community, but not those of the community, although they responded very positively to her invitation;
- The openly “makeshift” style used by the artist suggests the accessibility of the video tool.

*Raising Mom* by the Young Parents Program of the organization Head and Hands, 2005 (3 min)

Video made during the project, documenting the first year of a two-year LEVIER-supported project.<sup>15</sup>

*Corps parlants* [Speaking bodies] by Marites Carino with the Women’s Centre of Montréal, 2006 (17 min)

In-process video documenting the first year of a two-year LEVIER-supported project.<sup>16</sup>

*La Piel de la memoria* [The skin of memory] by Pilar Riano-Alcalá, 2006 (14 min)<sup>17</sup>

Documentation of an art project carried out in 1998–99 with young people in Barrio Antioquia, a neighbourhood of Medellín, Colombia, initiated by Pilar Riano-Alcalá, a Colombian anthropologist living in Vancouver, and Suzanne Lacy, an artist from the US.

2:45 PM

### Presentations of Projects and Screening of Another Video

The people whose videos were viewed earlier were asked to discuss their experience in documenting a community art project and to share the questions and issues involved in the process:

- Sara Bessin, Melanie Fournier, Jenni Lee and Laea Morris of the Young Parents Program of Head and Hands presented their community art project entitled *Raising Mom*;
- Monica Arias, Marites Carino, Reena Almoneda Chang, Héléne Hauspied, Clair Laforest, Diana Obregon and Shermine Sawalha from the Women’s Centre of Montréal presented *Corps parlants*.



Images taken from the video *Corps parlants*, from the compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.



### Case Study and Discussion

*Letter to Skidegate* by Karen Jamieson and Tanya Rae Collinson, 2004 (8 min 29 sec)<sup>18</sup>

From the compilation of the Documenting Engagement Institute

This video documents the beginnings of the collaboration between the dancer/anthropologist Karen Jamieson and the Haida community of Skidegate, in Haida Gwaii, British Columbia, to create a ceremony/dance/performance honouring Percy Gladstone, an elder of the community, and to bring two different cultures together. Tanya Rae Collins, a videographer and editor from Haida Gwaii, worked with Karen to produce this video.

Facilitators' viewing notes:



Images taken from the video *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors*, from the compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.

- This video documents the pre-project, that is, the artist's initial exploration of the collaboration between her and the community of Skidegate;
- Karen Jamieson produced this video in collaboration with a videographer in the community, which had a lot of influence on the structure of the video;
- An interesting point: the director takes the time to show how each person in the community possesses a part of the story. This video could be compared with *Something from Nothing*, in which the director also has various people speak briefly, but without enriching or challenging the univocity of her own perspective.

Other elements, which are interesting from the point of view of a documentation process under way:

- There is an exploration of sounds: superimposition, music, songs;
- The video documents the creation of a project, a little of the process and nothing at all of the result;
- It deals with the delicate relationship between what is too secret to be shown in video and the important things that need to be said;
- The document provides a point of view different from that of videographers who choose to film everyone;

here, the community said some things were too sacred to be shown, and the videographer accepted that.

4:00 PM

#### **Workshops: *Is Documenting Community Art a Collaborative Practice?***

Workshops aiming to highlight the shift from creative criticism to creative practice, from the case study to the elaboration of one's own documentary:

- For whom, why and how do we co-create the video documentary for the community art project I'm involved in?

5:00 PM

#### **Conclusion of the Day: Sharing**

### Second Day

8:30 AM

**Yoga** (optional)  
guided by Joanne Gormley

9:40 AM

#### **Introduction to the Second Day of the Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program**

10:00 AM

#### **Roundtable: *Ethics and Aesthetics***

To start off:

*Beneath the Seams: Making the Parkville Millennium Quilt* by Liz Miller, 2000 (5 min 28 sec)<sup>19</sup>

Internal video document describing the project of Liz Miller and seniors at the Parkville Senior Center, in Parkville, Connecticut, to produce a quilt and an accompanying video, which uses new technology to show how Parkville, an industrial neighbourhood, has changed over the last century.

## Facilitators' viewing notes:

- The question of the target audience: this is an internal document for the participants in the community, hence the absence of certain information;
- The video was not produced collaboratively and it does not document the collaborative process of the project in question;
- With regard to the production, the artist made all the choices; however, we do not learn what brought the artist to this particular community, or this community to this artist, who is presented as an artist-in-residence;
- With respect to the relationship between process and result: the video shows the process of creating the quilt and the artist-seniors relationship, the artist's multimedia work as a result and the artist alone;
- The video raises the question of representation: who is represented, what values are expressed and what roles are given to the various people.



Images taken from the video *Tuganire*, from the compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.

### Presentations of Community Art Projects and of the Diversity of Documentation Methods

The people who are considering collaboration on the production of a video for *Documenting Collaboration* present their experience, using visual and video documentation:

- Johanne Chagnon, Maryse Conti, Micheline Lebel, Chantal Rail and Nicole Saint-Amour of the organization Le CARRÉ (Comptoir Alimentaire Références Ressources et Entraide [A centre for food, encounters, references and mutual help]), talked about their community art project entitled *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors* [Open your treasure chest] using excerpts from their video documentation;<sup>20</sup>

- Francine Charland, Hélène Dion, Anita Petitsclerc and Monique St-Pierre of L'Atelier 19 talked about their community art project, *Abondance et partage* [Abundance and sharing], and their choice not to embark on the production of a documentary at this stage in their process.<sup>21</sup>

#### Presentation by Bob W. White Entitled

**Collaboration: pouvoir et capacité** [Collaboration: power and capacity]

1:00 PM

#### Roundtable: *Ethics, Consent, Dissemination and Impact*

To start off, a presentation of documents that showed various documentation processes:

- Screening of an excerpt from a video produced by the members of *Tuganire*<sup>22</sup> (interviews on the genocide in Rwanda);
- Presentation of photographic documents from the project *Le rap des hommes rapaillés* [The patched-up men's rap], currently under way with inmates of the Établissement de détention de Montréal and Mohamed Lotfi.<sup>23</sup>

Then the members in these two projects were asked to present their experiences (in the course of production) for *Documenting Collaboration* and to share the questions and issues that have arisen:

- Ami, Sandra Gasana, Harvé Kagabo, Anita Muhimpundu, Lisa Ndejuru, Teta Ndejuru and Gilbert Rwirangira of the Rwandan community of Montréal spoke about *Tuganire*, and the documentation process that was underway;
- Josier, Mohamed Lotfi and Nicodème, who were associated with the Établissement de détention de Montréal, talked about *Le Rap des hommes rapaillés*, and the documentation process that was underway.

**Presentation by Patricia Bergeron Entitled *La diffusion: nouveaux outils/nouveaux impacts?*** [Dissemination: new tools/new impacts?]

**Presentation by Patricio Henriquez Entitled *Filmer ou pas? — questions éthiques en lien avec le tournage et le montage*** [To film or not to film? — ethical questions related to filming and editing]

3:15 PM

**Workshops: *Is Documenting Community Art a Collaborative Practice? Ethics, Aesthetics, Dissemination and Impact***

Closing workshops: For whom, why and how do we co-create a video documentary for a community art project?

5:00 PM

**Conclusion of the Training and Exchange Program: Sharing**



Image taken from the video *Tuganire*, from the compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.

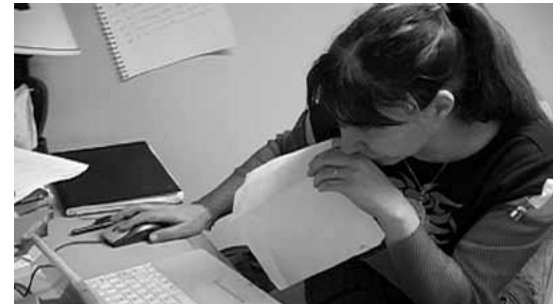


Image taken from the video *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors*, from the compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.

## NOTES

1. See the program schedule, pp. 32–36, and the text by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86, in which she compares this program with the one held in 2004.
2. See the program schedule, pp. 66–70, and the text by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86, in which she compares this program with the one held in 2002.
3. See the program schedule, p. 68.
4. An application for funding was made to the Inter-Arts Office of the Canada Council for the Arts for the *Documenting Collaboration* project. But, unlike the Documenting Engagement Institute in Vancouver, LEVIER received no funding from the Canada Council to support its project.
5. See her participation in the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices*, p. 51 and the text she wrote following that event *Community Art or Finding the Way Back Home?*, pp. 52–61. See also her participation in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, pp. 66–70, and in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 121. Louise acted as collaborating editor for this book and, in this capacity, she signed the Postscript entitled *La brûlure avant la voix or Could this be a love letter?*, pp. 353–365.
6. An example is the article written by Bob W. White after taking part in this program, *The Power of Collaboration*, pp. 317–325.
7. See his biography, p. 317.
8. She led a similar workshop during the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices* (see p. 56) and the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)* (see p. 66). See the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 72.
9. See the descriptions of the projects she took part in as a member of Vichama Collectif: *Manipuler avec soin*, pp. 159–160, *Mémoire de grève*, pp. 230–231, and *Caravane solidaire*, pp. 256–257. Rachel also wrote *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, a critical account of the community art training and exchange programs offered by LEVIER in 2002 and 2004, pp. 71–86.
10. See Rachel's text *Between the Means and the Ends*, a critical account of the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, pp. 100–108–120.
11. See the comments by Rachel Heap-Lalonde in *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 112, and by Bob W. White in *The Power of Collaboration*, p. 321.
12. All the videos in the compilation (English and French versions) can be viewed at [www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive-files/2009/02/social\\_imaginat.php](http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive-files/2009/02/social_imaginat.php).
13. See the comments by Rachel Heap-Lalonde in *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 111, 112 and 114.
14. See the comments by Rachel Heap-Lalonde in *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 113, and by Bob W. White in *The Power of Collaboration*, pp. 321 and 323.
15. See the description of this community art project, pp. 168–171, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 113. See also the video *Raising Mom* made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication; see also the presentation of this video during the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122.
16. See the description of this community art project, p. 179–180, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 113, 115 and 116. See also the participation of the members of this project in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122, and the video *Corps parlants*, made by the members of this project in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
17. A preliminary version of the two-part video may be viewed on YouTube using the search term: Piel de la memoria. See the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 113, and the text by Bob W. White, *The Power of Collaboration*, p. 323.
18. See the reference to this video in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 119.
19. See the reference to this video in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 114.
20. See the description of this community art project, pp. 154–158. See also the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 67, and in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122. See also the reference to these activities in the critical summaries by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 77, and *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 115. See the comments by Bob W. White in *The Power of Collaboration*, p. 321. See also the video *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors* made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
21. See the description of this humanist activist project, pp. 190–191. See also the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 115 and 118.
22. See the description of this humanist activist project, pp. 224–225. See also the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 111, 118 and 119. See also the participation of the members of this project in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 121. See also the video *Tuganire* made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
23. See the description of this humanist activist project, pp. 245–247. See also the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 117.

*Rachel Heap-Lalonde<sup>1</sup> had written a critical reflection on the first two community art training and exchange programs.<sup>2</sup> Once again, LEVIER asked her to write a critical analysis based on the Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program, taking advantage of her experience as an artist involved in community and humanist activist art projects that incorporated the use of video documentation. This process is an integral part of LEVIER's ongoing documentation and dissemination of its activities; it serves to elicit a critical reflection that enriches the training and exchange programs and benefits the development of community and humanist activist art. Another characteristic of this approach is the ongoing training of collaborators such as Rachel who was accompanied in the writing of the following critical reflection; this text is the result of an elaboration of ideas by Rachel in collaboration with Devora Neumark and Louise Lachapelle.*

*Rachel Heap-Lalonde  
(see p. 71)*

## *Analysis of the Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program within the Context of the Documenting Collaboration Project*

### **Between the Means and the Ends**

Rachel Heap-Lalonde

#### **Note from the Author**

Along with the Vichama Collectif, I participated in three LEVIER-funded projects. We used video cameras in all three projects. The function of the camera and the way we used the camera was different for each project. This text is inspired by personal experience with community art, power relationships, questions concerning the construction of a just society, and the predominant place that I think culture and the arts can take in the creation of human relationships that will allow us to revolutionize these interactions. When the author is not mentioned, the comments are mine and are derived from my subjective experience of the weekend. I hope that my choices regarding the wording of the comments of the participants and organizers reflect the intention and the meaning of the discussions that took place.

Being an art of relationship, community art affects the rainbow of choices that exist between perpetuating oppressive relationships, working for social change, and deconstructing established symbols and images that are at the heart of power relationships, with a view to transforming them. The construction of oppressive relationships and power dynamics sometimes happens slowly, imperceptibly and almost unconsciously. The deconstruction of these relationships happens even more slowly through dialogue, critical thinking, and consciousness-raising. In developing critical thought with respect to the art of relationship that is community art, LEVIER is, among other things, interested in the sharing of power between all the collaborators of the project, whether they define themselves as artists, representatives of community organizations, or members of a community. At the heart of this idea is the involvement of the members, that is to say all of the collaborators, at every stage of the creative process. Through this involvement, a metamorphosis occurs and the creative relationships of change are established.

History is usually written in a way that denies or diminishes evidence of oppressive relationships, thus allowing them to continue. The collective re-appropriation of recorded history commits the authors to a radical change of oppressive dynamics. Documenting community art may allow a respectful witnessing of what has been created, on an artistic as well as a human level, in order to contribute to the development of a historical perspective of this practice and to elaborate a critical discourse that questions sociocultural norms and develops a radical cultural tool for social engagement. Different documentation methods can be developed to be coherent with the processes and practices of what is being documented. The collective documentation and practices of community art may also be radical and subversive.

The event organized by LEVIER focused on the use of video for documentation purposes. As this medium is used more and more frequently to document and disseminate community art projects, its role merits reflection. What is the story being told? According to whom? What is the motivation for using video to document the project? What are the consequences?

The objective of the program was to question the process of co-creation in video documentation of community art, everyone's role at each stage of the process and the basis for, and limits of, collaboration. These ideas are based on two premises established by the organizers:

- The documentary process had to be a coherent continuation of the collaboration that was central to the project all through its development. In other words, it couldn't be only the artist who would tell the story of the project.
- Choosing to document the exchanges of the collaborative process between the community groups and the artists, rather than simply presenting the results of the project.

As there is a multitude of ways to document a collaborative artistic process, these two premises were central in providing a framework for the event and in giving it some direction.

The structure of the program over the weekend encouraged active exploration and participation. There were many opportunities provided for the exchange of ideas. Each day began with a Kripalu yoga session during which the principles of personal equilibrium as well as the respectful collaboration between two people were explored in order to examine the limits and strengths of each person and of the duo. All the participants in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program* signed consent forms permitting LEVIER to record and photograph the exchanges. The act of consent was even more significant as the issue of informed consent was one of the themes of the weekend. Whisper translation into French and English allowed all the participants to express themselves comfortably in either of the two languages.

The structure was designed to include a variety of methods for thinking together and included a diverse group of participants and speakers. During the weekend most of the speakers were LEVIER-funded project members, regardless of their role in these projects. Those who wished to, identified themselves, as their respective roles were not immediately apparent given how the collaborative aspect was the unifying element. Many of the participants were involved in the project *Documenting Collaboration*.<sup>3</sup>

In order to equip the group with common imagery, there were screenings of films pertaining to community art experiences, exchanges between participants and resource people on the proposed themes, as well as work in small groups. These methods allowed for rich discussions over the weekend. Most of the time was spent on interactions between the participants, moderated by the facilitators. The schedule, while flexible to allow for the needs and emotions of the participants, was clearly defined by the organizers in order to end the weekend with some elements of thought to nourish the construction of collective documentation of community art projects.

## *History is usually written in a way that denies or diminishes evidence of oppressive relationships thus allowing them to continue*

The three organizers of the event, Devora Neumark, Johanne Chagnon and Louise Lachapelle, moderated the exchanges. In addition to facilitating the discussion, each of them contributed to the conversation by sharing their personal experiences connected to the themes. Louise, informed by her work as professor and researcher of the ethics of contemporary cultural practices, co-facilitated the event with Devora, artist, teacher, and co-director of LEVIER. Johanne completed the trio by contributing her experiences as an artist-member of a community project and as co-director of LEVIER (and the co-founder of Engrenage Noir).

There were several resource people in the room who were invited to discuss particular themes. They did not, however, take a predominant role during the exchanges, preferring to listen and learn rather than to express their own views. These guests were Patricia Bergeron, Sophie Bissonnette, Bob W. White and Patricio Henriquez. Patricia Bergeron, the producer of *Parole Citoyenne* [Citizen's speech] of the National Film Board of Canada, was invited to share her thoughts on the distribution and the consequences of video documentaries of community art projects. Independent filmmaker Sophie Bissonnette was present to share her thoughts on the subject, drawn from her professional experiences. Bob W. White, an anthropologist at the Université de Montréal who studies the principles of collaboration, shared his thoughts on this topic. Patricio Henriquez, a filmmaker with Production Macumba International, discussed the question of ethics during the filming and editing of documentaries. These four guests contributed to the collective thinking over the weekend in balance with that of the other participants.

To support the critical viewing of the video documentaries during the program, the organizers proposed a series of working questions that were introduced in a number of ways and that helped facilitate a common approach to collectively thinking about the topics, helped in the critical viewing of the video documentaries, and oriented the discussions. The questions related to general ideas such as *why document, for whom and how?*

While it is difficult to dissociate an aesthetic appreciation of a documentary from a humanitarian appreciation of a documented project and from the critical viewing of a documentary on a collaborative art project, the participants willingly

engaged in the exercise with *Born into Brothels*;<sup>4</sup> *Corps parlants* [Speaking bodies];<sup>5</sup> *Something From Nothing*;<sup>6</sup> *Letter to Skidegate*;<sup>7</sup> *Reparative Culture*;<sup>8</sup> *La Piel de la Memoria* [The skin of memory];<sup>9</sup> *Tuganire*;<sup>10</sup> *Raising Mom*;<sup>11</sup> and *Beneath the Seams: Making the Parkville Millennium Quilt*.<sup>12</sup> The screenings helped to create a common language and to critique videos that had the power to move us emotionally. Each video will be briefly introduced to allow for a better understanding of the questions being asked.

The last method suggested to explore these themes was a conversation with the collaborating participants of *Documenting Collaboration*. Through both panel presentations and informal small group discussions, many members of ongoing projects contributed to the dialogue by sharing their views on the development of their projects, the obstacles encountered and the doors that were opened. This was the case for the members of the following projects: *Raising Mom*;<sup>13</sup> *Abondance et partage* [Abundance and sharing];<sup>14</sup> *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors* [Open your treasure chest];<sup>15</sup> *Corps parlants*;<sup>16</sup> *Tuganire*<sup>17</sup> and *Rap des hommes rapaillés* [The patched-up men's rap].<sup>18</sup> Other individuals, some who had already taken part in community art projects, joined in the program for reasons of personal interest. They also shared their experiences and knowledge over the course of the weekend.

Apart from the working questions, we also explored the cross-disciplinary themes of community art experiences. These themes were the place of ethics, aesthetics, consent, distribution and the consequences of documenting collaborative community art projects. During the weekend, two issues stand out for me: collaboration and power dynamics. At first, these two subjects seemed far apart from each other but as the weekend progressed, the two topics got closer together and became two sides of the same coin. The question of power dynamics, often brought up by participants, was viewed as one of the obstacles to collaboration, a theme put forward by the facilitators.

The content of the event could easily have taken place as a week-long forum. Reporting on it could easily take as long. In order to best organize this report, the weekend will be presented using the working questions offered by the facilitators. These questions as well as the cross-disciplinary themes will be linked to the supporting material, presentations and documentaries, in order to introduce certain ideas and to make note of the central theme, the video documentation of collective community art projects.

### "Caminante no hay camino, el camino se hace al andar"<sup>19</sup>

After five years of working in the field, the founders of LEVIER decided to take the time to review what had been accomplished and to imagine future directions. The review resulted in (among other things) the organization of this program and the creation of a new practical creative laboratory called *Documenting Collaboration*, which began in 2005 and was distinguished by the fact that all the collaborating partners were invited to participate in every aspect of the video production. *Documenting Collaboration* was also conceived as a space for reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of collaboration in documenting collective art projects, a reflection that accompanies these experiences without directing or judging them.

At the heart of this thought process is the importance of including the multiple voices of the collaborative effort. All too often during conferences on this subject, it is the artists or the "professional" partners who present the benefits and the accomplishments of collaborative art projects of a "target population" or a particular "community." It is important not to exploit a community for aesthetic and/or professional reasons: the artist is but one of the project members.

It is a challenge to create and document in a collaborative fashion. The artist's vision, that of the community members and that of the community organization may differ with respect to what has occurred during the project and what should be told. This difference is representative of the diversity that is intrinsically connected to this kind of production. Questioning the coherence between the documentation of a process and the process itself is one of the central concerns of the development of a community art project.

To take a historical step back, we observe that the community movement is relatively young in Québec and dates from the separation of Church and State. Using art as a means of social engagement dates from the same era: it offers an alternative to using charity as a solution to social inequalities. Community art which links two social spaces, the community group movement and socially engaged art, definitively breaks with charitable, dogmatic and reductive approaches to "social consideration... for the Other." In Québec it is a relatively new and developing practice but one that does have a rich history, specific to our society and our times. As Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon explained, writings exist on European, American, Australian and even Canadian community arts but this is not generally the case in Québec. They believe that our approach also merits discussion, distribution and even criticism! However, in order to accomplish this, it is important to document, to define a common language, and to create a collective memory.



Images taken from the video *Tuganire*, from the compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.

The precariousness of the movement, which has not yet been appropriated by Québec institutions, allows it to sculpt meaning harmonizing the realities and aspirations of what it should be according to those who constitute it. In order for the community art movement to develop congruency with the realities it is trying to portray and the power relationships it is trying to alleviate, it must develop with and refer to the "different actors" of the communities involved (social movements, community groups and artists). For art to become an agent for social change towards an egalitarian co-existence, it must be created on the basis of dialogue between the different members of society, rather than in isolation by the individuals who have the privilege of devoting their time to it.

What is important to me is not finding the answers  
but rather learning how to continue to question what is happening to us collectively.  
— Tuganire

There were nine working questions that served to orient our thoughts over the weekend. These questions related to the following core issue: what helps to make a documentary video of a collaborative community art project aesthetic, ethical and emotionally resonant. The questions are in no way exclusive but rather recommended points of departure with a view to opening up the discussion and contributing to future documentaries on collaborative art productions. The questions do not aim to suggest a ready-made formula that would guarantee the success of a collective endeavor. I am convinced that this *formula* does not exist and goes against the distinctive particularities and the human differences that are at the heart of these projects.

While preparing this event, the organizers could not find a documentary that corresponded to the orientation that LEVIER was seeking, which added to the importance of holding a weekend program for collective thinking and to put these questions into practice with the *Documenting Collaboration* project. The pedagogical tools that were used were chosen for their capacity to inspire alternatives and to support the creative exploration of possibilities during collaborative documenting of collective community arts projects. Although it would be appropriate to use each documentary and each presentation to explore all of the questions in order to increase the number of possible alternatives, only one or two documentary projects will be reported on in this text for each question as a way to further the thinking possible beyond this report. The order in which the questions are presented is not a reflection of their importance nor are these questions exclusive; they open the door to myriad other questions.

## What is Being Documented? What is Not Being Documented?

Is it the artistic process that is being documented or the changes in the host community? Is the project result the object of the documentary or is it the impact within the community? Is the focus on the project or on the social context that encouraged the emergence of the initiative? Is it the adventures of any particular community member that is being documented? Is it the taking of public space by the members of a community? What is not being documented? Is there a deliberate choice not to document certain things? Is it an aesthetic, social or political choice?

*Born into Brothels* documents the adventures of New York artist Zana Briski with the youth of the red-light district of Calcutta, India. Her initial project was to photograph the women of this neighbourhood. Because of the children's interest in her camera, she decided to organize photography workshops and it is this initiative that is documented in the film. As well as viewing extracts from the initial documentary, we watched extracts from additional footage that revealed the comments of the young people five years after the production of the film, during their first viewing of the original documentary. This additional footage also addressed the effect the project and the film had on the community. For



example, the opening of a photography school for children (Kids with Cameras). Besides the difficulty these children had escaping from the red-light district, this film does not consider the social context or the approach taken in the making of the documentary or the consequences of the film.

*Reparative Culture* is one of the films produced by the Institute of Documenting Engagement,<sup>20</sup> a collection of artist-produced videos on collaborative art projects. This film addresses the artistic censoring of incarcerated women. It documents the project of artist Edith Regier, who tried to infiltrate the walls of the prison with a space for artistic expression and creativity. She also established a space for creative expression outside those walls, designed for women coming out of a prison environment. It tells the story of the project and its process and raises questions on the political issues around freedom of expression and the high number of Aboriginal women in prison. The incarcerated artists are not very visible, probably due to legal constraints, but possibly by personal choice. The documentary also includes sociopolitical and artistic comments.

Both films document an artistic process, however the approach, the aesthetic and ethical choices made by the filmmakers lead to different results, not to mention the impact of different budgets! During the discussion following the screening of the two films, one of the participants talked about the difference between *Born into Brothels* and *Reparative Culture* as being the space taken by the artist in the documentation of the artistic project. Edith Regier has almost no presence in her film compared to Zana Briski in *Born into Brothels*.

In both cases, solutions to the problems encountered are part of the documented subject, but here too the approach differs from one film to the other. *Reparative Culture* documents the lack of creative space inside the walls of the prison and certain attempts at addressing that lack, without presenting the process as a way of saving the women who participate in the activities. In *Born into Brothels*, the *American Dream* result, with its inherent heroic approach, is forefront. The film and its international distribution are presented as ways to collect funds to keep the photography schools open, which in turn would allow the kids to overcome their situation. It is an ethnocentric and colonizing vision of the success of a project that is shared with the public.

Asking what the subject is, the theme addressed in any given example, is also asking what is not being documented. Is it possible that what motivates the completion of a community art project is different from what motivates its documentation? In both cases, what is being documented differs as much as what is not documented. Collaborative art projects have so many dimensions that it is impossible to show everything: choosing the central theme of the video is linked to the voice that we choose to highlight and the importance given to some of those voices.

During the event, the facilitators as well as many participants pointed out inconsistencies in the process and thus questioned the ethics of the documentary projects. Some of the questions that arose include: "What are the post-production consequences of the documentary?" "Is there a connection between the imperialist foundations of North-South relationships and the production of a project in India?" "What roles do children play in the discussion of social problems?" "When is it appropriate to show the results of a documentary to the community involved?"



Images taken from the video *Raising Mom*, from the compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.

## What Social Concerns are being Presented in the Documentary, How are they Presented and from Whose Point of View?

Is it the artist, professional experts or members of the community involved in the project presenting the social concerns? Are these concerns presented to criticize, to make an observation, or to solicit any particular emotion(s)? Are they being presented from the point of view of all or only some involved in the project? Are the social concerns connected to the internal dynamics represented in the documentary?

In addition to the first two screenings, three more films were added: *Something from Nothing*, *Raising Mom* and *La Piel de la Memoria*. These five screenings served to highlight the contrasts between the different styles of documentation and social concerns.

*Something from Nothing* is one of the films of the Institute of Documenting Engagement. It is about the creative process of a theatre piece involving a significant part of the Enderby community in British Columbia. The artist Cathy Stubington tells the story of the obstacles that she had to overcome when she was trying to write the history of the town while all the inhabitants had a different point of view on the history of the community. Cathy Stubington's concerns were both personal (how to treat such a huge topic in a few minutes, especially as someone who was living the experience and documenting it simultaneously), communal (how to tell a story that changes according to the speaker), and artistic (the possibility of an idea arising from nothing, transforming into something, and at the same time, allowing anything to happen). The social concerns of some of the individuals involved in the play were clear. For example, the Aboriginal community members brought up the importance of being able to tell their own history, so often misrepresented or denied by their colonizers. This concern, briefly mentioned in the short film, could have been the central focus of the documentary, due to the depth of the subject. As in a lot of situations, discussing an issue means choosing a particular angle or a specific conflict... In this case, Cathy Stubington chose to focus on an issue that impacted the majority of Enderby's inhabitants, that is: the elasticity of a common vision faced with recounting the history of the community.

*Raising Mom* is a project born out of the frustrations shared by the young mothers who frequent Head and Hands, a non-profit community organization in the west-end neighbourhood known as Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (NDG) in Montréal. The young parents felt looked at, judged and stigmatized. The project, as well as the video, shows their capacity for artistic expression rather than focusing on their limitations. The social concerns raised are coherent with the creative tools used during the project and its documentation. The video presents the first year of the project without pretense, including the intensions and the accomplishments achieved in that first year. The emphasis was on what the women wanted to express and the beauty of what was created. Some of the project members presented the creative process of the video. It was interesting to note the ethical and social concerns that were brought up during the production of the documentary, for example the fact that the cameraperson was male — some participants in the program thought that this role should have been filled by a woman.

Another concern raised by viewing the documentaries is the question of what is perceived to be the success of an art project such as I discussed above relative to *Born into Brothels* or in *La Piel de la Memoria*, a video documentary that demonstrates a collective artistic process and shows its impact in Barrio Antioquia, a Medellín, Colombia, neighbourhood troubled by violence. It tells the story of a long-term collaborative project involving the youth of the neighbourhood, local organizations, an artist, and a Vancouver anthropologist of Colombian origin, Pilar Riano-Alcalá and American artist Suzanne Lacy. The film demonstrates how a social concern might be considered to be an analytical research project, or may be used to search for concrete solutions, particularly when the film evolves with a group that has long lived experience and understanding of the issues. In this documentary, the process is explained (post project) and the results are shown but the emphasis is on the possibilities of social change that may occur as a result of this artistic project. In an alternative version made for the project members, the emphasis is on the symbols of the project, and on the history of the gathered objects in the *memory bus* (a bus converted into a museum and filled with objects in memory of the disappeared members of the community). Two different social concerns, two versions of the same video: the legacy and the struggle against violence.

## How Are the Individuals that Appear in the Documentary Being Portrayed?

The way that people in the film are portrayed depends on the roles they held during the creative process and the roles they played during the documentation process, as well as editing decisions. Are the images used to treat these roles with dignity and respect or do they exploit the members of the project? Did the different individuals choose their roles according to their personal desires and abilities? Are they in control of the images that represent them? Are these choices clear in the documentary? Are their roles clearly defined in the project as well as in the film? Are there in fact different roles?

In the video that accompanied the presentation of the *Corps parlants* project, the creative process, along with some comments from the members on the ideas that emerged as a result of the dance workshops, were shown. The video — a women's initiative — focused on the body. The exposure of the body to the camera was a theme in and of itself. After a series of questions about the impact on the women of being exposed to the camera and in order to protect the identities and the boundaries of some of the members, many of whom were recent immigrants to Québec, different tools were employed during the filming. Most notably, a white sheet was hung up between the camera and the dancers, giving an intimacy to the process and an artistic Chinese-shadow-look to the choreography. The documentary does not *speaks* about any particular issue so much as it allows the spectator to sense it *via* the images. Members for the most part present themselves



Image taken from the video *Corps parlants*, from the compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.

in movement, without a filter and clearly with their consent. Both the videographer and the artist invited the dancers to choose what would be filmed and what would be kept during the editing stage. The participants were also invested in how their identities would be projected.

Another film that follows the members of an experience without attempting to redefine their identities is *Beneath the Seams*, which portrays a senior citizens' association in Parkville, USA, and their re-appropriation of collective memory. Two methods for re-appropriating memory are employed in the film. The documentary tells the story of this community according to the individuals who experienced it. The members use quilting, an artistic means that they are familiar with, to tell the story of their community. The invited artist complemented this process with a video camera that she recommended be used to organize outdoor screenings on the exterior walls of buildings around the city. In the documentary, the two artistic mediums were harmonized so that it is impossible to observe any creative conflicts that must have occurred during the project. The members are presented as though they directed the production, which is not the case.

In *Beneath the Seams*, as in some of the other topics and materials presented during the LEVIER Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program (e.g., *Raising Mom* and *Tuganire*), the person identified as the artist with skills to share is a part of the participant community. This influences the portrayal of the people in the film. In other documentaries (e.g., *Born into Brothels* and *La Piel de la Memoria*), both the narrator and the artist come from outside the community, which lends a different tone to the documentary and to the way the members are presented.

Regardless of whether the person who produces the film experiences the social concern being portrayed or not, the important thing is that she is aware of this bias and of the way the actors in the documentary are depicted. As mentioned by Bob W. White, the anthropological point of view (an outside eye) has historically been the point of view of the colonizer. Whether the framework of the film is presented by a collaborative partner or by a member of the community, the questions that came up during this program are of fundamental importance: "Why do I want to enter into dialogue with this community, what are my problems, what are my needs?" From there, we may ask, "How do I want to portray the members and with what objective?" As mentioned earlier in this text, the choice of camera angle, lighting, music and rhythm are some of the tools employed to direct the portrayal. These choices have a major impact on how the processes, people and events documented will be read. These are the elements that give the filmed members certain qualities that transform them into *characters* that we may find ourselves liking, envying, viewing with sympathy, hate, or pity... I would add that this danger comes from wanting to make something beautiful, to romanticize social exclusion.

On several occasions over the weekend, people spoke about the idea that participating in an artistic experience could be an empowering moment. However, seeing one's image misrepresented by a camera could be experienced, as people mentioned, as a theft or violation. On the other hand, the art of rendering an image is something that may be learned. Leaving the members to fend for themselves during the editing does not necessarily mean that you are promoting a process of empowerment. Balancing these two things is an interesting but difficult task.

## What Evidence of Collaboration can be Found in the Documented Project or in the Process of Making the Documentary?

It is possible to create a collective and inclusive documentary project but making this collaborative process transparent and visible to the audience is another thing entirely.

If the video is describing a process, collaboration may or may not be a part of what is described. When the video is an art piece in and of itself in which what is being depicted is something other than the process, how can the collaborative aspect be made visible? One element that may help to alleviate this problem is the inclusion of accompanying documents within the video packaging that serve to contextualize the process and the motivations of those who created the work and its documented traces. Community art initiatives become more and more complex when they are accompanied by a collaborative video that is itself supported by an explanatory text!

One dimension of collaboration highlighted in the design of this program that was more implied than explicit was the tension between *roles* and *collaboration*. Collaboration does not mean that everyone has the same role in the project. This is why the organizers of this event did not explicitly describe the different roles that were held at the time by many of the members. What I found interesting was that even when everyone was initially introduced as a "member of the project," many ended up self-identifying the type of involvement (collaboration) they had in the project. In other words, they self-defined their respective roles.

It appeared that some roles were perceived as new challenges, as in the example of Marites Carino, who experienced tension between her habitual professional role as a videographer and her role as a member of the *Corps parlants* project taking part in a collective production. During the presentation of this project, Marites gave an account of the transformation she experienced: while used to working alone with a producer (within a hierarchical model), she had to let go of her preconceived ideas in order to share the process. In so doing, the members assumed the choice of being filmed or not at every stage of the process and indeed of what images of themselves would be included in the final video. Marites shared her knowledge on the processing and the power of images, and while her role as the videographer was clear and well defined, the project members shared in the decisions about aesthetic and social appearance.

Often, the project is making the contact, the space for learning about each other and self-trust. The artist associated with the project *Abondance et partage*, Francine Charland, as well as the woman identified as the videographer for the project, Francine's friend Anita Petittlerc, emphasized the importance of this contact, the trust and respect that are necessary before filming and putting together a documentary. They stressed the need to question the significance of filming community art initiatives. Collaboration is born out of being together, sharing, learning from each other, laughing, and surmounting obstacles together with the group. However, during the process of making contact with a group, there may also be conflict and personal motivations with respect to the project and its documentation. As stated by Sophie Bissonnette, a collective experience is made not only from consensus and beauty. Creation is the fruit of constant negotiation between the different tensions arising from the needs and objectives of each of the people involved. These tensions also serve as the impetus and, as previously mentioned, the creative conflict that is at the heart of the advancement of the adventure. *Documenting collaboration* may also mean documenting a conflict. However, in order to document a conflict, there must be trust and respect within the group.

One example of trust and collaboration was demonstrated over the weekend during the presentation of *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors*, from the Le CARRÉ (Comptoir Alimentaire de Rencontres, de Références et d'entraide [A centre for food, encounters, references and mutual help]), a resource and assistance centre in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve East-end Montréal neighborhood. The project members decided to stage a sketch on the decision-making process they went through in choosing what to present during this program, a sketch that was accompanied by a video projection on a screen set up behind the presenters in which images of their creative work were shown. While exposing fragile situations, the presentation demonstrated a great intimacy among the members of the project.

Power struggles and oppressive behaviours frequently come into play when a collaborative process is initiated. The beauty of the situation, however, resides in the possibility of staging a scenario that aims to redirect, to combat, to reorganize, and to create new, more cohesive and horizontal dynamics. Bob W. White addressed some of these dynamics of collaboration, before and during the creative process, at the moment when the dynamics change from theory to practice and vice versa. What follows are some avenues suggested by him to observe the presence or absence of certain collaboration styles in projects and in the video documentation process.

## Managing the Appropriation of the Project by the Members... Do the Participants Speak about the Project as Though it Is Theirs? Are They Enthusiastic about Learning, Sharing Knowledge, Sharing Their Inspirations?

MANAGING DIFFERENT VOICES... the organizer's voice, the artist's voice, the producer's, and the member's voice, each with each other. It is possible to create a climate that encourages people to speak, so that a person who wishes to speak may do so. One participant underscored this point: "This is where you find powerlessness on the part of the organizers of a community project: the decision to express oneself often lies with the speaker." Refusing to be seen or heard may also be an act of empowerment.

MANAGING EXPERIENCE... whose experience? Is the organizer transformed by the experience? What emphasis does she put on the transformation? Is this transformation tangible, is it ideological, or is it theoretical? Are those who have a lot of experience in these kinds of projects recognized for it or are they overvalued at the expense of the diversity of experiences held by different members of the group? Is there an informal hierarchy of experience in the group? Are experiences shared so that they may be shared with others in turn?

BODY MANAGEMENT... It is interesting to note the relationships between organizers and members who work together, with respect to their use of space and body language. For artist and member, proximity, nervous tics, and the ease with which they touch each other, are aspects which speak to the closeness of all involved in the project. In theatre or dance, this is an issue with which we are often confronted: asking the individuals to come out of their personal bubbles, to have enough trust in each other to create a climate of intimacy. This is not an easy task and can be quite confrontational.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT... creative conflict, censured or self-censured conflict... we don't seek conflict but what do we do when it arises? Is it acknowledged? Do we try to avoid it? Do we allow it to exist, time to breathe? One participant mentioned, "Conflict can be a wall or it can be an opening." Is it personal, interiorized, shared, or exposed? Is the response to it the responsibility of one person or that of the group as a whole? Should it be documented? Might its inclusion generate new creative space?

TIME MANAGEMENT... always underestimated and never enough, it is a central point in all collective documentary experiences. Is there a constructive use of the time spent together? Is it sufficient with respect to the objectives? Is personal time well planned for? Is there a balance between the process and the result?

FEAR MANAGEMENT... because a collective project can produce fear and an artistic experience may induce fears as well: fears of the project failing, not attaining the objectives set out, losing credibility, getting lost in the process. Fear often leads to absenteeism, as mentioned by members of the *Corps parlants* project. Should these fears be discussed? Are they respected?

Last but not least, POWER MANAGEMENT... Are differences in status and power clear in the group? This dimension is explored later on in the text.

A quote attributed to Australian Aboriginal activist Lila Watson, from the documentary *Reparative Culture*, was brought up several times during the LEVIER weekend: "If you have come to help me, you're wasting your time. But if your liberation is linked to mine, let us work together."<sup>21</sup> This sentence spoke to many people about the fine line between working *with*, in collaboration, and working for your self, using the Other.

## Who is the Intended Audience of this Documentary?

The answer to this question clarifies not only to whom the message will be directed, but also permits the identification of what type of relationship is established between the documentary and the audience. Is it an internal document for the members and the community? Is it a tool to be used for public education or to transmit a political message? Is it an artistic endeavour directed towards a specific cultural sector? Is it designed to be displayed in a public forum? Does it address a particular audience (e.g., the university milieu or youth)? Does it use community-group jargon? Does it explain the context or does it count on a public already familiar with the issues?

One of the reasons it is important to clarify the intended audience of a documentary is to better organize its distribution and its impact. Patricia Bergeron shared her knowledge and questions concerning distribution of community art documentaries. She

explained that we are living in paradoxical times, where the democratization of documentary tools exists at the same time as the control of information. While the tools are more and more accessible, only a few people control the public information consumed by the majority of Quebecers. Our social heritage is being forged in the image of the ideologies of those few individuals who promote neo-liberalism and/or neo-conservatism, individualism, hierarchical interpersonal relationships, etc. While the transmission of culture happens more and more on screen (television, computer, cinema, etc.), we have to educate ourselves and become informed about the use of media as well as the critical analysis of the content of the information that is being transmitted. By re-appropriating communication tools, it is possible to create an alternative social archive and thus allow for the telling of our own histories. If leaving a trace is important, Patricia reminded us that the distribution is equally so.

The media appropriates discussions and twists meaning far too often. In order to re-appropriate the public transmission of our voice and our ideas, some aspects of distribution should be considered during the development of a documentary video on community art projects. It is important to take the time to contextualize the distribution of the videos, by inviting the members to verbally present their intention or by annexing a written document. Both of these presentations can clarify the motivation for the project, highlight any distinguishing moments during the production of the video, suggest avenues of discussion during screenings, and methods of commenting on or even modifying the piece. It is also important to consider the target audience before beginning the video. Patricia warned us against the "star-system" of distribution, created for a huge market, with shock methods that may be badly received by the public or simply misunderstood. Anticipating the distribution may help the continuity of the piece by ensuring that the documentary is conceived with the intended audience in mind.

Should we be preaching to the converted or do we want to reach a wider audience? Do we want to convince or do we want to share? Do we want to control the distribution? To whom does the final piece belong to and whose authorization is needed before distribution begins? Mohamed Lotfi, from the *Rap des hommes rapaillés* project, questioned the quality versus the quantity of people reached... He suggests it is better to create for a specific public than to mould your creative piece to a mass culture aesthetic because you will never know the impact of your documentary before its distribution. This is what he has been doing for many years with his radio initiative *Souverains Anonymes* [Sovereign anonymous], from within the Centre de détention de Montréal [Montréal detention centre]. According to Mohamed, respecting the anonymity of the members is equivalent to respecting the dignity of the men. How does one respect this anonymity while publicizing a project? One of the solutions found was radio; another was modified photo images or masked faces... because the primary audience of the art piece is often the members themselves: they are the ones who experience the desired effects. As filmmaker Patricio Henriquez says, each creative initiative is first a gesture of pleasure and personal fulfillment.

*Often, the project is making the contact, the space  
for learning about each other and self-trust*

It is impossible to predict the effects of an art piece before it is made public. On the other hand, by taking control of the distribution and transmission, we can construct a medium that can be used to seek social justice. Whether the objectives are met or not, the important thing is to have thought things out as a group, in order to be better prepared to respond should obstacles arise during the distribution (including, for example, the potential challenges due to the video's successful reception).

What do we want from the public? Do we want them to be sympathetic, to discover a new issue, for them to be inspired to begin collaborative art projects? Are we hoping that they will pull out their cheque books and donate to the cause, for them to be filled with emotion, enraged, indignant? Do we want them to be passive observers or to feel involved during the screening?

I think that the question may be asked differently: is there a hierarchy amongst the public to be targeted? I would be tempted to respond in the affirmative. This hierarchy must be questioned when a community art project is completed. If it is important to write this popular history in books destined for the general public, it is essential not to sell out cultural and community values with a view to reaching the mainstream. The goals for distribution must be as coherent as those for the creative techniques chosen. When more historical and artistic documentation exist that speak the language of oppressed and marginalized communities and cultural groups, these groups will be able to build a solid future anchored in a validated and archived past. If their history is told according to the oppressors, how do they find their own cultural references and valorize them? Subjective documentation of experience is an essential stage of cultural literacy.<sup>22</sup>



## Are the Power Dynamics Obvious and Transparent in the Documentary?

Documenting completed community art projects is, among other things, documenting a part of the history and the lives of often marginalized communities involved in oppressive power dynamics. Should these power dynamics be present on the screen? All through this text, the pertinence of exposing and questioning these dynamics during the course of the project and during the documentation is considered. There is also power in the editing room, a place where the ethics of managing these power differentials resides. It is also present during the decision-making process regarding which images to keep and which ones to cut.

Sophie Bissonnette spoke about what underlies the definition of a “community participant” in a project, that is to say people with little power and to whom we have easy access. Patricio Hernandez recommended an adventurer’s attitude at the time of filming (film everything) while being particularly ethical during the editing process (making respectful choices). Anita Petittlerc and Francine Charland from the *Abondance et partage* project spoke about what is sacred and what must not be infringed upon. Many artists seemed to agree with Patricio’s statement, “The more we develop this field, the more doubts we have.” Thinking about how our actions impact power dynamics allows us to question them.

Devora shared her perspective wherein the first objective of any collaborative initiative is the work with the other, which also means confronting oneself. How do you balance the connection between individual empowerment and changes to oppressive social structures? Community art projects try to affect these two places, which are intrinsically in conflict. As César Escuza Norero<sup>23</sup> would say, harmony resides in the tension of imbalance.

Two of the challenges of living with creative conflict are: accepting to be put in vulnerable situations; and having to confront oneself while keeping an eye on the bigger picture. Add to this mix the need to deal with group dynamics and our acquired unconsciousness on social issues while allowing the camera to capture the dynamics of change. All of this means living with creative conflict. It is important to establish a level of trust with the camera people who are filming this creative chaos and to have a safe space to talk about the different power dynamics experienced by the members of the project. For several years Lisa Ndejuru from the *Tuganire* project has been deepening her involvement with her Montréal Rwandan community, in order to create dialogue about the aftermath of the 1994 genocide. Developing horizontal equality-based relationships takes time. Committed to the idea of respectful solidarity, it is just as important to consider how to expose power dynamics and conflict situations in the documentation of a project that took months, if not years, to develop.

Whether or not to document the creative conflict often present in power dynamics is an important question. In the presentation of *Ouvrez votre coffre aux trésors*, the members resolved this dilemma by using theatre to stage creative conflicts in a controlled way.

Before including conflict scenes in the video *CrapN*<sup>24</sup> the videographer consulted the members to know whether they were comfortable with the idea. When power dynamics are impossible to avoid, it is possible to highlight them in the documentation process as a way to defuse them, learn from them or simply and honestly record the creative processes, as they are experienced.

## What Evidence do you Notice of Informed Consent and Permissioning? Was this Present during the Filming?

Consent is intimately connected to respect for the project members. It is one thing to agree to being filmed but it is another to agree to these images being used and publicized, not to mention having a particular interpretation being given to them. There are things that cannot be recorded, things that can be recorded but not shown, things that can be recorded and shown but only after altering the image to deform it or make it sacred, and then there are those things that can be recorded and shown. In all these circumstances, consent to continuing a process reinforces its coherence. The authorization can be formal or informal, established at the beginning of the experience or linked to the decision-making process and revisited at every stage. In addition to this, it can be linked to legal or other ethical issues.

Members of the project *Rap des hommes rapaillés*, as well as the artist from *Abondance et partage*, explored the notion of consent. Are the images and messages consistent with what the members intend to project? If you are working with children, consent is easier to obtain, but is it informed consent? How was the consent obtained? In his book *Alfabeização Cultural — a luta íntima por uma nova humanidade* [Cultural literacy — an internal struggle for a new humanity],<sup>25</sup> Dan Baron considers the possibility of ending projects at every stage, including the first screening of the videos for the members, before any distribution occurs. In keeping this possibility open, the members appropriate their public image and the impact of their presence on the screen. This possibility must be offered in the spirit of a mutual understanding of what appears on the screen. The concept of consent goes further than a written authorization. Patricio shared an editing example where an image was to be cut from a film because (according to Patricio) the image would have been badly received by the public.

The person in the image did not share this point of view and wanted to keep the scene in the film because it was an essential part of the story. During the first public screening, that particular scene did cause a stir. It was at that moment that the individual concerned realized that it would have preferable to cut out that image. What then is the role of the videographer in this situation? Should the opinion of such a person be respected during the editing process or should the editing choices be based on the videographer's knowledge and experience even when there is no consensus?

## What are the Aesthetic Choices Made in the Realization of a Documentary? Are they Coherent with the Project being Documented?

Gathering people around an idea, offering creative tools, and collaborating on a piece is not all there is to the process. If the collaborators of a project have confidence in their creative experiences, they will want to participate actively in putting their knowledge and artistic talents to use. It is an art in and of itself to give an aesthetic finish to a collective piece. How do you balance direction and participation, how do you come to a feeling of unity within this diversity? What elements differentiate a creative documentary from a documentary clip like those seen on the news? Is it possible to conceive of an aesthetic based on the strength of the creative emergence of obstacles to a group process?

In *Letter to Skidegate*, poems and prose are superimposed onto images, images are superimposed onto themselves, and certain sequences are repeated or presented in canon form (as in a song). The documentary follows Karen Jamieson in the beginning stages of a collaborative process with the Skidegate community that concluded with a multi-disciplinary project. I think that this documentary was made with great artistic sensibility and that while it documents artistically, it does not collectively. The video *Something from Nothing* uses a puppet as the narrator. The process is documented by using the same artistic tools that were used during the project. Even though there was no collaboration, there is a "community" aesthetic, a transparency and an authenticity. What are the elements that give an artistic character to a video rather than a "documentary" character? Is it possible to identify these traits?

What place does art have in documentation? I believe it is, among other things, in the construction of a space for dialogue, a space amongst the members but also a space on the screen for dialogue with the viewer. The dialogue space must be created with respect, attentiveness, and an understanding of other people's boundaries. As Lisa Ndejuru was saying, artistic tools are only the bridge that allows authenticity and truth to reach each other in order to project it outwards, towards the other. During the event, many people mentioned that when a documentary aspect is included in a community art project, it is first and foremost a work of art that is created rather than an objective or historical document. An artistic experience is an expression of the self. Collective expression needs a big dose of creativity.

## What are the Motivations and Intentions Linked with the Making of this Documentary? Or, Why Document?

One of the methods used to clarify the motivations and intentions of the artist was to include them in the video or to at least include questions connected to the motivations and intentions of the different project members. Cathy Stubington used her documentary *Something from Nothing* as a tool to communicate these questions. The members of the *Tuganire* project used video to document the reflections of the group and to question their community about the first 100 days of the Rwandan genocide, motivated by the need to discuss and share together, a need expressed by the members of the group. At the time of the presentation, the direction of the *Tuganire* video (in association with the *Documenting Collaboration* project) was still being worked out and so it wasn't clear how the footage would be used in the final piece.

The members are responsible for choosing many aspects of an experience, including those aspects connected to the documentation process, but they cannot determine the motivations for all those participating in the collective project. The motivations will often be different for each member of the group. How do you find the common thread, a bridge linking each individual's motivations? Is there a common denominator that might serve as a basis for a collective creation?

When an idea starts from nothing and you turn it into something, you can make anything happen.  
If people imagine together another reality, we can create the world the way we want it to be.  
— Cathy Stubington, *Something from Nothing*

Art always has a cultural and social resonance. A good friend recently wrote me the following: "In my discussions with young people, many told me they feel culture goes a lot further in controlling their lives than the government."<sup>26</sup> If, in our times, publicity is so efficient and perverse, it is because its capacity to convince and infiltrate the unconscious is well known and used as a means of social control. However, art may have other functions. Cultural and artistic movements have often been associated with social justice causes and with the expression of the realities of those without power or agency.

Creating a new reality may seem laughable and utopian but constructing equality-based interpersonal relationships is a phenomenon that may be observed in many social circles. These relationships are not perfect and are assaulted daily by external social pressures that emerge from our dominant social structures. But if "resisting is creating,"<sup>27</sup> then we must continually ask ourselves how to create, with what objective, and with whom?

The collective video documentation of community art projects is one means among others that permits us to explore ways of interacting with others, with one's culture and with one's social heritage, present and future. I believe that this kind of documentary is above all a work of art rather than a consumable object. This text has suggested numerous avenues of thought regarding the different possible methods that may be used for this kind of documentation, however each experience is unique and derives from a context that influences its creation and the possible elements of collaboration to be included.

#### NOTES

1. See the description of the projects she participated in as a member of Vichama Collectif: *Manipuler avec soin*, pp. 159–160, *Mémoire de grève*, pp. 230–231, and *Caravane solidaire*, pp. 256–257.
2. See the text entitled *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86.
3. For more information, see the presentation of this project (and DVD) in the centre of this publication. See also the introduction to the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 100–101.
4. See the introduction to this video in the schedule for the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 103.
5. See note 4 (p. 104).
6. See note 4 (p. 104). See also Bob W. White's *The Power of Collaboration*, pp. 321 and 323.
7. See note 4 (p. 105).
8. See note 4 (p. 103). See also Bob W. White's *The Power of Collaboration*, p. 321.
9. See note 4 (p. 104). See also Bob W. White's *The Power of Collaboration*, p. 323.
10. See note 4 (p. 106).
11. See note 4 (p. 104).
12. See note 4 (p. 105).
13. See the description of this community art project pp. 168–171, and the participation of this group during the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 104. See also the video *Raising Mom* made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication, and the presentation of this video in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122.
14. See the description of this humanist activist project, pp. 190–191, and the participation of this group during the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106.
15. See the description of this community art project, pp. 154–158. See the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 67, in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, and in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122. See also the reference to these activities in the critical summaries by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 77, and *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 115, and in Bob W. White's *The Power of Collaboration*, p. 321. See the video *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors* made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
16. See the description of this community art project, pp. 179–180, and the participation of this group during the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 104. See also the participation of the members of this project in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122. See the video *Corps parlants* made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
17. See the description of this humanist activist project, pp. 224–225, and the participation of this group during the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106. See also the participation of the members of this project in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 121. See the video *Tuganire* made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
18. See the description of this humanist activist project pp. 245–247, and the participation of this group during the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106.
19. "Walker, there is no path... the path is made while walking." (Spanish proverb)
20. See the introduction to this project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 68, in the presentation of the *Documenting Collaboration* project, p. 100, and in the schedule of the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, pp. 103–105. However these videos were not the result of a full collaborative effort with the communities involved.
21. See Bob W. White's text, *The Power of Collaboration*, for the origins of this quote, p. 319.
22. This approach was named and developed by Dan Baron, a Brazil-based art educator.
23. César Escuza is the director of the Vichama Teatro theatre and was, for a time, the artistic director of the Vichama Collectif. The theatre technique that he has been developing for the last 30 years includes nine different body principles, imbalance being one of them.
24. *Un dimanche au biodôme*, Olivier D. Asselin, 2006, for CrapN' (Coalition pour la Réappropriation des arts, avec un petit "a", par N'importe qui, avec un grand "N") was not one of the documentaries screened during the training program. It is a collective film project but not one that I would consider a community art project due to the absence of marginalized communities.
25. Sao Paulo: Alfarrabio Press, 2004 (in Brazilian Portuguese).
26. Poya Saffari, in an article published on a blog at: <http://nooneisil-legal-montreal.blogspot.com/2007/01/reflections-from-iran.html>.
27. Florence Aubenas and Miguel Benasayag, *Résister, c'est créer* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002).

## Training and Exchange Program

**Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics**

At Concordia University  
(Loyola Campus)  
7141 Sherbrooke Street West,  
Montréal

June 13 and 14, 2007

*For the first (and only) time, LEVIER presented a training and exchange program in partnership. This partnership with Concordia University's Institute for Community Development was made possible through collaboration between LEVIER and the Institute's coordinator, Mireille Landry. Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics was offered as part of the Institute's 15<sup>th</sup> annual Summer Program — a very popular series of workshops and other activities focused on citizen engagement and social change. LEVIER would have liked to continue this collaboration on an ongoing basis, but the Institute's Summer Program has since been discontinued.*

*Up until this point, LEVIER had proposed training and exchange programs every two years. Offering this program in 2007 within the context of Concordia University's Summer Program meant that certain elements had to be adapted. For one thing, this program was not as long as the other two community art training and exchange programs organized by LEVIER<sup>1</sup> — two days instead of four — and attendance was not a prerequisite for project funding as it had been in the past. Material from previous LEVIER programs — including the two community art training and exchange programs in 2002 and 2004 as well as the 2006 Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program<sup>2</sup> — was integrated and adjusted to fit the shorter time frame. Because of the Institute's reputation, the program attracted artists and community workers from outside Québec — in particular, the rest of Canada and France — allowing for a broader exchange of experiences. It provided both novices and experienced practitioners with the opportunity to think about and discuss the joys and challenges of community art in theoretical and practical terms.*

*The training and exchange program was designed and facilitated by Devora Neumark, Johanne Chagnon and Louise Lachapelle<sup>3</sup> and dealt with basic questions related to community art practice such as collaborative creativity, resources, informed consent, conflict mediation and documentation, in the form of workshops, plenary discussions, projections of relevant audiovisual documents and a "field trip."*

#### HERE ARE SOME OF THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THIS PROGRAM:

The collaborative process was an intrinsic part of the program, which was able to take advantage of the availability of new relevant materials, including some of the videos produced as part of the *Documenting Collaboration* project.<sup>4</sup> Participants in *Documenting Collaboration* had an opportunity to present their videos in a new and interesting context, while still in production:

- Patrick Dongier, Sandra Gasana, Neal Santamaria and Lisa Ndejuru from Umurage Montréal Rwandan cultural and community centre] presented *Tuganire*;<sup>5</sup>



Louise Lachapelle  
(see p. 51)

On the premises of the organization Le CARRÉ.

- Marites Carino and Reena Almoneda Chang screened the documentary they were working on in association with the Women's Centre of Montréal and some of their members, entitled *Corps parlants* [Speaking bodies].<sup>6</sup>

There was also a projection of the video made by the *Raising Mom* members from the Head and Hands' Young Parents Program.<sup>7</sup>

The training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics* was also a chance for LEVIER to do something it had wanted to do for a while: get out into the field, to visit a participating community group's home turf, in this case that of Le CARRÉ (Le Comptoir Alimentaire de Rencontres, de Références et d'Entraide [A centre for food, encounters, references and mutual help]).<sup>8</sup> Maryse Conti, Louise Martin, along with Nicole Saint-Amour and Johanne Chagnon, all members of *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors* [Open your treasure chest], introduced several co-creative elements: a wax modeling activity during the bus ride between Concordia University and Le CARRÉ involving personal interactions; a symbolic simulation when they arrived — a kind of chaos of chairs all piled up and needing to be sorted out — intended to show what a project can look like at the beginning; and a writing exercise on what community art is all about.

Members of the Le CARRÉ project were open to the idea of showing their as-yet unfinished video documentary. The comments made during this encounter led them to change the video, providing a balance that had been previously lacking. At the close of the video, the artist had "pushed" the participants into answering the question, "Did this project change the situation of your poverty?" The participants had not, however, had the opportunity to ask the artist a similar question. As a consequence of the workshop at Le CARRÉ within the context of this training and exchange program, the following question was drafted and put to the artist: "What do you think you have contributed to fighting poverty?" The asking of this question and the artist's response were subsequently filmed and edited into the video documentary, thus changing its ending.



On the premises of the organization Le CARRÉ.

#### NOTES

1. See the first program schedule, pp. 32–36, and the second program schedule, pp. 66–70. See also the text by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86, in which she compares the two programs.
2. See this program schedule, pp. 102–106.
3. See her participation in the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Arts Practices*, p. 51, and her text *Community Art, or Finding the Way Back Home?* written following that event, pp. 52–61. See also her participation in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 66, and in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program* p. 101. Louise acted as collaborating editor for this book and, in this capacity, she signed the Postscript entitled *La brûlure avant la voix or Could this be a love letter?*, pp. 353–365.
4. For more information, see the presentation of this project (and DVD) in the centre of this publication. See also the introduction to the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, pp. 100–101.
5. See the description of this humanist activist project, pp. 224–225. See also the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 111, 118–119. See also the video *Tuganire* made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the middle of this publication.
6. See the description of this community art project, pp. 179–180. See also the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 104, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 113, 115 and 116. See also the video *Corps parlants* made by some of the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
7. See the description of this community art project, pp. 168–171. See also the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 104, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 113. See also the video *Raising Mom* made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
8. Host organization of the community art project *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors*. See the description of this project, pp. 154–158. See also the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 67, and in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106. See also the reference to these activities in the critical summaries by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And if we were to tell the story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 77, and *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 115, and by Bob W. White in his text *The Power of Collaboration*, p. 321. See also the video *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors* made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.

Photographic documentation: Johanne Chagnon.

## Workshop: **Playback Theatre and Social Justice – What's at Stake Relative to Diversity and Anti-Oppression**

Concordia University (Loyola Campus)  
7141 Sherbrooke Street West,  
Montréal

June 16, 17 (working sessions on Playback theatre) and 18 (presentation and open dialogue with a broader public), 2007

*I am a child born from the dispersion of Sindhis from post-partition Pakistan who studied within the Francophone Diaspora in Alberta, now residing in the Canadian Diaspora south of the American border. My desires, which are many and changing, have been constrained and shaped by the ever-shifting borders of my material body, my social and political geography, and by the gaze of others.*

— Nisha Sajnani

*I am an interdisciplinary artist engaging with the practices of movement and words; the writing, choreographing, performance and poetics of dance and text. Central to my existence in this world is the fact that as a person I cannot and will not separate myself from my art, my race and my political beliefs. I create art for life's sake, breath by breath.*

— Dawn Crandell

*From within the popular form of hip hop, I set out to learn and know its history, to critically engage its current manifestations and to be a part of envisioning new forms and innovations.*

— Baba Israel

A previous collaboration with the Creative Alternatives theatre company<sup>1</sup> during the workshop Why Art?<sup>2</sup> had enabled LEVIER to become better acquainted with the work of this Montreal-based Playback theatre company, which was challenging the larger Playback theatre<sup>3</sup> community to integrate more people of colour into their practice and to adopt a more diversified cultural approach. The company also offered a creative way of dealing with problems associated with racialized identities, social exclusion and systemic oppression. The idea of presenting a workshop on the question of social justice was developed with Nisha Sajnani, the director of Creative Alternatives.

The decision to ask Dawn Crandell and Baba Israel to co-facilitate the weekend workshop with Nisha came about as a result of connections between Devora Neumark's teaching at Goddard College (Vermont, USA) in the Master of Fine Arts – Interdisciplinary Arts Program and her work with LEVIER. Dawn and Baba were both students in this program; Devora was introduced to them via a Playback theatre workshop they co-facilitated on campus during a residency. Dawn shared with Devora her experience with Jonathan Fox (a Harvard-educated New Yorker who founded Playback Theatre), and spoken of the need at that time to broaden the leadership of the Playback theatre companies to include more people of colour. Such a process would reflect a greater diversity of experience and show what is possible in this form of practice. This is an example of what is possible in the encounter between pedagogy and critical reflection about community and humanist activist art. Dawn Crandell is a dancer, choreographer, poet, scriptwriter, community cultural activist and educator; she is an active member of Playback Theater NYC (New York, USA), a company that uses hip hop and improvisational theatre. Baba Israel is a hip hop and spoken word artist, and a founding member of Playback Theater NYC. He is also an arts educator and gives workshops in hip hop poetry, improvisational theatre and music production in the United States and abroad.

Nisha had not met Baba or Dawn before this workshop. Thus, by inviting them to Montréal to participate in Playback theatre here, LEVIER provided an opportunity for people working in the same field to expand their network and broaden their practice.

### NISHA WROTE THE FOLLOWING TEXT AFTER THIS THREE-DAY WORKSHOP:

The text begins by contextualizing Playback theatre, its history and issues, and then focuses on what came out of the collaborative work in Montréal. Nisha is an active member of the Montreal Playback Theatre Company and the Spanish-language Ollín Teatro Transformación. She is president-elect of the National Association of Drama Therapy and obtained her doctorate from Concordia University, Montréal, with research on performance, oral narrative and social change. She currently teaches a course entitled "Applied Theatre, Trauma and Cultural Intervention" at Yale University, Connecticut, USA.



Living Histories Playback Theatre Ensemble, during the International Day for Sharing Life Stories, Concordia University, 2009. Photo: David Ward.

Analysis of the Workshop: *Playback Theatre and Social Justice – What's at Stake Relative to Diversity and Anti-Oppression*

## **Reflections from a Montréal Workshop**

Nisha Sajnani

There has been growing attention to issues relating to collective trauma, diversity and oppression in Playback theatre praxis in the last few years. In 2005, my organization, Creative Alternatives, held a capacity-building workshop with Jonathan Fox, inviting 20 members of Canadian Playback theatre companies and interested members of the public to reflect on the efficacy of Playback theatre in creating spaces of dialogue to address issues of diversity and social justice. This effort strengthened the network of Canadian Playback theatre artists and resulted in a documentary film on Playback theatre and dialogue. In 2006, the School of Playback Theatre, in association with the Centre for Playback Theatre, hosted a special session on Playback theatre and people of colour as part of its spring programming.<sup>4</sup> This session was unique because it was the first time that a group of people of colour within the Playback community had gathered together. What emerged from both of these events was a renewed awareness of the importance of and commitment to engaging with issues of diversity and anti-oppression through our art practice.

Consistent with a shared objective to raise critical issues related to socially engaged arts-based practice, Engrenage Noir / LEVIER initiated a collaboration between Creative Alternatives and Playback Theatre NYC to present a workshop on Playback theatre and social justice from June 16 to 18, 2006. The workshop, held at Concordia University, was presented in English and French, and the invitation was open for free to anyone interested in potential intersections of performance, dialogue and social change. Approximately 30 educators, artists and creative arts therapists speaking a variety of languages and representing a variety of ages and experience with Playback theatre attended the three-day workshop that culminated in a public performance and dialogue about the opportunities, considerations and limitations of the Playback form in addressing issues of collective oppression and social justice. In the sections that follow, I provide a brief history of Playback theatre, share my thoughts on how this particular workshop unfolded and introduce several ideas regarding opportunities and limitations of the Playback form in addressing issues of collective injustice and oppression.

### **A Brief History of Playback Theatre**

Playback theatre is an original form of interactive theatre developed by Jonathan Fox in 1975 wherein true stories of audience members are improvised by a team of actors who play back the stories through improvised rhyme, rhythm, sound, movement and script. Fox intended Playback theatre to be an extension of a foregone oral tradition within which communities could generate insight and elicit a variety of perspectives regarding their lived experiences by sharing and witnessing each other's stories. He writes: "If oppression can be defined as having no one to tell their story to, our mission has been to provide a space for anyone and everyone to be heard."<sup>5</sup> He also envisioned the form as a means of creating "communities of memory" and Playback theatre as intervening in a "culture of separation" through the mutual sharing of lived experience. The goal of Playback theatre is to faithfully render, albeit with a varying degree of ease and tension, the immediate, archetypal and sociopolitical narratives available in each story, "drawing people closer,"<sup>6</sup> reducing isolation and enabling a sense of collective identity as a community. The structure, roles and techniques within Playback theatre are accessible to learn, as evidenced by the proliferation of this form in over 50 countries. There are, at present, over 300 Playback theatre companies worldwide that have used this form to facilitate dialogue over a wide range of themes, deepening empathy and understanding amongst individuals and groups in educational, organizational, community and health care settings.

The aesthetic space of a Playback theatre performance is rather simple. It can take place in any environment, indoors or outdoors, in which there can be a space created for both audience and "stage." The props used are minimal and traditionally consist of a set of coloured fabrics that can be manipulated to signify emotions, objects and characters as needed. A Playback theatre company is usually comprised of one conductor, who is akin to a master of ceremonies for each Playback performance,



inviting stories from audience members and skilfully surfacing the main points of each experience shared. The company must have at least one musician who underscores the rendering of personal stories within the performance. The company also needs actors familiar with the varied short- and long-story forms within Playback theatre. Perhaps most importantly, Playback theatre cannot take place without storytellers and story listeners, everyday people who are drawn to sharing some aspect of a situation or experience they have lived and listening to one another's accounts. Playback theatre companies perform for others or for members of the company as a form of process group. A typical Playback theatre performance often begins with an introduction sequence in which company members introduce themselves by sharing a brief personal narrative that relates to the theme in question, if there is a theme. As a means of preparing the audience to share their own stories, the conductor may invite audience members to greet one another and then to share a brief experience as it relates to the theme. These initial experiences are played back through a variety of short forms leading to longer ones. Finally, performances are usually concluded by asking the audience to reflect aloud upon the stories shared or by witnessing a culminating enactment or poetic gesture by the company.

*We should not take for granted our capacity  
to listen to difficult stories*

### The Montréal Workshop

Our workshop was co-facilitated by Dawn Crandell, Baba Israel and me. Both Dawn and Baba had substantial experience with theatre and diverse dance and spoken word forms that they blended to reach new audiences and, in so doing, cultivated new stories through their adapted Playback form. As for me, I had several years of experience in Playback theatre both as an actor in the Montréal Playback Theatre Company and the Ollín Teatro Transformación, a Spanish-speaking company, and as a co-founder of the Third Space Playback Theatre Company, the mission of which is to give an art form and a platform to experiences of economic, social and political marginalization.

We had not seen each other work and had met in person only a couple of days prior to the workshop to design how the days that followed were to unfold. What became clearer to me as we progressed in our collaboration was the fact that our two companies employed very different aesthetics (I did not do hip hop but was very interested in learning!) and also had to negotiate a way of facilitating together. With regard to the idea of collaboration, having a network of practitioners who can be brought into an encounter and tasked with teaching together is a useful and creative way to elicit each other's underlying assumptions concerning our practice. In the past, as with this experience, I found it most useful to regard our workshop as a learning laboratory where we would not necessarily be imparting pearls of wisdom concerning Playback theatre, diversity or social justice but inviting our Montréal community to investigate possibilities and emerging questions with us.

### Reflections on Playback Theatre and Social Justice

Several key insights surfaced over the course of our three-day workshop and culminating performance. I have grouped these thoughts as a set of themes with several examples drawn from our Montréal workshop.

#### **A Partial Knowledge of Storied Bodies**

One of my guiding assumptions in Playback theatre is that our understanding of ourselves, and of society, is derived from the stories we hear and tell about ourselves and each other. Many people continue to see their options and choices diminished and their social and economic mobility reduced as a result of how their bodies have been narrated in the public imaginary. Playback theatre provides a means of gathering in the presence of others, representatives of society, and speaking from one's experience. In this way, Playback theatre privileges situated expertise, knowledge that is derived from lived experience. However, as this is the case, the experience available to dialogue in a Playback theatre performance is, on the surface, limited to the bodies in the room and the stories that emerge from their encounters.

I believe it is important for us to see this limitation as less of a liability and more a reality and arena of possibility. Company members will be limited in the experiences they will be able to empathically play back in their embodied reflections of audience members' stories. This is especially true in cases where Playback companies are comprised of members whose socioeconomic status, ethnicity, ability and other differences are largely homogeneous or particularly discrepant from the social locations and experiences of their audiences. On one hand, it is important for companies seeking to enable a dialogue on diversity and social justice to include a membership that is diverse in age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, legal status and so on. Yet, as we will never achieve a perfectly diverse company and because this is largely dependent on context, it also seems that it would be important to playfully speak to our ultimate failure in being able to fully understand or represent the experiences of another even as we continue and compassionately attend to the challenge of encountering experiences divergent from our own.

It is also important to remain cognizant of the limitations of what can be known about the “other,” that is, any experience that differs from one’s own. Therefore, while one of the goals of Playback theatre is to reflect the “essence” of the teller’s immediate story, its archetypal symbols and its sociopolitical narratives, it is also important for actors to playfully and creatively acknowledge the edge of where their experiences divert from that of the teller’s in order to avoid potentially repeating the violence of uninvited narration, or what Ken Gergen refers to in his articulation of the saturated self, through overly stereotypical dramatizations.<sup>7</sup> One technique we employed during the workshop was to ask both company members and audiences to reflect silently or aloud on the stories shared throughout the performance rather than waiting until the end of the performance to ask for audience reflections. By interrupting the flow of stories shared by the audience to invite reflections, it appeared increasingly possible to avoid colluding with the silence that often surrounds narratives that surface conflicting, contested or troubling material. Furthermore, Playback companies are encouraged to reveal a diverse array of personal experience, relating to the theme in question, in their introductions and throughout the performance, in order to share the risk involved in sharing stories that emerge from the often unsettling, disrupted and dystopian experiences of oppression.

### *Have you ever had an experience relating to diversity and oppression?*

#### **The Relationship Between Power, Questions and Analysis**

The stories shared by Playback theatre companies as part of their introduction sequence often set the direction for the performance as they subtly give permission to the audience to share a similar range of stories. As I mentioned earlier, it is important for the company to present a diversity of experiences in order to invite a wide array of responses. In the same vein, the conductor often sets the tone of the performance by framing the theme and asking the audience a question or series of questions that might prompt an anecdote.

Over the course of our workshop, Dawn, Baba and I grappled with what questions might best invite the kinds of stories we were interested in hearing; how could we invite stories relating to diversity, oppression and injustice? We found that by directing the audience’s attention towards a particular inquiry such as, “When have you felt like you were a target or agent of oppression?” or “Why is racism wrong?” the conductor holds a position of power, subtly shaping the contours of the dialogue that is invited to unfold and initiates what experiences can become part of our collective memory. The latter question might suggest that only experiences that support a particular view are welcome, whereas the former question seemed to invite stories of complicity as well as stories of marginalization. Another question we used was “Have you ever had an experience relating to diversity and oppression?” This seemed open-ended enough and actually brought out several interesting stories from our audience.

One racialized<sup>8</sup> woman who attended our culminating performance event shared experiences of her 16 years of employment as a public service employee with the federal government. She described how racism operates in her environment, for example in recruitment interviews where immigrants of colour are often told they do not have enough “Canadian experience” or “personal suitability.” She described what we would later reflect on as ageist, sexist and racist moments where she was told she could not advance in her job or was outright looked over as her white superiors decided to promote younger and less-experienced colleagues. She expressed her physical and emotional fatigue, and the pain of experiencing and witnessing these attitudes and behaviours repeatedly in her work environment. She described how important it has been for her to stay involved with the National Council of Visible Minorities, an advocacy group that supports the education and advancement of racialized groups across Canada. It struck me during her patchworked and compelling telling that part of what we were doing was finding a way to name the moments that have hurt us: words and gestures for the absences and the gaps created by agents of oppression. So often are these experiences dismissed in favour of survival that the remnants of these transgressions do not easily come together as a story. In fact, we often hear people pause and reflect mid-sentence as they try to collect the pieces of their experience to form a story to tell in Playback theatre. When it comes to inviting stories of oppression, it appeared, as it did in this woman’s story, that these dismissive, possibly traumatic and deeply internalized moments required invitation, encouragement and patience on the part of the teller, listeners and actors.

Similar and divergent experiences worked their way to the surface over the course of our workshop, formed into words, gestures and stories, and entered back into the narration of who we are; they were woven into our collective memory. The conductor is responsible for inviting stories to be told and is, *ergo*, responsible for ensuring an environment of equitable participation. This mindfulness is paramount when broaching issues of injustice and oppression and especially in mixed audiences where there are those who suffer particular experiences next to those who are not marginalized in the same way or who, dependent on context, belong to a privileged group. Over the course of this workshop, we tried various ways of inviting the audience to make themselves known to each other through introductions and through invitations to share experiences with partners or in small groups near the beginning or in the middle of performances.

### On Silence and Beauty

Playing back the silences, the moments when there are no words in the stories shared, is just as important as playing back verbal narratives. In the example of the above story, the gaps and silences in her telling revealed the partial nature of the experience, the moments of oppression when words were stolen and replaced with disbelief, shock or sadness. This silence may be the residue of trauma indicating gaps in one's authority and self-determination created by perpetrators in the moment or aftermath of harmful encounters. When inviting experiences of oppression or when staging traumatic memory, how do we play back the unplayable, the moments when there were no words? Fox finds the answer in beauty. He writes of striving for a kind of theatre that could provide a glimpse of redemption alongside representations of human suffering and offered Playback theatre as a form that could "describe the most difficult truths in a way that we can bear to remember because the rendition is beautiful."<sup>9</sup> The connection between aesthetics and ethics in Playback theatre continues to be an area worthy of further inquiry to avoid eroticizing injury through the "lie of the literal."<sup>10</sup> Indeed, re-enactments of stories of oppression necessitate a suitable aesthetic for both the verbal and non-verbal expressions emitted by the teller that do not translate neatly into linear dramatization. Playback theatre offers several short forms (e.g., fluid sculptures, pairs, rants and chorus) that can better reflect the constellation of experience shared in these stories and that can be incorporated into longer re-enactments.

There is also the silence of those in the audience who choose not to share stories. This silence may be kept for many reasons and may be related to who is and who is not in the room, who is guiding the performance and the stratification of power that presents itself over the course of a performance as a result of the kinds of stories that are shared and how both actors and the audience respond to them. Armand Volkas, director of the Living Arts Playback Theatre Ensemble in San Francisco, California, has an interesting way of encouraging a diversity of perspectives within the stories shared. In his "healing the wounds of history" approach, he invites groups of participants from two cultures with a common legacy of violent conflict and historical trauma (e.g., descendants of Jewish Holocaust survivors and the Third Reich) into an intimate workshop environment that results in a public Playback theatre performance where participants initiate the Playback performance by retelling a story they told during the workshop process. Armand refers to these tellers as "emotional pioneers" who pave the way for others in the audience who may be holding back their story for fear of how they might be received.<sup>11</sup> He strives to create a balance in the kinds of stories that are told from the beginning of the performance in the hopes of inviting a similar range of perspectives from among the audience gathered.

### Facilitating Deep Listening and Effective Witnessing

As I mentioned earlier, Playback theatre is comprised of storytellers and story listeners. We should not take for granted our capacity to listen to difficult stories. It is not easy to listen to stories of disappointment, destruction and loss, themes that often emerge when inviting stories relating to injustice and oppression. Fox positioned Playback as a means of reviving an oral tradition of building knowledge and achieving *communitas* through the sharing of personal stories. I advance that we must also privilege the development of an aural tradition, that is, the capacity to bear witness through acts of generous listening with a curious ear to the realities lived by ourselves and each other. In order for Playback theatre to be effective in addressing issues of injustice and oppression, there must be space to exercise the capacity to listen.

Fox has underlined the necessity of a strong aesthetic in supporting audience reception. In addition, the structure of Playback itself can be helpful in encouraging our aural capacities. By listening to the teller's account and then witnessing a dynamic embodied rendering by the Playback company, a space is created to give attention to each person's experience without the interruption of the next story, idea or comment, as might happen in everyday conversation. This space may invite the teller, the audience and the Playback company to listen in ways that are not familiar and not easily dismissed. This space set apart can also present a challenge when addressing issues of harmful marginalization when it creates an aura of sacredness around each experience. When this happens, the audience's attention is drawn to what becomes an event or an experience rather than a passing moment and can prevent further analysis. Honouring personal story is the *sine qua non* of Playback theatre. This raises the question of how to effectively create space to listen and reflect the interplay of systemic, relational and interpersonal violence that produce harmful experiences of marginalization and oppression in the stories shared, while attending to the unique experiences of audience members.

Playback companies have responded to this challenge by surfacing the sociopolitical narratives within the stories told, however partial and incomplete their rendering may be. In addition to this, the conductor can also invite the audience to reflect on the stories shared throughout the performance by giving further pause between stories, as is often done, to ask the audience to call out brief associations to the story or intentionally asking the audience to share similar or divergent experiences from the one shared as a means of broadening perspectives on a given issue. Furthermore, Playback can also be positioned as part of a larger exercise that includes dialogue in small groups, caucuses and dyads or as a large collective on the ideologies and relationships identified through performance. Over the course of our workshop, we reflected on who was and who was not present in the room, as this shaped who would be doing the telling and also who was available to listen. Facilitating effective witnessing, from my perspective, moves beyond the single event of a performance or workshop,

to intentionally gathering diverse individuals and communities to be both listeners and tellers, each bearing witness to the other's perspectives.

### Working in Alliance and Towards Change

When situated as a part of a larger community organizing strategy, Playback theatre can be effective in surfacing the dialectics present in a particular group, grounding ideas in personal experience and establishing compassionate ground from which to build solidarity. In this way, individuals and communities living different experiences of oppression are offered a space in which their realities can be told and heard. To truly engage with the social and political themes in the collection of stories that arise, it is important to see Playback as a part of a larger popular education process that begins with personal experience but moves towards an analysis of common themes of collective action.

During the workshop, we discussed the viability of merging Playback with other forms, notably the Theatre of the Oppressed developed by Augusto Boal.<sup>12</sup> Boal was influenced by the transformative pedagogical practices of Paulo Freire<sup>13</sup> and developed a series of theatre-based techniques that involve the active participation of audience members or workshop participants, who Boal refers to as "spect-actors" (not "spectators"), in a dynamic search for solutions to their own concerns. It bears mentioning that while Playback theatre embodies the values of participation and dialogue that are also found within Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, the two practices were developed separately. The Theatre of the Oppressed often begins by establishing images or scenes that depict the collective realities and struggles of a group, such as an image depicting racism or sexism, and involves a series of interventions that invite participants to identify and address the interplay of systemic, relational and interpersonal violence operating in a given reality. Of note is the emphasis Boal places on the "responsibility" of witnesses. Many of his exercises focus on supporting the ability of the everyday social actor to respond to injustice. During our conversation at the end of the workshop's culminating performance, participants agreed that it would be useful to draw on the techniques available within the Theatre of the Oppressed to further analyze the way power was organized and expressed in the stories told. They also suggested that it would be important to establish the end of one form and the beginning of another in order to avoid confusion about how participants' stories would be processed. A workshop participant further suggested that there be a different person facilitating the social exploration of themes via Theatre of the Oppressed techniques to differentiate the style of facilitation from that of the conductor in the Playback performance. The idea of blending Theatre of the Oppressed with Playback theatre has been taken up by Hannah Fox and Marc Weinblatt at the Centre for Playback Theatre and has been met with much interest.<sup>14</sup>

To conclude, Playback theatre, while it draws upon one personal story at a time, must be understood within its social context and within the context of a larger performance and dialogue in which many stories are being shared. In this way, the collective experience of the audience emerges over the course of a performance. Fox refers to this as the "red thread" of a Playback theatre performance. At the same time, the sacredness bestowed on each story and the promise of validation and affirmation created in a traditional Playback performance may place limitations on the degree to which we might address the intersections of ideology, power and complicity in the stories shared. With this in mind, I have offered specific sites of inquiry and in(ter)vention that can be made with regard to the social and political efficacy of this form. Further, the opportunity to continue this exploration in this Montréal workshop provided an opportunity to identify and strengthen a network of people deeply committed to the arts and social change from both anglophone and francophone communities in Montréal and also created a relationship between Playback NYC, Creative Alternatives and Engrenage Noir / LEVIER. Working in alliance, we have been able to deepen our collective knowledge of the possibilities and limitations of Playback theatre in addressing prevailing inequities as well as identifying interesting sites for adaptation and innovation within the form.

### NOTES

1. See the presentation of the company, p. 91.
2. See the account of the workshop, pp. 91–92.
3. Playback theatre is a form of interactive theatre practice in which members of the public share moments from their lives and watch their stories played spontaneously by a group of actors and musicians. See the following text for further information.
4. Personal communication with Dawn Crandell regarding School of Playback Theatre programming.
5. Jonathan Fox, *Acts of Service: Spontaneity, Commitment, Tradition in the Nonscripted Theatre* (New York: Tusitala, 1994), p. 6.
6. From the mission statement of the School of Playback Theatre ([www.playbackschool.org](http://www.playbackschool.org)).
7. Ken Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
8. The term "racialized" is used here to refer to the understanding of "race" as a socially constituted category. Racialization refers to the process by which one's physical features become salient and over-determine social relations. Within a racist-sexist-classist society, a society that is organized around a system of advantage that benefits white, heterosexual males (Sherene Razack, *Casting Out: Race and the Eviction of Muslims From Western Law and Politics*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), the term racialization is used to refer to the process by which one's physical features are conflated with negative status.
9. Jonathan Fox, p. 216 (see note 5).
10. Julie Salverson, "Change on Whose Terms? Testimony and an Erotics of Injury," *Theater*, 31, Duke University Press (2001), pp. 119–125.
11. Armand Volkas, "Healing the Wounds of History," in D.R. Johnson and R. Emunah (eds.) *Current Approaches in Drama Therapy* (IL: Charles C. Thomas, 2009).
12. Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Urizen, 1979).
13. Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970). For a presentation of Theatre of the Oppressed and of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, see the notes 4 and 5 of Jorge Goia's text *Soma: Origins and Paths of an Anarchist Experiment*, p. 331.
14. Hannah Fox, *Weaving Playback Theatre with Theatre of the Oppressed*, Centre for Playback Theatre (2007) – available on-line: [www.playbackschool.org/articles/FoxH\\_TO.pdf](http://www.playbackschool.org/articles/FoxH_TO.pdf).

## Roundtable: **Introduction to VIVA!** **A Collaborative International Research Project on Community Art**

At the Centre Saint-Pierre,  
1212 Panet,  
Montréal

September 6, 2007

*I entered community-engaged art through my involvement in social movements in Latin America (Peru, Nicaragua, Mexico), the US, and Canada over the past 40 years—from singing in the Civil Rights Movement to teaching photography to literacy teachers in revolutionary Nicaragua.*  
— Deborah Barndt

*This roundtable took place at a time when Engrenage Noir / LEVIER began a review of its first five years of existence and was seeking to inscribe the effects on individuals from LEVIER-funded projects within a larger cultural movement of artistic activism. LEVIER was also developing links with individuals and organizations from outside Québec and sharing the experience of these encounters with the Québec-based network of community and humanist activist art practitioners. This approach led LEVIER to concentrate mainly on the inequitable distribution of wealth, to focus on the gap between rich and poor and pay attention to how these differences are lived locally within Québec and elsewhere.*

Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon first met Deborah Barndt, whose writings<sup>1</sup> were already known to LEVIER, in Toronto during the October 2006 conference on community art organized by Melanie Fernandez,<sup>2</sup> Director of Community and Educational Programmes at the Harbourfront Centre. Deborah was also present at the training and exchange program Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics presented by LEVIER in June 2007.<sup>3</sup> Another encounter with her occurred when Devora represented LEVIER at the Live in Public—The Art of Engagement event, in Vancouver in October 2007. It thus made sense to invite Deborah and her colleagues, community art research assistants and facilitators, to come present the VIVA! project. This project, which was initiated in 2003, brings together eight projects combining community art and popular education in five different countries: Canada, the United States, Mexico, Nicaragua and Panama.<sup>4</sup> The roundtable was an opportunity for mutual learning, because these guests also came to learn from the experiences of artists in Québec: how they initiate and guide community and humanist activist art projects; what specific challenges there are in the Québec context.

The shared experience developed through VIVA! is one way of decolonizing art, education and research. All the places where VIVA! projects have been carried out share a colonial past where some stories have been decreed to be official, while others have been marginalized. Each VIVA! project confronts this situation and attempts to resist it while responding particularly to the specificities of location and history. Even within their groups, the partners of VIVA! recognize the colonial model being repeated in a number of ways including the use of colonial languages as the lingua franca. It is therefore important for these practitioners to consider the colonial processes associated with the context of their project and, sometimes, their art practice, education and research in order to overcome it together, hence the need for ongoing critical exchange. Many other issues were raised during the roundtable including the question of why the VIVA! project members chose distant and/or marginalized communities and whether doing so reproduced the processes of colonization. This question and the issues discussed during this roundtable then gave rise to numerous exchanges highlighting a diversity of community and humanist activist art practices.

The roundtable provided only the point of view of the VIVA! organizers since none of the project members were present or shown in the video documentary that was screened during this meeting. Although there was talk about exchanging ideas on an ongoing basis, at the time of this writing, the plans have not yet materialized.



You must first of all be well rooted in your local context in order to be able to be open to others. If you understand your personal politics, your history and the heritage that has formed your present identity, then you can speak to others at a different level. If we recognize that one river of blood flows through the Americas and the whole world, and that we have our own connections to this river, we will be able to swim this river together. — Margarita Antonio, of the *Bilwivision* project, Nicaragua

Photo: Johanne Chagnon.

### NOTES

1. For example *Wild Fire: Art as Activism*, Deborah Barndt (ed.) (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2006). She is a professor at York University in Toronto, where she is the coordinator of the Community Arts Practice Certificate in the Faculty of Environmental Studies.
2. See her participation in *Community Arts: Invitation to an Information Meeting*, pp. 28–29.
3. See the account of this program, pp. 121–122.
4. See *VIVA! Community Arts and Popular Education in the Americas* (including a DVD with nine videos) (New York: SUNY Press, forthcoming).

## Workshops: **Soma – An Experiment in Anarchism**

At La Caserne 18–30  
3622 Hochelaga East,  
Montréal

October 19, 20, 21, 2007

At the Studio Peter-Boneham  
of the Édifice Jean-Pierre-  
Perreault –Circuit Est  
2022 Sherbrooke East,  
Montréal

March 12, 13, 14, 15, 2009

*Engrenage Noir / LEVIER is constantly seeking to expand the range of experiences and knowledge of the community it is part of, and so when Sophie Le-Phat Ho<sup>1</sup> mentioned that she was going to participate in the full day of conferences and workshops entitled Aesthetics and Radical Politics and suggested that this might be of interest to LEVIER, Johanne Chagnon arranged to attend the event, which took place in February 2007 at Manchester University in England. It was on this occasion that Johanne experimented with Jorge Goia's approach to Soma for the first time.*

*According to Goia, Soma exercises are invitations to play in a group, share experiences of collaboration rooted in pleasure rather than in sacrifice – experiences of trust and responsibility. Given Soma's potential as a force for profound social change and its clear connections with the collaborative work inherent in community art projects – and since there are no Soma facilitators in Montréal, or anywhere in North America for that matter – LEVIER invited Goia to come to lead a local three-day workshop. Jorge Goia has been a Soma facilitator since completing his training with Roberto Freire in 1993. He has coordinated groups in Florianópolis, São Paulo, Porto Alegre, Recife, Fortaleza and Rio de Janeiro. Since 2004, he has been living in London, England, giving Soma workshops and teaching Capoeira Angola. He has a PhD in social psychology from the Rio de Janeiro State University.*

*The response was very enthusiastic, demonstrating a need for an integrative approach that takes into consideration all that it means to be human – in fact, several workshop participants continued meeting every week for a few months afterwards. The collaboration with Goia continued when LEVIER invited him to present a second workshop in Montréal in March 2009 in order to encourage people who had participated in the first workshop to go further in thinking about and assimilating Soma. LEVIER also extended the invitation to people who had not taken part in the earlier workshop so that they could experience Soma for the first time. Once again, the response was enthusiastic.*

*At Goia's request, there is no photographic record of either of the workshops. As the experience is so direct, any outside interference – such as the presence of a camera – would shift the focus and risk having the experience turn into a performance.*

THE FOLLOWING IS A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF SOMA<sup>2</sup> (which comes from the Greek word soma, meaning the body):

### What is Soma?

Soma is a series of exercises using body games to create a group dynamic based on the principles of self-organization and solidarity. Working collectively is one of the greatest challenges of our competitive, individualistic society, even for activists and artists who are struggling against this situation. How can we live in a more collaborative way?

Soma provides an opportunity to analyze micropolitics and everyday life through our bodies' responses to certain physical exercises, and to challenge authoritarian or submissive behaviour that we discover in our day-to-day lives. Soma fosters perception and awareness of how this behaviour reproduces authoritarian systems and it aims to extend this awareness to other aspects of our lives and to challenge hierarchy and social injustice.

When Roberto Freire created Soma, an anarchist therapy, more than 30 years ago in Brazil, he was looking for therapeutic methods that could provide emotional help for people fighting the military dictatorship. Drawing on anti-psychiatry, with its emphasis on communication, on Wilhelm Reich's research on the body and emotions, and on the tradition of capoeira (a Brazilian martial art), Soma uses theatre games, exercises with sound and movement, and capoeira to free spontaneity, playfulness, communication and creativity, and foster an anarchist attitude (in which no one is "the boss").

*I grew up in a conservative family of Japanese immigrants, spent some years as a member of an evangelical church, had to go into the army against my will, studied journalism, worked for a news corporation and finished a PhD. I like to define myself as a survivor.  
— Jorge Goia*

*Play is a way to rediscover the body,  
just as collaboration helps us  
rediscover human relationships*

Changing therapy into experimentation, Goia's approach to Soma does not focus on neurosis (we have something wrong with us), but instead, on acquiring skills (we can learn something new). In this sense, the experience aims to develop skills in building horizontal relationships — skills that can change the way we perceive the world, by restructuring the body, its foundations and its way of existing.

Soma is inspired by anarchism and psychology, two broad fields of concepts separated by a sea of ideas. Daring to combine them creates a utopian bridge between them and offers the possibility of fighting domination with more than words and rationality. The politics of everyday life begin with our personal issues; when our feelings and emotions clash with our beliefs and ideology, we become aware of the physical reality of our bodies that have been educated in the capitalist culture of fear and insecurity. Play is a way to rediscover the body, just as collaboration helps us rediscover human relationships. It is this environment — this group dynamic created by the Soma games — that stimulates the whole person to connect with the world. After the collective games — and just as significant — participants discuss their reactions to their observations and behaviours during the games.

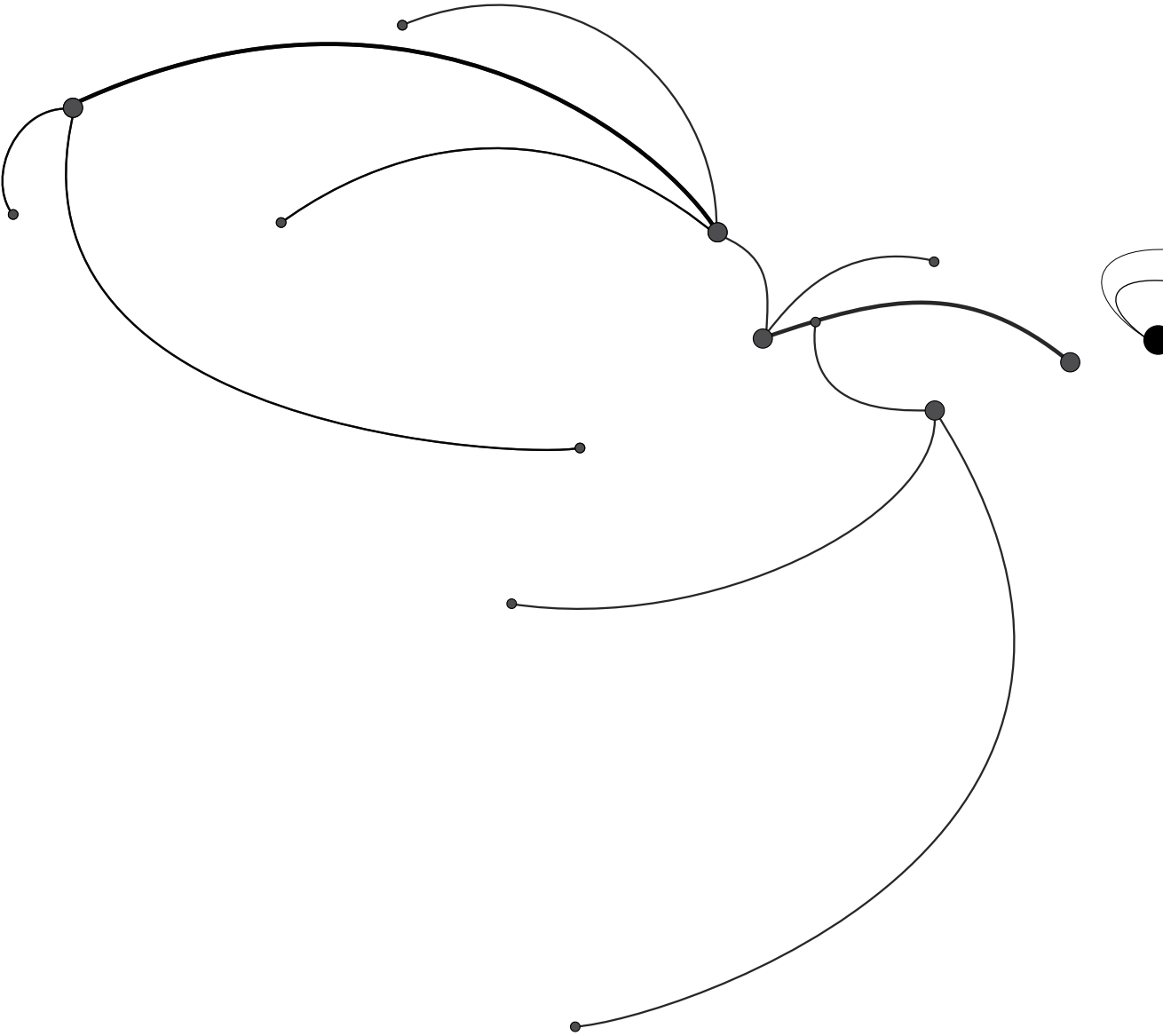
#### NOTES

1. Sophie Le-Phat Ho is one of the co-founders of Artivistic. See some of the events organized by this collective, pp. 88–89.
2. See *Soma: Origins and Paths of an Anarchist Experiment*, written by Goia, pp. 326–331, for further information on this approach.





# Shaping the Experience





# Introduction

In addition to promoting the practice of collaborative creativity, LEVIER-supported projects have addressed a variety of pressing sociopolitical and economic issues touching on the precarity of human existence. The unequal distribution of wealth, homelessness, access to water, violence against women, and the criminalization of poverty were just some of the themes identified and explored by project members. No one medium dominated: theater, music, photography, visual arts, writing, and a host of interdisciplinary artistic expressions were used, depending on circumstances and the skills of people involved.

Since 2002, LEVIER has funded 9 community art projects in the greater Montreal region, involving 65 community members and an additional 20 artists, and 29 humanist activist art projects, involving the members of 91 community organizations and an additional 49 artists in Québec and elsewhere. Apart from these statistics however, there is a multitude of compelling stories that bring us closer to the people whose passionate engagement has been key in shaping what LEVIER is today.

The partnerships between the host communities and LEVIER were intimate and prolonged. LEVIER developed a process of critical accompaniment in order to ensure, as much as possible, that the co-creative process created more good than harm. Representing LEVIER, Devora Neumark maintained a regular and ongoing contact with many of the project members on location at the community group or organization's office — or in some instances when the group had no office, in the homes of the project members. A minimum of four meetings a year was scheduled between Devora and community art project members; in many instances the contact was more frequent.

Since LEVIER-supported community art projects involved a sustained personal involvement with a small number of individuals over an extended period of time, the relationship developed between Devora and these project members was easier to establish and maintain than the relationship with members of the humanist activist art projects. Nevertheless, artists and others involved in the humanist activist art projects did benefit from this process of accompaniment to the extent that it was possible.

From the outset, LEVIER assumed that the community art projects had more chances of being successful in the eyes of the project members — including the artist(s) — if the community group or organization involved in the project was actively implicated in the decision-making process. LEVIER therefore developed an approach based on the premise that at least one representative of the host community group or organization would be integrated into every stage of the project's development: participating in a community art training and exchange program; preparing the funding application process in collaboration with the artist(s); actively being involved in the ongoing consultations with LEVIER; and contributing to the final assessment process. Furthermore, the host community group or organization was invited to commit as many resources as possible to sustain the project.

Due to the more punctual nature of the humanist activist art projects, project members were not required to participate in any of the public encounters organized by LEVIER. A substantial number did however voluntarily attend one or more of the LEVIER-organized training and exchange programs, dialogue circles, roundtable discussions and workshops. While the community groups or organizations implicated in the humanist activist art projects were also involved in the decision making process, for the most part, the artists took a greater lead in the shaping of such projects in all phases, from the application process to the final assessment.

Embarking on a collaborative creative experience without a solid foundation can lead to destabilization of social relations within the host community, something that would be detrimental to all involved. Such a "failure" would also serve to reinforce the view that participatory democracy is not viable. Given the importance of taking the time to establish appropriate conditions for community and humanist activist art to be experienced as empowering and satisfying for all involved, in addition to the community art and humanist activist art grants, LEVIER occasionally provided funding for a three-

month preparatory period in which the collaboration could be explored and developed. In some instances these preparatory grants led to more long-term funding; in some instances it became apparent to the project members that the collaboration was not viable or the project didn't resonate enough with the community to warrant further development.

Even with all the attention to setting up the conditions in which the co-creative process and project could be experienced pleasurably, we noticed that along the way, as a result of the transformative power of co-creativity, some project members – including many of the artists – found themselves suddenly confronted with issues they had not previously considered and experiences they had not anticipated. The confrontations were frequently triggered by the fact that the values of the different project members were not in alignment. Yet, even when the values were consistent amongst all the project members, community representatives without prior artistic experience often had different goals than the people who self-identified as artists. Often the very definition of terms – such as what political activism meant in a given situation or the difference between being a “creative person” and an “artist” – was contentious ground.

Sometimes the powerful emotions that were triggered ended up creating conflict within the group. While conflict is never pleasant, it is often an indicator of change in progress, and some would even say, a necessary stage in the creative, dialogic, and healing processes. LEVIER encouraged the conflicted individuals and groups to address the underlying issues early on so as to avoid an unnecessary and destabilizing escalation of the disagreement and, when possible, benefit from the transformational potential of conflict.

Overall, one could easily say that LEVIER's approach is a demanding one: beyond the dispensation of grant money, LEVIER was involved in the critical conversations leading up to the start of new projects and maintains contact with project members – sometimes even long after the projects have been completed. LEVIER is as interested in the dynamics that shape the projects, as in the ways in which the project members define success. This approach, while implicating a greater deal of involvement on our part, is part of our ethical engagement and vision for a more just and responsible society.

LEVIER is interested in creating autonomy not dependence. In some instances, the idea of the lever worked quite well and communities continued to integrate art into their programming even after the LEVIER funding came to an end. This wasn't the case with all the projects. Rather than extend the financial support in these instances, LEVIER invited the community members – including the artists – to examine how to establish a different set of conditions within which they could maintain their interest in linking personal transformation, political activism and artistic practice.

### *After Preparing the Ground*

*Shaping the Experience* opens to the implementation of the projects, the “doing” following the preparatory phase. While these two sections are presented in what appears to be a linear way, it is important to keep in mind that there was a lot of overlapping between preparing the ground and shaping the experience. The co-learning, the critical reflections, the planning and the doing were always interrelated.

Affirming the many connections between community and humanist activist art, LEVIER is also aware of the differences between the two. Both types of projects are presented within the same section, in order to highlight the articulations of these similarities and contrasts. Community art projects are grouped together and presented in chronological order. The humanist activist project descriptions follow. These are differentiated into six subsections that point to the key sets of tensions/complements: Aesthetics and Ethics; Individual and Collective; Healing and Activism; Institution and Grassroots Organization; Here and Elsewhere; and Resistance and Celebration.

Material in this section is not a catalogue of LEVIER-supported projects. Rather, the community and humanist activist art projects described here are presented in such a way as to reveal the projects' strengths and challenges while simultaneously expanding the discourse about the ethics and aesthetics of socio-politically engaged art, as well as developing the practice itself. Drafts of the project descriptions presented in this section were first written up based on information compiled by the community representatives and project members in the assessment reports shared with LEVIER at the completion of the projects.<sup>1</sup> Then, this preliminary material was sent back to the community representatives and project members for verification. For the most part, the information was approved without modification. In the few instances when changes were suggested, the conversation that led to the final project description found in this section once again deepened everyone's understanding of the project and appreciation for the dialogue process.

Complementing the project descriptions, two questions have been identified in association with each of the 38 projects, which are intended to invite critical reflection about the challenges of community and humanist activist art. The questions are emergent from the project members' direct experience and focus on the impact the project has had. Taken together, the 74 questions compiled in this section can be used as a reflexive and developmental tool for other community activist art projects.

## The Interviews

At the same time as the project descriptions found in this section were being drafted, Devora and Sylvie Tourangeau engaged dozens of project members in an individualized interview process, which invited them to give voice to their personal experiences and political aspirations. For some, reflecting on the project provided an opportunity to connect with a significant life experience from the past. In each case, signature graphic elements authored by the interviewees and the personal texts that emerged from this process brought forth aspects of the projects that would not have otherwise come to light. Between December 16, 2008 and May 1, 2009, Devora and Sylvie conducted 46 interviews with people involved in 12 different projects.

*THE FOLLOWING TEXT IS A REFLECTION ON THE INTERVIEW PROCESS WRITTEN BY DEVORA AND SYLVIE:*

Our choice of interview process was based on the desire to prioritize the continuity of the dialogic approach that LEVIER developed over the years in relation with various communities and their members. We therefore proceeded to choose the interviewees with the same concern for fairness as with all other LEVIER commitments. It was important for example, to make sure that individuals with different roles within a project would contribute to writing the project's history. Such a variety of perspectives – including those of community representatives and project members who did or did not self-identify as artists – provide a diversified reading of the collective experience.

The usual methods of audio recording and subsequent transcription of the interviews were set aside; instead, we chose to elaborate on a process that Devora had experimented with on earlier occasion. By us typing out what each interviewee said directly as she spoke and reading back to her all that was said aloud paragraph by paragraph, the participant had several opportunities to reformulate, refine and nuance her narrative. We preferred this lively, coherent, and performative way of shaping each interview since it allowed us to ask for clarification if and as necessary, on an ongoing basis.

This approach would not have brought the desired results if we had not remained constantly open to the serve the process. Our challenge was to listen as actively as the person in front of us was speaking. Above all, it was necessary for us to create a climate of trust and a flexible enough methodology that would favour honest communication.

We aimed to provide the support necessary for the ongoing self-reflexivity that was being practiced by each interviewee in order to record each person's unique experience as well as the evolutive process of words in action. The self-awareness and self-revelation that characterized the involvement of each participant is evident in the resulting narratives, which are at once intimate, activist and altogether transformative. Despite the time that had elapsed between the end of the projects and the interviews (sometimes up to six years), we were all pleasantly surprised by just how persistent were the traces left by the experience and by the profusion of ideas that these experiences had continued to generate. In short, we trusted a performative approach and we were not disappointed.

To begin with, LEVIER had to identify the projects that could be represented by several project members, not just the artist(s). LEVIER also respected the decision to refuse to participate, a decision that was taken by a few people who did not feel sufficiently involved in the project or who did not want to share, what was for them, a less than satisfying experience. LEVIER was therefore not able to include interviews in the majority of the project descriptions.

Maintaining confidentiality amongst the different project members in any given project during the interview process was essential to being able to gather personalized accounts and ensure that every person felt trusting enough to recount their own version of what happened, especially in situations of conflict. In some instances, project members chose to do the interview together, leading to them to have a new understanding of what was at stake for each other. Taken together, these different viewpoints provide a realistic portrait of the many facets inherent in any one community or humanist activist project.

We were both personally implicated in this exchange, which put us into direct contact with the search for lucidity, right action and commitment to an activist practice within a context of collective art making.

Despite the difficulties that the project members encountered in expressing the truth of their experience, and maybe even more so because of the challenges, this entire process was an affirmation of the undeniable power of dialogue and active listening.

— Devora Neumark

It was a real unifying process in which I could connect my different skills and attitudes, as well as practice differently the sustained attention that I had previously developed within my performance art, training and coaching sessions. I had to find a way to write, which was more aligned with relational practice. In the instantaneity of the spoken words revealed, the live simultaneous written recording of the interviews has allowed me to acquire a quality of presence more suitably adapted to a wide diversity of human situations.

— Sylvie Tourangeau

#### NOTE

1. The assessment report questionnaires are included in this section.  
See pp. Final Report Questionnaires for LEVIER-supported  
Community Art Projects, p. 186-189.



# Et si j'y étais... Histoire de se connaître, de se reconnaître un peu [And if I was there... ]<sup>1</sup>

Montréal and Alma

March 2003 –  
October 2005

Oxy-jeunes  
Annie Gauvin  
(until March 2004)  
François Bergeron  
(beginning in April 2004)  
Cédric Peltier  
Johanne Verville

*Facilitating Artist*  
Christine Brault<sup>2</sup>

*Other Artists and Project Members*  
Alexandrine Gauvin  
Alice Girard Tixidre  
Anaïs Beaulieu-Laporte  
Arielle Choquette-Laporte  
Azinaty Caron Paquin  
Cathrine Gauvin  
Émilie-Paule Lenoir  
Isabelle Lenoir  
Jessie Mackay  
Maria Anastasaki  
Martial Després in Alma  
Maxime Laprade  
Nicole Fournier for *Terre nomade*  
Stéphanie Laprade  
Vanessa Lavoie

*Project inviting youths (12–17 years old) from different backgrounds in Montréal and Alma to participate in a daily practice of contemporary art as a means of developing a sense of belonging to a group and to a neighbourhood*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- What ethical considerations are specific to working with youth especially when the adult artist(s) involved are motivated to heal their own (wounded) inner adolescent self?
- Community art is often considered an activist commitment and dedication to social change in line with the socio-political concerns of the community involved. When a project has deliberately modest goals, how can it be discussed and defended within the framework of this politicized discourse? In other words, what are some strategies to affirm the pertinence of poetically inclined community art projects that are not overtly militant?

Founded in 1980, Oxy-jeunes developed mainly in association with the Festival de création jeunesse [Youth creation festival], which was also how this community organization was known before its name change in 1984. The mission of this non-profit organization, which is located in the South-Central Montreal neighbourhood, is to support the expression of the concerns that youth between the ages of 12–17 might have and contribute to the fulfillment of their dreams by developing art activities and cultural projects involving contact with professional artists. Through active participation, Oxy-jeunes' members reinforce their self-esteem and affirm their identity, while developing a sense of group cohesion and community engagement.

The participating youth come from all kinds of backgrounds, although the majority of them live in the South-Central neighbourhood — a neighbourhood that is often associated with underprivileged conditions. Artistic creation is not particularly taken for granted in their milieu and is sometimes discouraged within their families. Oxy-jeunes does not necessarily seek to curb the neighbourhood's social problems — which are frequently experienced on a daily basis — but rather to find alternatives through creative collaborations while inviting young people to accomplish something with means that are not otherwise usually offered to them.

Christine Brault was already involved with Oxy-Jeunes before LEVIER first extended financial support to this community art project. While the organization was in the middle of a major restructuring, a pilot project had been started with the intention of integrating artistic activity into the daily lives of the youth members as a way to demystify contemporary art. In collaboration with the artist-run center DARE-DARE, Christine conducted a six-month residency in 2001–2002 during which she developed the first stage of *Et si j'y étais... Chroniques du passeur traqué* [And If I Was There...], an outdoor project scattered amongst several small neighbourhood South-Central parks. The project — integrating photography, writing and sound — infiltrated the urban landscape and left its mark. Young people living in this neighbourhood, wanted to occupy public spaces that were filled with syringes and condoms and where there was little light and sometimes no benches or play structures. These common areas, once merely transit points, became places of exchange between the youth and the passersby. Within these urban places — so rife with prostitution and drug use — the interventions were like bits of poetry offered to strangers — an intimate social poetry, sometimes quite playful, and above all, nonviolent.

*Ensemencement urbain activity.*





Terre nomade activity.



Pouvoir dormir sur un nuage activity.



With members of La Maison des jeunes d'Alma.

It was at that time that the LEVIER-funded portion of *Et si j'y étais...* began with a core of youth who had taken part in the pilot project. For her part, Christine was motivated by the need for recognition felt by young people in today's society. She identified with their need to speak out and challenge the negative preconceptions that some adults hold about youth today. The project was a way to validate the potential the youth have to change whatever aspects of society they feel need to be improved. Christine was eager to extend the opportunity for the young members to learn new ways of doing things and express themselves in modest but meaningful ways — thus reinforcing their inner resources.

Here are the projects completed during the one-year period 2003–2004:

- *Ensemencement urbain* [Urban seeding] was based on the following question: "Why not try to make flowers grow in inappropriate — even impossible — places and to make something — anything, really — emerge within patches of debris?" Project members planted a narrow strip along a neighbourhood sidewalk: well watered, the seeds began to germinate and green shoots began to adorn the sidewalk. "These plants, often perceived as weeds, served as a metaphor for the youth who were often compared to "bad seeds" but who, when given a chance, can make wonderful things emerge."<sup>3</sup>
- *Terre nomade* [Nomadic earth] consisted of collecting soil samples from various South-Central parks in small glass bottles. Along with expressive drawings identifying the origins of each soil sample, these bottles were then placed in a valise found on a local sidewalk in order to make the earth samples migrate from one location to another.
- For *Accroche-moi un rêve* [Hang me a dream] — which was carried out during the winter holiday season — the project members invited passersby they met on the street to offer immaterial good wishes that they then inscribed on strips of translucent vinyl and hung on Christmas trees (which were installed to boost commercial sales along Mount Royal Avenue and Saint-Lawrence Boulevard in downtown Montréal).
- A trip to Alma, Québec; this trip was one of the original goals of the project. It was intended to create the possibility for an exchange between youth of different backgrounds and regions within Québec. The encounter was made possible thanks to Geneviève Boucher, the Coordinator of the IQ Workshop, who first met Christine at LEVIER's *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*.<sup>4</sup> Members of La Maison des jeunes d'Alma [Alma youth house] and Oxy-jeunes participants helped each other to make a series of installations in the snow out of flowers gathered from Montréal and Alma-based florists. They also collaborated on a collective series of lanterns made from tin cans.
- The production of a published catalogue of all the various activities carried out during this one-year period.

*Et si j'y étais...* subsequently obtained a second year of funding from LEVIER: the new project drew its roots from *Accroche-moi un rêve* and was called *Pouvoir dormir sur un nuage* [The possibility of sleeping on a cloud]. A cloud-like structure built by the group consisted of a futon base upon which aluminum poles were attached. The structure was covered with a vinyl liner and an inflatable mattress was placed inside. This nomadic installation was presented in three Montréal public spaces. The youth invited passersby to take a break from the hectic pace of the city. Upon leaving, the passersby left with a flower made by the project members as a memento of the experience.



While recruitment was a challenge throughout the *Si j'y étais...* project — and motivation was sometimes lagging — the members were able to take advantage of the extended support to really take ownership of the project and increase the amount of active collaboration in the creation of the work. For both the youth and the adult artist, *Si j'y étais...* was an important vehicle for the development of a stronger social conscience and a more articulate voice. As for the organization: Oxy-jeune explored new ways to operate, including inviting the artist with whom they worked to participate in team meetings in recognition of the particular contributions she could offer.

As with several other LEVIER-sponsored projects, the number of members ranged from three to six. LEVIER considers this an asset as the small number of participants can actually be advantageous in developing interpersonal connections, more active involvement and collective decision-making processes. This modesty of scale was a general feature of this project: humble gestures were encouraged to unfold slowly and grow at their own pace. As with homeopathy, the small doses can have long-lasting and far-reaching effects.

#### NOTES

1. See the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 69, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 75.
2. See also her participation in the *SEXÉ ! art action* roundtable, p. 90.
3. Excerpt from Cédric Peltier's 2005 research project entitled *Trouver la parole des jeunes par l'art communautaire ?* (carried out within UQAM's community service program), which focused on the Oxy-jeunes experience.
4. See the program presentation and the schedule, pp. 32-36, as well as Rachel Heap-Lalonde's report *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, which compares this program to the one held in 2004, pp. 71-86.

Photographic documentation: Christine Brault and the other project members.



*Accroche-moi un rêve* activity.



With members of La Maison des jeunes d'Alma.





## Alice Tixidre

*I'm a high school student in theatre arts. I place a lot of importance on respect and listening. I'm inspired by the wind and by life in general. Alice Tixidre doesn't always know who she might be, and sometimes has a hard time defining herself.*  
— Alice Tixidre



I've taken part in a lot of projects with Christine Brault and now I want to talk about one project in particular, because that's the one that's clearest in my head. It's the project where we wrote down our own wishes and wishes of people on the street in downtown Montreal. What I found significant in this is that we hung people's wishes and dreams on trees cut for Christmas. They were written on transparent strips, which I think is a symbol that says a lot. I love this symbolism. It takes you back to the original values of the holiday.

What's important at Christmas is family, which means being with people you love — it's not just about buying presents and consuming. It was *fun* talking to people on the street, because people normally don't talk to each other on the street. Sometimes it was hard to approach them, because they felt like they were being harassed. They were really in their own little worlds even though it was Christmas.

The examples of the wishes they gave us most often, the ones that were, let's say, the most classic, were for peace in the world and peace for children — and the wish that they had wings. Recently, I went to the Montreal Biodome and in the big windows where you can see underwater, I saw that the birds, as well as flying, could dive down into the water and come back up to the surface. Maybe having wings is not enough, or maybe it's not necessary?

The people on the street said quite simple things. They didn't just answer any old thing, even if it sometimes took them more time. Everyone always has a lot of things to wish for, but when someone suddenly asks us, we aren't necessarily able to express *these wishes* clearly. People told us what they really wanted, because if they weren't interested, they would have just ignored us. Often, people took us for *beggars... begging* for wishes.

The wishes that really got to me for their presence of mind were the ones told to me at a meeting with Engrenage Noir / LEVIER. Participants in this organization's projects took this process of making the wishes further. There was the wish to be inspired. That was the most beautiful one! I think I'll remember that one for the rest of my life. *It's crazy!* And then there was one that snow could be all different colours. In this case it wasn't the same as in the street; they were much more aware. I felt a huge gap between these individuals and the consumers we met on the street just before Christmas. Their wishes were more specific, less general.

It led to new experiences; I think of them the way you recall good memories.

I have a better understanding of the difference between the mind of a person who's about to buy, often in a hurry, and a mind that's free. The people I found the most interesting were the ones who didn't think for too long. They were intuitive — they listened and they trusted their minds. There was something creative. I don't know if it's culture or making art that gives you that. In the street, people had to think for a long time to come up with the simplest thing — world peace. Everybody wants world peace! And I think it will never happen. Of course, the multicoloured snow won't happen either, but it's more imaginative. I feel that when you're thinking about buying, you're more in your head, and therefore you're not in the moment — you're not intuitive and you don't let yourself go.

One of the big questions is: What is art? I feel that when you're doing art, you have to put yourself into it, and to put something of yourself into it, you have to let yourself go. To do that, you have to stop censoring yourself and criticizing yourself in order to have enough detachment not to stop your momentum, even if you don't get the result you want right away. Afterwards, you have to go back over what you've done, looking at it from the outside, and I think it's then that you're best able to understand all the possible meanings of what you've created.

Often, you come up with things you hadn't thought of. That's why I feel it's important to let yourself go. The unconscious brings interpretations you wouldn't have thought of and that sometimes pleasantly surprise you.

I thought it would be easy to think up wishes, but it was hard for the people on the street. They were caught off guard; they would wonder, "Why are they asking me this?" It was as if it was the first time anyone had asked them for a wish. Also, if they didn't think of their most important wish right away, they had a feeling that they were going to miss their chance and that their wish wouldn't come true. Generally, you just wish for something; you don't always ask yourself how to make it come true.

I think the vast majority of people want something we don't have or think we don't have. We're unhappy about that and we try to find it, but we don't always know exactly what it is, and that's why it's hard to make a wish.

## Annie Gauvin

*I am fascinated by the intertwinings formed by our relationships with others. I love sticking my nose into points of social, cultural or economic tension that appear, disappear, break up or shrink under pressure. I see my identity in terms of these "discoveries" that find expression in community art.*

— Annie Gauvin



Linearity and duality are integral aspects of my experience. If I explained the origins of the project *Et si j'y étais... Histoire de se connaître et de se reconnaître un peu* as they come to me, really, it would be too chaotic to follow clearly. Hence the value of linearity, which lets me experience the duality in me positively. It's the appreciation of my duality that makes me look for zones of tension, and once I've found them, I use them as engines for creation, action and exchange.

This way of living in the world puts me in precarious spaces where balance is delicate and where conflicts can arise in relationships. Through all this, beauty always emerges in the end. These are the conditions I have chosen to bring forth my beauty, the only beauty I can convey. And I have a desire to share it with others. Even though it's basically selfish, it can't come only from me, because I absolutely need others in a project like this. I can't help discovering and sharing the other person's beauty and superimposing it on my own, and so I end up confronting my own prejudices and preconceptions. This gives rise to zones of duality, but also to convergences and knots. And the more people we are, the more this kind of phenomenon multiplies, until it's transformed into the raw material for CREATING A COLLECTIVE.

Since the convergences change regularly, it's important to always be aware of where they are. And depending how the project goes, the convergences are also constantly being transposed according to the circumstances, the state of each person at the time, their living conditions and what they are subjected to inside and outside. Once I've recognized myself and the other has in turn recognized me, and we've recognized each other in the collective, each one can fail to fully trust the other without it necessarily affecting the BALANCE OF THE COLLECTIVE. It works the same way for each of the elements of the collective because they are constantly being transposed with the inner and outer elements. When I contribute my beauty, thus creating a layering of beauties, it will be in constant movement.

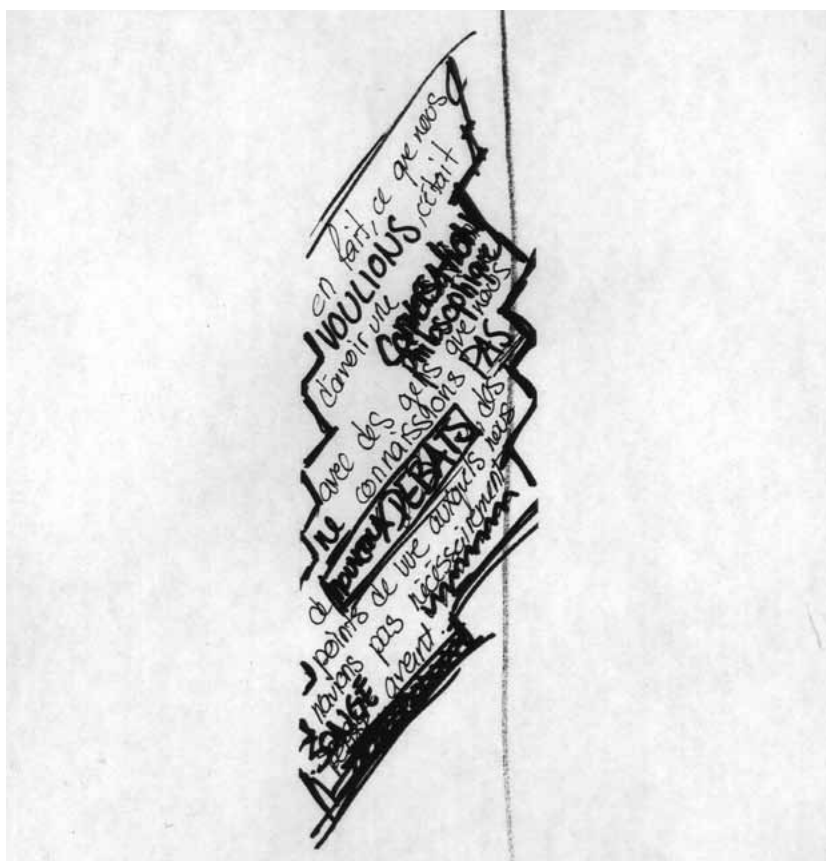
Beyond that, it's quite simple. It's a matter of living, being, co-creating, co-constructing. I want to maintain my links with others in a relationship of mutual balance. To me, equity is not the same thing as equality. What I want to explore in the exchange of our beauties is how far the other is ready to go in this sharing. I open the door, I wait for the other to open theirs and to know how far they are ready to go with me, and then with a third and a fourth person. This exchange contains all the unifying elements that will bring out the points of convergence necessary for each one to recognize themselves and recognize the other in order to ESTABLISH THE MEANING OF THE COLLECTIVE.

Once the meaning of the collective has been established, this awakens new states of consciousness in me, making me again question my ways of living, interacting and speaking, so that I never take for granted the end result or the process of culmination. Maintaining appropriate relationships with others enables me to remain consistent with myself and to situate myself in relation to the motivations of the collective in order to bring about social change, improve living conditions and help us open our minds to difference.

For a project to work, it takes more than abilities. In the project *Et si j'y étais... Histoire de se connaître et de se reconnaître un peu*, Christine Brault brought her deep being, and it is thanks to what we are, she and I, that we achieved this result with the participants.



## Azinatya Caron-Paquin



*I like taking part in artistic activities that have a real impact on communities. And my work in photography and painting is very much based on human situations typical of city life. Currently, I'm trying to connect these interests with the practice of law in order to be able to change certain situations through both law and art.*

— Azinatya Caron-Paquin

Cathrine, Annie Gauvin's daughter, is my friend, and she's the one who invited me to take part in the project *Et si j'y étais... Histoire de se connaître et de se reconnaître un peu* with Oxy-jeunes in 2001, even before Engrenage Noir / LEVIER got involved. It was a pretty unusual and interesting project, so I agreed.

By the time I arrived, the project was under way; the second part had already begun. I remember the first day; we developed photographs. At that time, there was more interaction with people. We went and spoke directly with them; we went to all the parks in the Centre-South neighbourhood of Montréal and asked people what the parks meant to them, whether they went there often, etc. For the first time, I saw people who slept in the park at night, and syringes, and the darker aspects of Montréal. It made me realize that life is not as easy as it seems. That was one of my first disillusionments and it made me mature a bit, because I had been unaware. Now I often see situations like those, and I try to do

something. Without being very active, I'm still sensitive to the social problems in Montréal, even though I can't always sort out the causes and effects.

Basically, I think, at the beginning of the project, I didn't really like it, I didn't feel comfortable. That's strange, because now I realize that what interests me is finding solutions to this kind of problems. At that time I was uncomfortable, because it was strange to me, different from the things around me. As I recall, since I was unsure of myself, I stayed close to my friend Cathrine.

Later, we continued our research in the parks and we decided to ask people absurd questions: Why is the snow white? Where do we go after death? Where does light come from? Where does life come from? Why is the ocean different colours? Do you believe in extraterrestrials? It's really interesting when I look at the answers people gave us. I described the people in my notebook and then wrote down their answers. For example, a woman with curly hair and a hat and a dog, gave these answers: "I can't explain it to you because the answer is scientific." "Nowhere and somewhere." "The sun." "We'll never know." "The ocean floor and the sky." "Yes." It's surprising, half of the people we talked to believed in extraterrestrials! Someone said in answer to the question about where light comes from, that it comes from the sun or from a bulb. A man from France who was wearing a leather jacket and walking his dog answered the question about the snow by saying "The sky is blue and the forest is green."

We wanted to start philosophical conversations and discuss new things with strangers, to hear views we hadn't necessarily thought of before. I think we would have liked to have more; to meet more people and to have a deeper dialogue. Often the people we talked to were on the way from point A to point B; they hadn't come to the park to talk to us. Probably the place, the lack of time on the part of the people we approached, and the relatively few times we tried this, limited the possibility of taking things further. The fact that we were young perhaps gave us less credibility, although we were very excited about the philosophical questions and intellectual debates.

The project ended in 2002 with a vernissage in the park where we had done most of our research. We set up in a gazebo and hung photos and texts on clotheslines. There was a waterfall in the park. As I recall, we placed elements of the exhibition to mark the way as people would walk through the park.

After that project, there were theatre classes, but I didn't go to them as often. Later, Oxy-jeunes moved and the second part of the project started, but it was less accessible then and I didn't take part.

I recently finished my first year in studio arts at Concordia University, but I really went there because I wanted to defend human rights by using the arts, by being creative. And then I realized that the best way to do that was to first have training in law, and then to add the arts. I want to do a bachelor's in law, ideally specializing in international law. I see a connection with the community art project. In fact, *Et si j'y étais...* was decisive, because it made me realize just how much has to be changed. That's precisely what motivates me: reducing the inequalities in the world. It seems to me that's what needs to be done, and I'm going to try to do my part.



## Christine Brault



*A citizen of the world, I'm fascinated, challenged, activated by the Other. Whether from here or elsewhere, humans are an inexhaustible source of discovery for me, which I try to deal with through simple gestures, seeking a common language and points of connection.*  
— Christine Brault

# Vivreensemble

The essence of this project still resonates in my artistic practice and in the co-creation projects I've carried out in recent years in community art and other contexts, here and elsewhere.

In 2001, I did a first project as part of an artists' residency with a group of young people from Oxy-jeunes, in collaboration with the DARE-DARE artists' centre. Following that experience, Annie Gauvin and I wanted to take things further. We felt it was important for the young people and for us to continue this type of project. These projects were really validating, both for the adolescents and for me. They realized that the actions we took could change the opinions some adults had about them.

First of all, it seemed essential for me to improve my self-esteem. This is still a huge challenge for me on a daily basis. I believe that being together, creating and taking action together in this project definitely enriched my practice, but above all, it validated me as a person, as a human being. People often say that art has no useful purpose. To me, on the contrary, since I was very young, art has been a way to express myself, to communicate what I feel. I do it anonymously and because I spontaneously want to reach out to others.

It has become important to me to say things other than through words alone. I control my shyness without repressing it, but rather by discreetly transforming it, because I'm not an outgoing person. So I try to draw on a certain inner intensity related to my desire to say things, to speak up. It's not just a matter of raising my hand and reaching out to other people, but of taking concrete action to show that I exist.

With *Et si j'y étais... Histoire de se connaître, de se reconnaître un peu*, it was the first time I worked with a group in a community art context. Collaborating, sharing our knowledge and experimenting with the mix of identities in spite of our differences in age, levels of education and backgrounds gave me a lot of strength to carry out this kind of public intervention.

I don't think I related to the young people as an authority figure. I don't really like being in a position of authority. At the beginning, I was the one who initiated things, and then it became more of a co-creation project. There was a real sense of camaraderie among us, even though I was the one leading the project. I needed to get involved with young people before getting involved with adults in order to get in touch with the adolescent in me and to love that adolescent. I had wanted to erase that period of my life, which I'd hated for a long time. This co-creation with the young people enabled me to make peace with myself. Following this unifying

experience, I quite simply got rid of my Mother Teresa tendencies! A memorable, meaningful action carried out in a chosen place or targeting a specific person may seem insignificant or banal, but it can evoke a time or an event that was important to you and others. It can create sparks! When people meet, the simple gesture of holding out your hand leads to opening up, and then to exchange, the sharing of looks that often say much more than a whole lot of useless words. I don't think you have to do big things to have an effect. All it requires is taking a few steps hand-in-hand, feeling the warmth of the other person without saying a word. Connecting with people's potential from within.

When I was little, I could amuse myself with almost nothing. I would play with the cracks in the sidewalk. One day — I must have been two or three — by constantly moving as I played, I ended up on the sidewalk of a major boulevard. I've always had a great need to explore, to feel free and to see myself in other people and in the places where I'm at home. I can put down roots almost anywhere. Perhaps I'm reaching a state of well-being that lets me feel good almost anywhere? I think that has been my quest.

My actions reveal a natural modesty and I'm empathetic in my way of practising my art. It has now become essential for me, in my interventions, to offer something when people are participating in a work that's being created. To me, the principle of *quid pro quo* is an integral part of all human interaction.

During the training sessions and thematic meetings organized by Engrenage Noir / LEVIER, when I found myself with people who were really interested in the practice of community art, I had the impression that I was part of a family, and this was with people I hadn't known at all. I found these encounters enormously enriching, and they continue to nourish my collective projects and inspire me in all the spheres of my work. They've contributed greatly to what I have become over the last few years.

I fine-tuned a coherent, personalized "scale of intervention" with minimum content, based on simplicity and the authenticity of the moment, and related to awareness of the ephemeral. I aspire to transform the pertinence of our gestures, words and actions and our ability to recognize this pertinence as a creative force that all of us possess, and I do that precisely by responding to a certain urgency of intimacy that's sometimes more crucial than other kinds of urgency that are often more apparent. What's important in these experiences of spontaneous co-creation is not so much the number of people who will be affected, but rather the scope of the experiences, which will last for a long time, long after the real contact that was established.



# On mijote ensemble [We're cooking together]

Montréal

Preparation: January  
— April 2003

Duration:  
October 2003 —  
October 2004

Regroupement des  
cuisines collectives du  
Grand Plateau [Coalition  
of collective kitchens of  
the greater Plateau area]  
(RCCGP)

Audely Duarte  
Véronique Lebel-Bilodeau

## Facilitating Artists

John Mingolla<sup>1</sup>  
Mei-Kuei Feu

## Other Artists and Project Members

Catherine St-Amand  
Claude Duchesne  
Dean Nellis alias Mélodie  
Doris Allard  
Francine Lafrenière  
Francine Roy  
Ginette Malo  
Guy Dubé  
Jacques Trépanier  
Jacynthe Landry  
Jean-Philippe Gourdon  
Julie Gagnon  
Lyne Bergeron  
Lyne Frappier  
Marie-Claire Larocque  
Myriam Fradette  
Nathalie Pinsonnault  
Nicole Thériault  
Pauline Johnson  
Pierre Laliberté  
René Laviolette  
Robert Forest  
Roselyne Gratton  
Suzanne Marcil  
Valérie Massing  
Yvette Riga

*A community organization asked for two artists to produce a video with its members, highlighting the values of solidarity and autonomy involved in the action of low-income people cooking collectively to meet their needs*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

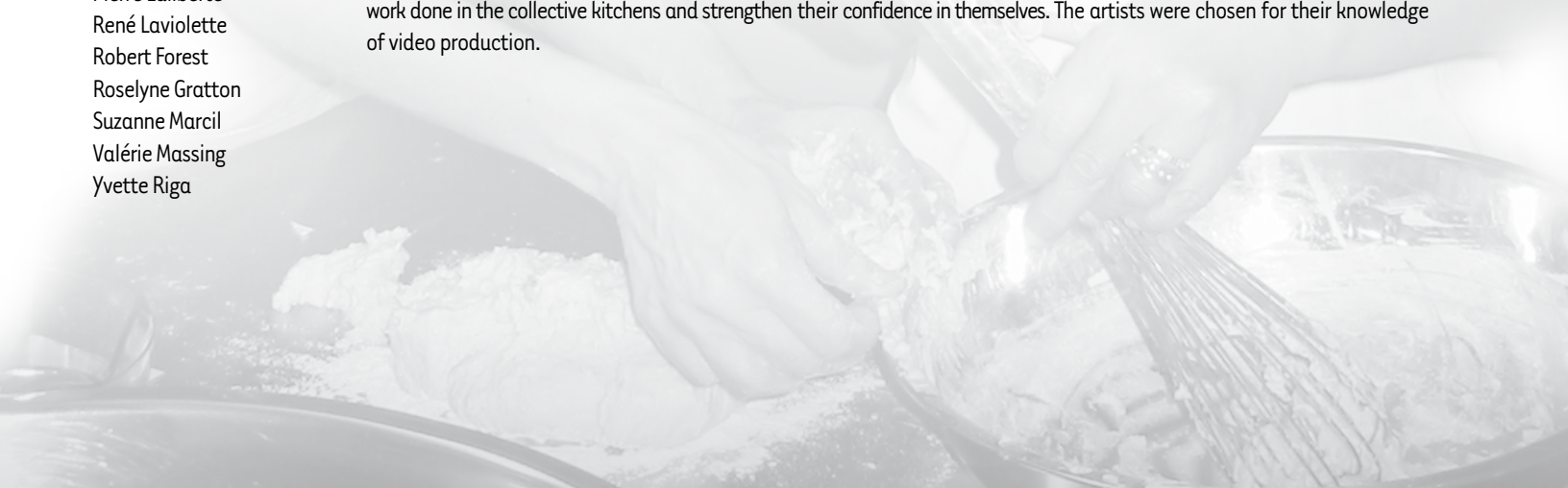
- What are the advantages and disadvantages for all the project members involved in a creative collaboration if it is commissioned directly by the administration of a community organization?
- How should the difficulties in the collaborative process be described at the end of a project when the project members are satisfied with the result? Are the difficulties that were encountered along the way perceived differently if the project is seen as a success?

The Regroupement des cuisines collectives du Grand Plateau (RCCGP)<sup>2</sup> was founded in 1991 as a response to the problem of poverty and hunger, following consultation among various community groups in the Plateau Mont-Royal neighbourhood. The organization works to initiate and support educational activities involving cooking, in particular, collective kitchens. Once a month, each group — the RCCGP represents about ten groups, for a total of sixty people — forms a team of four to six people and chooses a nutritious, economical and tasty menu that they cook as a group. The members of the team discover new dishes as well as different techniques and resources, and they take home varied and nutritious meals. The coalition also organizes workshops on healthy eating, theme dinners where people discover different cultures through their food, and cooking workshops for children and teenagers. These activities combine saving time and money with pleasure.

In addition to providing a response to the economic problem of hunger, the act of cooking together helps these people take charge of their lives by encouraging autonomy in a sharing atmosphere. Conceived by and for the members of RCCGP, who are low-income people living in or near the greater Plateau area, the collective kitchens are a way to counter isolation and promote social recognition through mutual aid activities, while meeting a pressing need.

This project was marked in two particular ways. First, the participants did not know each other before the beginning of the project. The two artists and the two community workers from the RCCGP met for the first time at LEVIER's *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*<sup>3</sup> and in the four days of training developed enough affinities to want to work together. The two artists had little or no experience in community art. Because of this particular situation, but also because they showed a serious desire to work together, three-month preparatory funding was granted to give the parties time to get to know each other better, identify their shared needs and develop a collaborative project. Those four collaborators coming from two different cultures — community and artistic — shared nevertheless some motivations. Since the artists were not at all familiar with the RCCGP, they first took part in the regular activities of the collective kitchens — they "chopped vegetables"<sup>4</sup> during a few meetings — in order to forge links with the project members, to better grasp the issues of the community and to become more familiar with the specific needs of the RCCGP.

The other distinctive feature of this project was that the organization had already established precisely the result it wanted: from the start, there was a wish to create a video that would promote the values associated with collective kitchens. The video was also intended to debunk certain prejudices about the organization, which is located in a neighbourhood undergoing rapid gentrification; one that seeks to construct and maintain an image of wealth. This image distorts the reality and can lead to people questioning the pertinence of an aid organization such as RCCGP in the neighbourhood. The goal for the members was to show the value of the work done in the collective kitchens and strengthen their confidence in themselves. The artists were chosen for their knowledge of video production.



This, then, was not a case of a project emerging directly out of the needs and desires of the members. On the other hand, the presence of artists who, like the organization's community workers were, "trained" in what a community art approach involves, had the effect of getting everyone to take part in the decision making and production, and stimulated creativity throughout the process.

The project was not without difficulties, however. The decision to make a collective video had been made by the administration of the organization, not by the members, who were therefore not very motivated in the beginning. With all the cooking workshops, it was not always easy to get the members to participate actively in the production of the video, as opposed to just being interviewed on camera and having what they said integrated into the final documentary.

The critical framework that was provided by LEVIER made the difference at this stage, which shows the importance of providing such continued support for community art projects. There were often conflicts and tensions during the project, which could have led to failure. The members' desire to work together to resolve the conflicts and learn to communicate better should, however, be stressed. In the end, this was an enriching human experience for everyone.

After the successful completion of the three-month period of preparation which allowed all the members to appropriate the project as their own, a one-year grant was allocated for carrying it out. The project was "officially" launched with a creative workshop on making bread (a symbol of sharing and solidarity) and exploration through drawing. This event was decisive for the rest of the collaborative process; it helped develop the solidarity that the group needed.

As in any collaborative project, the members were involved in the decisions on content and aesthetics in addition to appearing in the documentary. A video camera was purchased so that every body could have access to equipment; the camera subsequently remained the property of the RCCGP.

The launch of the video was a celebration and everyone forgot the difficulties encountered along the way. Many of the members said they were satisfied with the experience, and that it had had a personal impact on them. They took part in everything, even in the conflict resolution; if they had not, the degree of authenticity in the video would have likely been greatly diminished. Members felt accepted and thus were able to get more out of the project. The two artists also learned a lot from their experience. And the organization obtained what it wanted: a document that was useful to the community and that empowered its members. The video is still being screened and used as a tool for consciousness-raising on the importance of developing a collective strategy for fighting poverty.

#### NOTES

1. John collaborated on the graphic design of the book *Tenir parole !* published by the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec. See the mention of this book in Vivian Labrie's text *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty — A Degree of Freedom*, pp. 293 and 295.
2. In 2003, at the time of the *On mijote ensemble* project, the organization was called the Regroupement des cuisines collectives du Grand Plateau; in 2007, the name was changed to Cuisines collectives du Grand Plateau.
3. See the program schedule, pp. 32–36, and the text by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86, in which she compares this program with the one held in 2004.
4. "Go chop some vegetables" became a catchphrase used at LEVIER to express the importance of participating in the activities of an organization before considering developing a community art project.



Images taken from the video *On mijote ensemble*.



During the "official" launching of the project.



## Audely Duarte

*d'inspiration*

*I have always been concerned with justice and equity for disadvantaged people, and have worked for their welfare and social integration. I have broad experience ranging from the helping relationship to the organization and running of social programs to the administration of non-profit groups.*  
— Audely Duarte

From the start, I found the project really motivating. I sensed a lot of interest and a feeling of cooperation between the artists, Véronique and me.

One of the first difficulties was recruiting members of the collective kitchen to work on the video. People were afraid of the artistic aspect: "I'm not an artist. What can I contribute?" The challenge was also to get to know each other as artists and as members of a community group, since we come from two different cultures and that was reflected in our ways of working, especially because we have quite different perceptions.

For example, as coordinator of the Cuisines collectives du Grand Plateau for 12 years, I needed, at that time in 2003, to look out for the image of the organization, and sometimes the artistic suggestions demanded adaptation on both sides. I knew the organization and the community very well, and also how we had to present the content for the general public and the funding bodies. I also had to limit participation in the video project to members of the organization and those who knew it best. We couldn't ask the whole community in the Plateau area to take part in collectively making this creative documentary.

Personally, I expected the project to be finished much more quickly. It took us quite a long time, because it wasn't always easy to work in teams, with the diversity of mother tongues, personalities, work rhythms and the expectations of the different groups. While the project was being organized, I was getting to know the two artists and understand their ways of thinking and what they were experiencing. I was trying to put myself in their shoes. It was a great experience!

I found working with people from the art world really enriching. Despite the tensions, there was a lot of enthusiasm. Our discussions showed me new ways of dealing with conflict. The language differences weren't an obstacle — far from it; they were a real source of inspiration! The project was especially motivating because all the participants gave a hundred percent of



themselves. Doing it was the first step toward building a heritage. The story will endure over time because although I'll leave the organization, people will keep on being informed of what we've done and how the collective kitchens developed. We had a sense of being part of the history of an organization that is fighting, and will keep on fighting, poverty.

The video is really dynamic and it will be very helpful in promoting the organization. Since it was made, we've been presenting it at information evenings. We notice that if people are still hesitant about getting involved in the collective kitchens, they are more ready to do so after seeing it. And a social work teacher at Cégep Marie-Victorin uses it in her classes. The video is distributed by the Groupe Intervention Vidéo, who has already shown it at the Maison de la culture Plateau Mont-Royal in 2006. But people from the funding bodies tell us they haven't had time to watch it. We've found that print promotional materials (catalogues and leaflets) are much more effective with them.

It would be interesting to keep up the connection with Engrenage Noir / LEVIER. We could do something else, because working with them was so motivating. We haven't told them of our interest yet because we have a lot of work and we're limited in terms of funds and human resources. To be continued...

*Le fait de travailler avec des gens du milieu artistique m'a vraiment enrichi. Les différences de langage n'étaient pas un obstacle, tout au contraire, elles ont été une réelle source d'inspiration!*

Photos of the interviewees: Devora Neumark (unless otherwise mentioned).

## Dean Nellis alias Mélodie



*My activities as a participant and volunteer in the Association des Transsexuels et transsexuelles du Québec and the Cuisines collectives du Grand Plateau have given me the opportunity to create a space for myself, to discuss, to change, to learn and to shape myself.*  
— Dean Nellis  
alias Mélodie

Ma  
profondeur  
est ma  
réalité



Before beginning this project, I was a member of the Board of Directors of the Cuisines collectives du Grand Plateau and I joined the organization's committee for the collective and corporate video project. I've been trying for a long time to remember, as precisely as possible, how it all began.

What was important was the training in conflict resolution and non-violent communication (NVC) given by Engrenage Noir / LEVIER. I even went over Marshall Rosenberg's list of needs to write my bio today. Using that list gives meaning to my feelings and that's something I was missing, whatever the feelings, even the worst ones. I can now name those feelings and identify the needs behind them. From there, I can change from one time to the next; I can change situations that at first appear to be beyond me, but that, once I'm involved in them, start to affect me from the inside.

For example, with the *On mijote ensemble* project, I got involved when there was already a conflict, as if that's what attracted me. Then, gradually, I undertook to resolve the conflict. In hindsight, I realize that this disagreement gave me my first opportunity to apply the NVC approach. Since then, I've continued taking training and involving people in the process. And they've become my best friends...

I've observed that conflicts external to me can be triggers that help me become aware of and settle my own conflicts. The conflict I experienced in the *On mijote ensemble* project really confirmed to me that I was attracted to external conflicts because I wasn't necessarily resolving my own. It also taught me not to develop this pointless dependence on tensions. Before, when I got into disagreements, I could come out a winner or a loser, even morally. Now, when I get involved in conflict situations, I have a better sense of my skills and my ways of intervening.

My participation in the collective video project showed me that my perception of a conflict or a problem was accurate and that I already had in me the capacity to grasp the specific issue in the conflict and find a way to articulate it. I think I managed to have everyone express their desire as an individual and a group so that we could agree on the basic objectives of the collective.

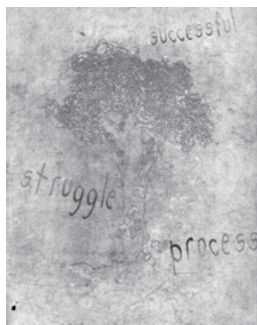
These exchanges helped me develop a critical sense of the issue in the disagreement. Also, I believe my presence created a positive dynamic in the group. My stance and my attitude clearly expressed my desire to see this collective project work. This way of being and doing gives me the motivation needed to continue, because the better I am at dealing with my inner paradoxes, the greater my impact becomes in interactions with others. Now, when I start to be affected by other people's reactions, when I feel disoriented and discouraged, I go back to the conflict resolution and NVC principles I first had a chance to practise in the *On mijote ensemble* project and I change how I feel.

Yesterday I saw my mother again, two months after coming out to her as a transsexual. I knew how I would feel before going into her house and that this subject would finally come up again. So before I met her, I sat down and made a list of my feelings. I was nervous, anxious, worried and afraid; I was experiencing a whole lot of emotions related to fear. I took my list and underlined the ones that were strongest, the ones that would best allow me to express myself concretely, the ones that would change most quickly within me. I also underlined the needs that gave rise to that fear. I asked myself this question: "What am I expecting from my mother?" In this way, I was able to focus on certain needs and eliminate others. The need for acceptance was there, as well for openness and empathy. When I thought about it, I realized that the openness I sought was something I had to first give to myself before I could change my feelings.

My mother expresses transphobia, so at times I don't feel right living my transsexuality. My mother unconsciously becomes a mirror that projects back my own transphobia. But since I had already identified my needs before seeing her, when she told me she would never accept my choosing to be a transsexual, I replied that I would do everything I could to accept her disapproval. From there, it's up to me to fulfill my own needs in order to live my transsexuality. In changing my reaction, I was very far from the dependence on conflicts that I had observed in the *On mijote ensemble* project. I realize that the depth of my being is my reality.



## John Mingolla



*I was born, raised and educated in Montreal. I believe all authentic creative action comes from the same place regardless of the medium or technique. That place can be found in our soul where the child in us lives. Great technical skill and talent dies quickly if the spirit (child) is not there.*  
— John Mingolla

It's all about networking: I began with an interest in community art. I wanted to become part of a group after many years of experience as a lonely artist working in the studio. Painting is more often than not a solitary medium and when I began branching out to film, which is mostly participatory, I found myself searching for other connections. And although I had only just begun this exploration, the workshops during the first training and exchange program of LEVIER led me to encounter the artist Mei-Kuei Feu and also Audely Duarte from the Regroupement des cuisines collectives du Grand Plateau (RCCGP). The conversations I struck up during the four-day intensive program responded to three of my then most-pressing interests: furthering my film work, engaging with pressing social issues, and finding interesting employment. I was able to work with Mei-Kuei and the members of the RCCGP on the film about their community work (which we collectively titled *On mijote ensemble*) while learning a lot about poverty and social exclusion. Guy Giard, whom I met at Concordia University in the late seventies was also present during the two weekends — he suggested I apply to the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal in the education department where he worked. I had the interview for the job and have been working as a museum educator there ever since.

It was quite the experiment to work as an artist in a collaborative duo especially given the differences in age between Mei-Kuei and myself (she being younger than me) and our cultural/life experiences. These differences provided a fertile breeding ground for friction. Elements that supported me in the passage through the tensions that arose include the fact that we had a common goal, that there was financial support, and that we shared a willingness to be flexible.

I think that artists protect themselves with the shield of ego and with age become themselves more and more, allowing a growth in confidence and acceptance of oneself and others. For me it is hard to separate the interpersonal conflict from the creative friction that is part of the creative process. It's a struggle to create whether you are alone or with a group — it is not always successful. Failure is a frequent part of the process.

In addition to the challenge of collaborating with another artist, there was the challenge of working with the members of the centre. When working in a group, whether in a film or something else, there always has to be compromise. There are changes that need to be made: the choices have to be taken democratically. We would often sit around the table and come to mutual agreements, sometimes through a voting process and sometimes through a consensus, but only when the consensus was obvious.

Audely Duarte and the other members of the RCCGP identified a clear creative goal from the outset: They wanted a video to promote their centre and highlight various issues of importance to them. Working within these parameters, Mei-Kuei and I would propose ideas and work them through with input from the membership, or at least from the core group of eight or nine people that was formed.

The project reaffirmed the need for changes in the community to lessen poverty and to get people involved and less isolated in their own homes. What compelled me to participate in the initial LEVIER sessions — breaking the isolation of my studio practice — is also what was so successful with the group. My own personal needs and “success” is also the “success” within the sociopolitical realm as far as identifying this within the terms of community participation. A lot of the benefits that were derived (for me and the participants) are not so tangible, yet the benefits are noticeable in our minds and our attitudes, and that after all is where change begins. Change first comes with the realizations that we have conveniently adapted to our misfortune and that we need to invite change. Then we can search for ways to shift our attitudes and bring new activities into our lives. These two processes influence each other and from there other things can follow.

I'm really pleased with my participation in this project. It made me feel important. It made me feel like I belonged. I felt like I was making a contribution and doing something pertinent. It is not easy to change things in our society: sometimes the efforts seem very futile. I see this project as a total success. We accomplished what we set out to do despite the obstacles, including personal conflicts and language differences. And working towards the common goal transformed the obstacles that are often present when working within a group so that they didn't become barriers. In the process of adaptation to suffering, it's easy, I find, to lose the sense of personal and social ideals that are beneficial to coexistence. Working through the conflict made it possible to reconnect with those ideals and feel a sense of self-worth.

The collaboration (which is something I didn't experience prior to this project) marked me for life in a good way. It made me more flexible and more understanding. It influenced me to continue being socially engaged and to have the feeling that I am not just taking. Giving back is a great feeling. The whole process led me to become part of the society — as someone involved, not just a bystander. This is a sharing that goes beyond just taking or just giving: It is a social attitude, not one linked to Capitalism.

Sometimes I think I would like to work again in a community collaborative setting but I don't know what would be next. I don't know at this point. Part of me is pulling me towards community and part of me wants to do everything on my own and gain recognition for what I do instead of what the group accomplishes.



Photo: Michel Dubreuil.

## Marie-Claire Larocque



*I'm a woman who's involved in mutual aid and social action. I would like to live in a more equitable society, and that's why I'm involved in community organizations.*

*As an artist, I strive to provide moments of happiness through colours, textures and stories that inspire people to voyage in their imagination.*

— Marie-Claire Larocque

My involvement in the community goes back to when I was 20 or younger. It's almost visceral for me, being with people who, like me, have a need to share and form groups. This ethical approach based on giving and receiving has helped me to have a healthier, more serene life. My participation in the Cuisines collectives du Grand Plateau for seven years and my involvement in the production of the video *On mijote ensemble* were very energizing for me and gave a big boost to my self-esteem, and the same is probably true for the others.

My interest in the community is inborn and my working with this group was essential to me. To me, community involvement can be summed in three verbs: give, learn and receive. When I get involved, it means growing psychologically and discovering that when people work hand-in-hand, anything is possible.

I'm curious by nature and I like to experiment, so I wanted to take part in the video project. The energy and the discussion among the participants showed their commitment and their closeness. I really enjoyed being part of a group and I discovered some beautiful souls. When we made the video, I had a small part playing a resource person who expressed her view of community involvement. I had to talk about the principle of the collective kitchen. With the directors and the other participants, I was happy we chose to emphasize the cultural diversity of the members of the organization by showing community meals, festivals, music and the sharing of individual experiences.

Dividing up the tasks was one of my challenges, since I tend to really want my ideas to be accepted and to do everything myself and control other people. At that time, I had a very big ego, and to try to balance my relationships with others, I talked to myself constantly. I made an effort to trust the other participants and to encourage their creativity rather than curbing it, as I had tended to do before.

These group meetings enabled me to observe the defence mechanisms I had developed in childhood and helped me make progress on the person I was and was becoming. In other words, I discovered my true nature. This awareness also opened up the way to greater humility. I had to adopt a code of conduct: live and let live.

By being in a group with other people, I learnt that even with little means, life can be pleasant and it's possible to do great things. Having already become aware of recycling as part of my process of artistic creation and through my experience with the community garden, I continued with the social and political concept of voluntary simplicity. One of its aims is to reduce consumption and encourage a lifestyle based on recycling, which I'm all in favour of.

My experience with the Cuisines collectives du Grand Plateau led me to continue my involvement in Ferme-Neuve, a village with a population of about 3500 in the Upper Laurentians about 250 kilometres from Montreal, where I recently went to live. I fell in love with this village because it fits in with my idea of mutual aid.

As an active woman who believes in social involvement, I love the people of this little village, who work hand-in-hand to organize collective events. When I arrived, the community kitchen was already functioning. I wanted to repeat my experience with a new group, and I realized that I had grown in my relationships with people. The organizations in the village offered me opportunities to continue my artistic practice as a painter. I'm becoming integrated into village events in my own way, taking part in making floats for parades, doing paintings for the artisans' bingo in the region and other activities. So I can continue to live my values and goals of social involvement even more deeply.

Get involved in the community one day and you're in it forever!





## Mei-Kuei Feu

在社會學中，意識：)  
會作為一項對抗貧窮的工具。

*Born into a modest family in Taiwan, I grew like a wildflower. I'm attracted to the revolutionary spirit of contemporary art. Through the eye of the camera, I'm pursuing a quest for reciprocity inspired by everyday encounters.*  
— Mei-Kuei Feu

Before starting the project *On mijote ensemble*, I approached a Taiwanese community charitable group, the Tzu Chi Foundation, and worked there. The group, which was founded by Buddhists, works on questions related to poverty, medical resources, education and culture throughout the world, including Montréal. As part of my activities with them, I did some volunteer work as a video educator documenting events they organized, such as a fundraising campaign for victims of the tsunami in southern Indonesia. At that time it was easier for me to approach a Chinese group than an anglophone or francophone group. At around the same time, I got to know Engrenage Noir / LEVIER through the first training and exchange program, in 2002.

I use my skills to integrate into these groups and work with them, for example, in the *On mijote ensemble* project with the Cuisines collectives du Grand Plateau, a non-profit organization. Various factors helped to improve communication among the four initiators of the project. We first met during the training. Audely, Véronique, John and I took three months to get to know each other and develop the project. We not only learned to work together, to dialogue and to make decisions together, but we also did concrete work. John and I did some cooking and we took part in discussions with members of the organization throughout the project.

At the beginning of those three months of creative and festive interpersonal exploration, we announced the project and organized activities to inform people of the coordinators' plan to make a video on the collective kitchen, a video that would be both imaginative and promotional. In a second stage, after a break during the Christmas holidays, we needed the members to become concretely involved in making the video. As often happens in this type of group, members come and go, so we had to recruit some new members along the way.

We planned the content of the video with Audely, Véronique and the most active members of the group, holding meetings to set out guidelines. We felt it was important to give the members the opportunity not only to discuss it but also to participate in the film crew. So I gave a course on video, which enabled some of the members to take part in the shooting, to make suggestions for filming or to be involved in other ways. Language can be a major



issue in working together on a community art project. I prefer projects that allow me to develop long-term relationships, even though it's not always easy.

Despite the difficulties we had, I'm glad I did this project with new people, because I learned to work with people. It was not easy to persuade some of the members to act or attend meetings or suggest usable sequences — to create a framework so that everyone could move forward at the same rate through the different stages of the project.

The collective video project broadened my vision and taught me how these communities live and how they are fighting poverty. I saw that every organization has its own strategies and its own difficulties, depending on the context. I now have a better understanding of poverty in Québec and in my own neighbourhood.

Training and working together are essential, because I've experienced the difference that exists between just working as a volunteer and consciously using art as a tool in the fight against poverty. My consciousness as an artist and a volunteer has been raised. In fact, this experience really affirmed my role as an activist artist in the fight against poverty. Engrenage Noir / LEVIER played a role as guide and coach, helping us learn to work together more effectively.

After the project, I withdrew from work with the community. I felt a need to work on myself, to go back to my individual artistic process, to read and think. That less socially active period allowed me to integrate my whole experience in community art.

Right now, I'm finding it hard to transpose the non-hierarchical ways of doing things I learned in the training and in my experience with the collective kitchen, because other groups work differently. However, in the volunteer work I do with the Tzu Chi Foundation, I've observed that the foundation has improved the way it shares knowledge with volunteers so as to create real continuity in their interventions with regard to poverty.

## Véronique Lebel Bilodeau

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*As a citizen of the world, I feel that my individual responsibilities are closely linked to our collective well-being. The values of sharing, listening, respect and valuing the Other are important in my life and in my support work for organizations involved in the social economy and solidarity with Africa. My social activism means giving my son the best.*  
— Véronique Lebel Bilodeau

That experience is far away and close at the same time. Going back to when I worked for the Cuisines collectives du Grand Plateau, I remember I only worked there a year, the year of the video project. I feel privileged; it's the best thing I got out of the time I was with the group. The project connected with two parts of me, my artistic side and my anthropological side. I would like to develop my artistic side, but I really haven't had much opportunity, because my priorities are elsewhere and also because I simply let myself be led by life.

I was trained in anthropology, and that's the perspective I see things from — social processes, human relationships and how we talk about ourselves. What particularly interested me in this project was that it involved the participants in the Cuisines collectives du Grand Plateau and asked them to recount their experience of cooking to the group. Making the video led us to ask ourselves who we were and what images of ourselves we wanted to project. A group is a microcosm of society. Ours brought together people from different backgrounds who had common values and who gathered around a dish to share the smells and tastes and the pleasure of eating well.

I also found it interesting working with artists, because they have a different view of reality in the way they combine colours, shapes and objects in the environment. I remember working on the editing with Mei-Kuei Feu. What fascinated me was the choice of one image rather than another and the arrangement of the images in a sequence, which determined the message we conveyed. And it was interesting discussing the work done in the editing and hearing each person's comments and reflections. All these questions involving the images, the sound and the sequence of shots were important moments.

I'll always remember the time we made bread. Those are the images that come to me when I think about the project. The movements of kneading and the choice of the shape of the loaf, it was very artistic! And finally, the visits to the subgroups to look at their creations, and the atmosphere when we were making bread together, it was all very intense! There was a lot of love and it was a very special evening. While the bread was baking, we sang songs and shared personal experiences, and then we tasted the bread we had made. Each person chose a basic recipe according to her tastes and her inspiration of the moment, and added ingredients of her choice: honey, nuts, pumpkins seeds, etc. It was a powerful experience, not only for me, but for all of us. There had always been festive times, but making bread brought a new dimension to the collective production of the video, to the group dynamics and also to my pleasure in cooking.

The positive impact that evening had on the production of the video is hard to express, but in retrospect, I think it's related to sharing: the way it was experienced and also what it meant. In terms of human relationships, the interaction between two artists who had never before worked with each other or with the people in the Cuisines collectives du Grand Plateau — who are artists too, without knowing it — was very interesting. We had to do a lot of listening to be able to understand each other, since our views of the process and outcome we wanted were different. Sometimes working together became very emotional. In complex situations where perceptions, feelings, words that were interpreted or poorly expressed were all mixed together, I had to intervene to take another reading of the situation and provide a view and an understanding that were different.

Each of us experienced it in her own way and I found that difficult, because I'm uncomfortable dealing with conflict. I don't like to see people unhappy, it makes me feel bad. What could I do to calm that feeling in me and to make people feel better? I had to analyze the situation and create a space for dialogue.

I think the training and support Engrenage Noir / LEVIER provided for this project were essential. We improved the way we communicated and learned to better understand each other in what we were experiencing as individuals and as a group. From an anthropological point of view, the process is as important as the result, sometimes more important. All the challenges and successes contributed to making us all very proud of the result.





# Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors [Open your treasure chest]

January 2003 —  
June 2005

*A diversity of artistic expressions associated with an organization at the service of people living in poverty*

(Names followed by an \* identify project members who also co-created the documentary *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors*, as part of the video compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.<sup>2</sup>)

Le CARRÉ (Le Comptoir Alimentaire de Rencontres, de Références et d'Entraide [A centre for food, encounters, references and mutual help])  
André Galarneau<sup>3</sup>  
Louise Laliberté (beginning in January 2004)

*Facilitating Artist*  
Johanne Chagnon<sup>4\*</sup>

*Other Artists and Project Members*

Alexandre Gotsidzé  
Annie Girard  
Chantal Rail  
Claire Gravel  
Diane Jean  
François Perrin  
Louise Martin\*  
Maryse Conti\*  
Micheline Lebel  
Nicole Saint-Amour\*  
Valmont Brousseau

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- Within a community art project whose focus is poverty, what strategies and approaches are conducive to balancing the need to address the personal challenges arising from living in poverty with the work necessary to developing an appropriate aesthetic and a critical analysis of the sociopolitical context?
- In what ways is it possible to bolster a community organization's support for artistic collaborations when the organization is experiencing serious financial instability?

For the past two decades, the community organization Le CARRÉ — located in the East-end Montréal neighbourhood of Hochelaga-Maisonneuve — has been providing services to people living in poverty. According to its mission statement, the services are available to individuals “from the moment they express the will and commitment to build their own future”<sup>5</sup> and support them as they empower themselves to no longer be poor. In addition to coaching and food aid, activities that mobilize the greatest number of people include the organization and distribution of Christmas baskets, the low cost income tax return service, and the circulation of school supplies.

I feel the human warmth, as we are all one big family. Together we see that we are all capable of exiting out of poverty. Everyone can find a way out provided they have a helping hand along the way.  
— Micheline Lebel

Before initiating the community art project with members of Le CARRÉ, Johanne Chagnon was a member of the Board of Directors and served for a time as the Board's President. The change in Johanne's implication with this organization coincided with the beginning of LEVIER's reflective and critical engagement in community art and represented Johanne's first experiential commitment to this practice.<sup>6</sup> The project *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors* [Open your treasure chest] was aimed at furthering the organization's mission by fostering greater self-awareness and autonomy. Almost all of the other members expressed that as far as they were concerned, the reason they became involved — besides from being able to share their own artistic experiences with others — was that they wanted to break out of the isolation they were living with.

For two and a half years, this project brought together more than ten people who participated with varying degrees of involvement. While no particular theme or form was determined in advance so as to leave everyone the possibility of shaping the project according to their desires, abilities and needs, the through-line of all the activities was an emphasis on personal affirmation. In keeping with the skills of the members, a host of disciplines were explored — and experimented with as a means of developing self-awareness — including painting, photography, video, theater, music, singing, masks, models, drawing, writing and painting to music. As the project developed, the degree of personal affirmation did in fact increase and the members oriented their work more and more towards theatrical production.



The first collective piece, *Plus d'armement, moins de nourriture* [More arms, less food], emerged during the period leading up to the war in Iraq. The lack of resources is a major problem in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighbourhood; the project addressed this local deficiency, but linked it to the global context. Not long after, project members took part in a Cagibi International activist event<sup>7</sup> by preparing an exhibition and performing an intervention. Next came the group's participation in the *Salon de la santé* [Health fair]; this was another activity, in which once again, there was more emphasis put on the sociopolitical cause than on the personal exploration and the expression of individual non-public experience.

*Le miroir aux préjugés* [The mirror of prejudice]<sup>8</sup> was the first of three theatrical pieces that the group ended up producing. It dealt in more direct ways than what was emphasized in the previous activities with a reality that affected the project members on a daily basis and in more direct ways. However, the actual theatre piece treated the issue of prejudice rather generally. It was due to the openness and the audacity of the group as well as its members' ability to network effectively that they got involved in theatre in the first place. Responding to an invitation from the Théâtre des petites lanternes [Theater of the little lanterns] to join them when they were about to perform locally in collaboration with participants from the Autonomie jeunes familles [Autonomy young families]<sup>9</sup> — the group decided to take the plunge! While they could have opted for an exhibition of their work, they jumped at the opportunity to create a theatrical production instead. In the end, the experience was very positive and instrumental in shaping the direction of the subsequent creative collaborations.

As was characteristic of this project throughout its duration, activities alternated between being presented in the public sphere and being shared internally amongst the Le CARRÉ members only. This alternation also implicated a switch between personal introspection and declarations of a sociopolitical nature. One of the "internal" activities involved a short video presentation of Le CARRÉ compiled from a series of interviews conducted by one of the project member with other members of the organization and the employees.

As the Director of Le CARRÉ, the days that the art activities were held on the premises were like vitamins!  
— Louise Laliberté

The project members used Le CARRÉ's storefront window for the second time as a means to play a more active role in the public life of the community. A set of photographs and texts bearing the title *Culture des richesses du quartier* [District cultural wealth] was displayed. This work, which dealt with local social challenges, first made its debut in the public art event entitled *Urbaine urbanité II* [Urban urbanity II].<sup>10</sup> As with the earlier window installation, a full-colour poster was produced using documentation from the installation and distributed to neighbourhood organizations, elected officials and media outlets.

Wanting to take advantage of the multiple ways of presenting the artwork, the next piece that was produced was a video, which was screened in the waiting room — that is; at the very threshold between inside and outside. *Les folies carrées* [The crazy squares] highlighted some funny short gestures enacted as safety release valves from the stress of life. Other sociopolitical interventions brought the members well outside the walls of the organization — one in particular had them traveling to Quebec City, where they took part in the *Parlement de la rue* [Parliament of the street] organized by the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec.<sup>11</sup>

After having experimented with a diversity of media and a host of different venues, the group was interested in going back to theatrical production. Both *L'écho des portes* [The doors' echo]<sup>12</sup> and *Les couleurs de mon arc-en-vol* [My



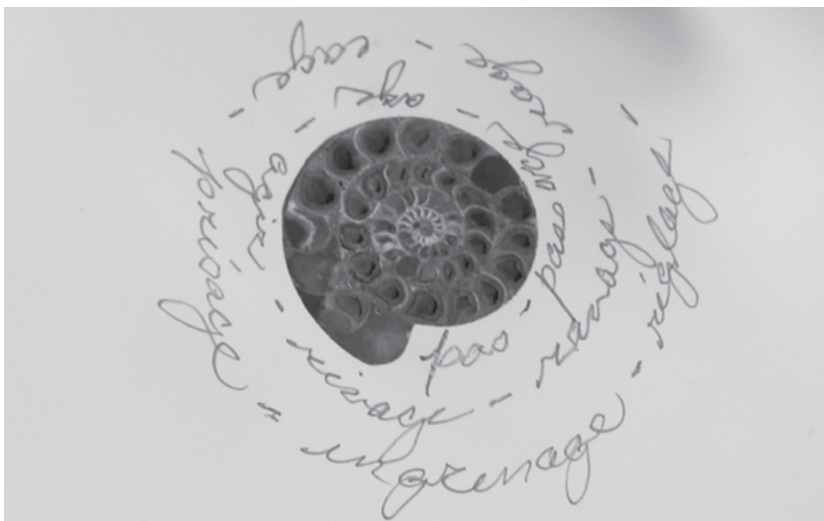




assumed one or more of the many creative tasks necessary to bring the productions to stage — including the musical compositions and song writing.

I started by just helping out. Not long after, I found myself on stage speaking and singing! For me, before, the art world was superficial and useless. My conception of art has certainly changed: now I'm not afraid anymore to dress up; I'm not afraid of looking ridiculous, or of what the rest of the world will say.

— Chantal Rail



More elaborate than the previous theatrical production, *L'écho des portes* included music and video. The "door" theme initiated a creative process through which each project member agreed to open themselves up to the others in order to become better acquainted and break the isolation they were living with. By this time, the group was ready to discuss more "private" issues and as a consequence the production was marked by a high degree of sincerity. For the majority of the individuals who took part, it was the first time they publicly named their personal problematics or intimate emotional wounds. The work developed in stages: first there was an individual exploration of what a personal "(re)-birth" could look and feel like; this was followed by an intra-group sharing before it was staged for the public-at-large.

The third theatre production, *Les couleurs de mon arc-en-vol* also included video only this time the theme was liberation

and colour was used as the principal symbolic element. The personal exploration that had begun in the previous collaborations continued, but this time, there was an emphasis on what could be described as a "flight towards the positive." The spiral shell fossil, which had been integrated as the project's emblem from the beginning, could not have been more adequate to mark the route between interior and the exterior and between self-reflection and communication.

Art is a healthy way to express oneself without doing harm to anyone and, moreover, to do good. What gets expressed opens a door to something else.

— Nicole Saint-Amour

Members in the *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors* project came to be able to discuss a wide variety of intimate details about themselves and their lives amongst each other. While not always evident in the final work, nor particularly measurable, the benefit of the trust that was developed through the personal sharing was significant to everyone involved in the project — this is an important dimension of the project and amongst its major "successes." In addition to the confidence and creative experimentation that was generated over the course of the project, on-the-spot conflict resolution practice was also greatly appreciated.

Amongst the major questions that arose during the course of the project and which contributed to a lot of learning for everyone involved, was the following: “Should the project be structured or not?” While the project began with the intention of keeping things loose, open and spontaneous in order to invite a sense of free collaboration, and also because Johanne did not want to be authoritarian, at a certain point, it became obvious that parameters had to be set in order to move forward: even the artist had to admit that such limits were not counter to the creative process. Amongst the structural elements that were put into place in the course of the project was a rather strict schedule that included time for creative exploration as well as time for dialogue and the exchange of ideas. However, despite the group’s decision to organize a calendar, not everyone in the group respected it. As it turns out, the schedule was not suitable for many of the members although they were not able to say so at the time because they were afraid of revealing too much about their personal difficulties.



Indeed, both structure and boundaries were big issues for the artist. After the first year of taking on too much, Johanne began to realize the importance of structure in the distribution of responsibility. For example, at the beginning she documented each weekly session using a combination of photography and text. Seeing how huge a task this was, she invited others to participate in the documentation; and, starting in September 2004 the process was shared amongst the different members. Not only did this lighten the load on the artist’s shoulders, the documentation process was enriched; Johanne came to understand that by having taken on too much, she was holding others back from activating their potential. As each person brought their own unique style and perspective to recording the weekly events, they were able to give expression to thoughts and feelings that they might not have otherwise.



Initially, the artist also felt destabilized as she began to understand how powerless she was to solve the world’s problems. The acceptance of how limited the potential impact of a community art project was a very important learning for her as an artist, despite the initial frustration.

In hindsight, there are some lingering questions about the complexity and ambitious nature of the final theatrical piece: although in the end the performance came off without a hitch, there were many conflicts along the way — most of

which were triggered by the demands of the production and the accompanying high levels of stress. Even though each person chose to push her or himself as hard as they did, was there some unforeseen pressure to create a “success” and correspond to some unspoken criteria of excellence? In any case, the impulse — however it is defined — was motivating enough to push all the members (including the artist) to stretch their limits in creatively daring ways. Not surprisingly then perhaps given the high degree of personal implication, some of the members subsequently began volunteering at the organization and two individuals became members of the Board of Directors.

Following Johanne’s decision to withdraw from the project after two and half years, the other project members expressed their desire to continue with the creative experiment. While such an initiative is in keeping with LEVIER’s interest in nurturing autonomy and self-organization, the conditions were unfortunately not favorable to move the idea forward: the kind of organizational framework necessary to support such a project was not available as Le CARRÉ was in the midst of coping with several personnel and financial crises. The lack of a stable Board of Directors hindered the possibility for LEVIER to contribute financially to another project with another artist, despite the ongoing interest from the project members and the desire expressed for such a continuation on the part of the (yet another) new administrator.

While working on the final collaboration — the video that was created within the context of the LEVIER-sponsored *Documenting Collaboration* project — *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors* members facilitated a couple workshops at the *Ensemble autrement!* [Together differently!] event, organized by the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec. The video *Voir son intérieur pour mieux voir dehors* [See inside in order to better live outside] (which provides an overview of the entire project) became a project in itself, taking just over nine months to produce. The members particularly welcomed making this documentary





Photo: Maryse Conti.

as a way to prolong the project, which they weren't quite ready to let go of, and also on account of the critical distance that was gained in the process without the tensions that marked the most intense creative moments. The video was an important contribution to the overall project and a very satisfying way to bring closure for everyone involved: it bears witness as much to the personal growth of the project members as to the friendships that emerged amongst some of the individuals, which continue to this day.

#### NOTES

1. See the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 67, in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, and in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122. See also the reference to these activities in the critical summaries by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 77, and *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 115, and in Bob W. White's text *The Power of Collaboration*, p. 321.
2. For more information, see the presentation of this project (and DVD) in the centre of this publication. See also the introduction to the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, pp. 100–101.
3. See his participation in *LEVIER's First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24.
4. See her participation in the humanist activist projects *Urbaine urbanité III*, pp. 241–242, *AbriBec – suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, *Carte.Compétence*, pp. 261–262, and *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265. See also Vivian Labrie's text, *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty – A Degree of Freedom*, pp. 294–295 and 297.
5. As indicated in Le CARRÉ's mission statement.
6. Although the project met the criteria for a LEVIER community art grant, the project received no financial support, as this would have been a conflict of interest given Johanne's position as co-Director of LEVIER and her role in the project as the facilitating artist. However, the members of this project did benefit from the critical framework that all the other LEVIER projects received.
7. See in the description of this collective's humanist activist project *AbriBec – suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, p. 260.
8. Presented at the Pavillon d'éducation communautaire, in connection with the theme that had been adopted by Le CARRÉ for the year (duration: 15 min).
9. See the participation of the Director of this program in *LEVIER's First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24, and the participation of members of this project in the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 34. See as well the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *And if We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 73. See also the description of the Théâtre des petites lanternes' humanist activist project *Miscellanées*, pp. 253–254.
10. See the description of this humanist activist project, pp. 241–242.
11. See Vivian Labrie's text *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty – A Degree of Freedom*, p. 295. See also the photographs of the two members taken on this occasion, p. 296 in the English version and p. 306 in the French text.
12. Presented at the Centre communautaire Hochelaga (duration: 1 h 45 min).
13. Presented at the Théâtre sans fil, in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighbourhood (duration: 2 h).

Photographic documentation: Johanne Chagnon unless otherwise mentioned.

# Manipuler avec soin [Handle with care]<sup>1</sup>

Montréal

March 2003 –  
May 2004

## Facilitating Artists

Vichama Collectif:<sup>2</sup>  
Élodie Samuel-Leduc<sup>3</sup>  
Frédéric Emond-Anctil<sup>4</sup>  
Julie Perras  
Karyne Filteau  
Mélanie Riverin<sup>5</sup>  
Miriam Heap-Lalonde<sup>6</sup>  
Olivier de Gaspé Asselin<sup>7</sup>  
Philippe Daigle  
Rachel Heap-Lalonde<sup>8</sup>  
Stève Vies  
Vincent Trottier

## Other Artists and Project Members

Organisation populaire des  
droits sociaux de la région  
de Montréal (OPDS-RM)  
[People's organization for  
social rights – Montréal  
region] – Maison Aline  
Gendron:  
André Théorêt  
Anita Pazzi  
Étienne Legault  
Ianoush Felski  
Joseph Therrien  
Khadija Benabdallah  
Lilianne Dupont  
Madeleine Martel  
Pierrette Charpentier  
Roger Boisvert

*A project born of the meeting between two collectives – one artistic and the other community-based – in which everyone together experimented with creative approaches to activism*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- How can we prepare the ground to welcome the processes of personal healing that often emerge when we are working with, and on the basis of, life experiences?
- How can we prepare for the end of a project? What are the responsibilities of each member of a creative collaboration (the administrative staff of a community organization, its members, the artists and the funding bodies) when a project is coming to an end and some members want to continue the collaboration?

The OPDS-RM is an organization that defends the (individual and collective) rights of people receiving welfare and those with low or no incomes. Its mission is to enable these individuals to improve their living conditions through understanding the causes of their impoverishment and through initiating collective actions based on those causes. The OPDS – Maison Aline Gendron, one of the two locations of the group, is run by its activist members both in terms of its operation and the setting of priorities for action.

Vichama Collectif is a socially engaged multidisciplinary art collective (music, visual arts, circus and theatre) formed as a result of an intercultural exchange with Vichama Teatro, which has been working in Villa El Salvador, Peru, since 1984. Founded in 1999, Vichama Collectif is made up of people with a desire to play an active role in changing their society through creativity. It is above all, a group that tries to establish sincere, non-hierarchical relationships by sharing everyday life together.

Some members of Vichama Collectif, whose home base was in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighbourhood when the project first began, had already worked with members of the OPDS, which was located nearby. During its 22 years of existence, the OPDS had organized many “colourful” demonstrations to publicize its demands in an accessible, appealing way. The aim of the collaboration with Vichama Collectif was to enrich the means of intervention that had already been developed by offering members new artistic approaches.

The project began with mask-creation workshops and role-playing games with masks. The opportunity to take the masked characters public first presented itself in December 2003 during a demonstration against the “re-engineering,” a term that was widely used by the Québec Liberal government in power at the time. An intervention called *Action Citron* [Lemon action] took place across from the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, in which the members, masked and carrying the message “Fed up with being squeezed like lemons,” squeezed lemons in the midst of the demonstration. This action emerged from the group’s process of taking joint control of the direction and organizational functioning of the project, and of a collective creative process that arose from the members’ need to make themselves heard in a specific and timely event.



Intervention called *Action Citron*.  
Images taken from the project’s final video-report.



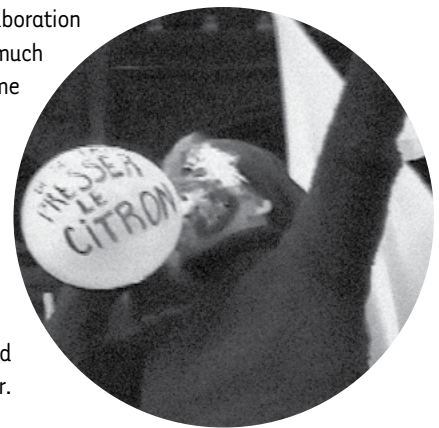
After the first months of the project, the members expressed a desire to continue exploring their masked characters while varying the workshops to include percussion, theatre and improvisation, as well as opening the workshops up to other members. They also adopted an overall theme that came out of the first phase of the project: manipulation. The second phase of the project ended with the performance of a play entitled *Manipuler avec soin* [Handle with care].

*Manipuler avec soin* was particular in that it managed to merge two very different collectives and strike a good and satisfying balance between them. For Vichama Collectif, which was still in the process of establishing its own way of working together as a group, the project brought its members to question both the collective's internal coherence and "how to work with others" — an exercise that was quite useful later on. For the OPDS, which was at the time having difficulty renewing its activist membership base, the project helped strengthen the sense of belonging within the organization by helping people discover alternative methods of communication.

Communication between the two groups was not always easy, many conflicts arose and the project suffered as a result. For example, the two collectives did not have the same attitude. The OPDS was saying, "Can we start the workshops? Things are taking too long!" while Vichama Collectif was saying, "Whoa... We're not ready yet; we need more time!" One method that was used to alter this dynamic was to hold a weekend of workshops with the OPDS in Vichama Collectif's new home in the country (where they had moved in the summer of 2003). These few days of reflection together in workshops, but especially the time taken to cook together, chat and sing around a bonfire in the evening, created a core of trust between the members of Vichama Collectif and the OPDS that led to a more solid collaboration.

One of the challenges was to reach a point where each "I" in the collaboration joined together to become a "we." As a result, the time spent talking was much greater than the time spent creating. This is how the relationship became reciprocal and the process truly collective.

In spite of a shared desire to orient the project toward activist and social objectives, the impact of *Manipuler avec soin* was felt much more by the members on the personal level. Although this had not been foreseen, the members of the project inevitably had to deal with emotional reactions experienced by several people in each of the groups. The creation of a masked character proved to be a challenging task and some people had problems with their characters — it was like looking at themselves in a mirror.



The artists' collective admitted that it was not completely prepared for these reactions.

By deciding to use theatre, it had awakened more than it expected! Thus it had no choice but to include personal healing into the process, and it was on that level that the members of Vichama Collectif learnt the most. "At certain times, you have to set limits in order for the collective process to work, but where should those limits be? What do you do when a person tells you she can't do a certain character because that character is destroying her?" Rachel Heap-Lalonde said.<sup>9</sup>

It therefore became necessary for everyone to negotiate the space between the times when personal problems could be reinvested in the creative process and the times when an individual space had to be reserved for self-care. It was not only the members from the OPDS who were forced to confront themselves because of this work; a member of Vichama Collectif had to withdraw temporarily from the process because it was too emotionally demanding.

Becoming aware of this inevitable link between personal and social healing in a context of creative activism was an emotional process from beginning to end, and it proved to be an essential dimension of this community art process.

#### NOTES

1. See also the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 70, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 75. Rachel is a member of the Vichama Collectif.
2. See the descriptions of the other humanist activist projects that this group took part in: *Mémoire de grève*, pp. 230–231, and *Caravane solidaire*, pp. 256–257.
3. See her participation in the *Caravane solidaire* humanist activist project, pp. 256–257.
4. See his participation in the *Mémoire de grève* humanist activist project, pp. 230–231.
5. See her participation in the *Mémoire de grève* humanist activist project, pp. 230–231, and in the *Caravane solidaire* humanist activist project, pp. 256–257.
6. See her participation in the *Caravane solidaire* humanist activist project, pp. 256–257.
7. See his participation in the *Mémoire de grève* humanist activist project, pp. 230–231.
8. See her participation in the *Mémoire de grève* humanist activist project, pp. 230–231, and in the *Caravane solidaire* humanist activist project, pp. 256–257. See also her texts *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86, and *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 108–120.
9. During the project presentation at the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*.

## Étienne Legault

*Resistance does not only  
arouse passions. I have  
seen oceans. I know other  
people who have too.  
I have swum in oceans.  
Others too. The water is  
salty. I know people who  
have been forced to drink  
it. When I swim, I swim.  
And at other times,  
it's indignation.  
— Étienne Legault*

## Tout à coup, les œuvres sont devenues impressionnantes!

Your invitation to take part in this interview came just at the right time. I recently met a friend who had come back from the USA with a brochure from an exhibition called the *Combat Paper Project*. I started to look at the works of art; I found them beautiful, but that's all. But when I read the brochure, I learned that they had been made from military uniforms worn by soldiers in Iraq. The uniforms had been boiled for hours and hours until they turned to pulp; and the artists and veterans had created their works from this pulp. Suddenly I found the works impressive.

While the uniforms were boiling, the soldiers talked about their experiences, especially their suffering since coming back from the war. If I understand correctly, they talked the way people talk when they're sitting around a campfire. I realized the importance of the process of individual healing from post-traumatic stress. I suddenly saw that this therapeutic experience was part of the project of engaged art. And it was precisely this dimension of healing that was the focus of my own thinking when I took part in the *Manipuler avec soin* project.

The main question was what aspects of our project would contribute concretely to social change and increase self-esteem and self-confidence. At that time, I clearly valued sociopolitical and economic effects over individual changes that could come out of a collective experience. Our wounds were more serious than I had imagined. The *Combat Paper Project* told me that, and I felt I was now more sensitive to it. Is that an effect of the *Manipuler avec soin* project? It's certain that my thinking changed regarding the battles to be fought and the means to be used.

What impressed me in the project was the beginning. I felt I was learning to talk. The artists of Vichama Collective asked us to do physical exercises, play roles and express moods as part of the warm-up. It was more involving than I would have expected. Not only did I discover that I was not as physically flexible as I thought, but I found it hard to find an appropriate language, a

place for my intimate feelings, certain sensations, etc. This was particularly striking at the end of the first stages; I had thought my acting was solid, but watching the film of the process, I realized I was just a beginner.

This first part of the project consisted of creating masks, playing characters and discussing things with the other participants. In retrospect, I see similarities between that part of our project and the period of discussion and exchange among the participants in the *Combat Paper Project* while they were making the pulp needed for their works. I was surprised at the importance of this phase in a collective action. People needed to take the time to put into words the broken social bonds, the violence they had experienced and the dreams that had gone unfulfilled.

This first stage also helped us define our collective project. We decided to bring our experiences together around the theme of manipulation—manipulation understood as an individual experience but also a shared experience, as in media disinformation, the false representation of our reality, etc. The idea of “handling with care” was also a reference to a wounded inner world that needs to be protected, and a warning to the forces of social control and repression, telling them they were “handling” explosive materials. In short, the collective dimension of our work began to take shape at this point. We had to find an artistic form for this and define the space in which to make it politically effective.

Finally, since the rest of the project was quite well documented, I'll just say what has stayed with me from it: that a process of subjective expression is a prerequisite for any political action. In the case of the *Combat Paper Project*, this involved dealing with the traumas directly related to the war and its horrors before carrying out a collective action to dissuade young people from enlisting in the army and going to Iraq. In the case of our project—and to me, the similarity ends here—it involved finding a place for our intimate experiences in order to identify the nature and the causes of certain wounds before going on to collective action. With regard to this—and I'll stop here—squeezing lemons in front of the Queen Elizabeth Hotel with the police pushing us back was certainly a way of symbolizing the fact that they try to take everything from us, down to the last drop. It was also a concrete gesture to disrupt the regular course of things and get away from that dehumanizing reality. After all, this time we were the ones squeezing the lemons.



Photos of the interviewees: Devora Neumark (unless otherwise mentioned).



## Liliane Dupont



*Thanks to the Comité Bails - base pour l'action et l'information sur le logement social in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, I helped found the housing cooperative where I've been living since the spring of 2000. That action improved my quality of life. I can't do otherwise but participate in this organization and support it.*  
— Liliane Dupont

During telephone conversations with Engrenage Noir / LEVIER to plan today's interview, I said I would be happy to see people from Vichama Collectif again because I found them lively, dynamic, refreshing and cheerful.

I got to know Vichama Collectif and then LEVIER when I got involved with the Organisation populaire des droits sociaux (OPDS). I needed to meet people and take part in social activities because I was coming out of a rather difficult period. I met Anita, a member of the OPDS who I knew from activist groups for various causes such as social housing and the May 1st marches. She said, "Come and check out the OPDS; it's interesting, the people are fun!" I said yes and immediately joined as an active member.

The presentation of the project with Vichama Collectif at a meeting of the mobilization committee started me dreaming. I have a strong artistic side in my soul. It takes energy and good health to do projects, but I could put more into it. I've admired certain artists for their discipline, for example when they memorize texts and when they carry out creative projects. The *Manipulez avec soin* project that was presented to us was interesting and I really wanted to take part.

Although all the explorations and activities we did together ended with a show that was only 20 minutes long, doing it took a lot out of me. It wasn't all that easy! Often you think that in artistic productions where you make masks and create characters, you just have to *let yourself go* and have a ball; that's true, but there's also a lot of work, and I found it demanding. We had to develop the psychology of our character, which put us in touch with difficult and even unsuspected feelings, and we had to express these feelings as well as different facets of our personality. My character was clumsy and walked like an ape, which reflected what I was going through at the time. In the end, the character was like me, and I observed that, for all of us, there was something of ourself in our mask and our character.

When we took part in a demonstration, our characters said simple, true things in a way that was different from grand speeches. During the march, since I was hidden behind Poligone (my character), I allowed myself to be jostled by a person outside the demonstration without reacting. It was my character who had been jostled, not me! Our characters can say things we couldn't express ourselves because it would be too dangerous. Art allows you to say things differently!

I'm proud that I stuck with this project to the end, because I had trouble fitting in with the group. I was coming out of a period of loneliness and I needed to meet other people, so I got involved with this group too quickly, without taking the time to get to know it properly. There were communication problems along the way, and I gradually felt less and less at home. I had some misunderstandings with a member of the team. When I talk about it now, I still feel disappointed. It makes me feel lonely again even though I was in a collective project and at the beginning I wanted to escape from that loneliness and no longer feel marginal and finally to feel a sense of belonging.

It was a useful experience for me, because I learned that before sticking my neck out and getting involved or joining in, it's better to take the time to get to know the organization and the people and see if I can contribute something that meets their expectations while feeling comfortable with them. That means learning to recognize my limits and to better channel my strengths. I'm with a lot of young people in all kinds of contexts related to protests and I find it easy to talk to them, to organize meetings and activities, etc. I feel appreciated for the things I contribute. Now I belong to other groups, I write articles for the *Fouineur libre*, the newsletter of the Comité Bails - base pour l'action et l'information sur le logement social [Bails committee - basis for action and information on social housing] and I fit in with it very well.

*je suis  
allée à ma  
rencontre*  
Liliane



## Madeleine Martel

*I was born on October 31 in Amqui, on the Gaspé Peninsula, and I'm an autodidact by nature. I'm crazy about the arts, they're my passion! I was the oldest one in the group for the Manipulez avec soin project. What an experience! What a joy! I have the soul of a nomad, and I spent three years living in Algeria with my husband and our two children, Alexandre and Daniel.*  
— Madeleine Martel

When a project is brought to us, we have to seize the opportunity and go for it, even if we sometimes doubt our ability to express ourselves as creative activists who want to contribute to social change in relation to poverty.

Although I didn't follow through on my childhood dream of becoming a figure skater, I had collective artistic experiences as a young child that were meaningful enough to still motivate me to take part in community art projects now that I'm in my fifties. I know that if I'd had a chance to be an artist, I would have been an artist with a message, a committed artist.

For the *Manipulez avec soin* project, I was with people who were much younger than I am and I realized that in my youth, these opportunities simply did not exist. I feel a certain frustration at not having had access to this type of culture and practice of community art. Yes, it's frustrating, because in this kind of project, you discover yourself, you shape yourself, and you can dream. I've always kept my child's soul, so I always felt comfortable with a group, especially with the members of Vichama Collectif, in both the meetings and public activities.

Khadija and Étienne, the two coordinators of the Organisation populaire des droits sociaux (OPDS), were the ones who first connected with the project and talked about it to the membership, both the active members and the activist members. The group for the *Manipulez avec soin* project was made up almost completely of activist members of the OPDS.

We wanted to put across messages, but in general, most people didn't get them. For example, the action with the lemon was beautiful, but I don't know if most people understood its meaning in relation to the day of demonstrations. However, even for the



government, which doesn't listen to us, the analogy between the people and the lemon being squeezed dry should have been obvious: there was no juice left! Maybe the audience didn't take the time to understand. The gesture was very clear though. Also, people saw our wearing masks more as a show than as something related to everyday life. But that was a good thing, because behind my mask, I kept my identity. Each mask represented a person with unique characteristics, corresponding to the diversity of the Québec population, therefore to the multitude of possible voices.

I think it's too bad we're no longer in touch with the group Vichama Collectif, because we were very close. I would have liked to continue doing community art projects with them. I found the split with our group a bit abrupt. I would have liked to be involved and stay in community art, whatever the project. The end was difficult for me.

At the last meeting, which was recorded and filmed, we talked a lot about the project, about its effects and the fact that it was ending. There were a lot of reactions, and most people were disappointed that that experience was ending. We weren't able to find a way to keep going. The discussion on finding other avenues was short, because the activists of the OPDS didn't want to take responsibility for future activities. I especially didn't want to, because I was tired and I wanted more time for my family. Vichama Collectif had a lot of commitments and the OPDS coordinators were already overloaded with the demands and issues of the organization.

What still resonates a lot for me is the desire to learn to play a musical instrument. I really loved playing the African drum, the *djembe*, with the group *Manipulez avec soin*! I still miss it a lot, even after five years. I took a class for a few weeks, but I didn't have the money to continue. I also miss learning in a group, the relationships. I had so much fun! I like putting my efforts into things that last and that are connected with other people. I don't want to grow old without some creative project!

*Je ne veux pas  
vieilles sans  
projets sociaux*





## Mélanie Riverin

What fascinated me was hearing a participant say that since she had been with us in the *Manipuler avec soin* project, she had been remembering the dreams she had as a child. She had reconnected with her hopes and her trust in life. Art sometimes meets the need to create the world you envision, the need to become an authentic person in the sense of being in connection with your vital source and needs. And also being able to express these needs without censoring, respecting the quest for existence and the existence of dreams.

When I started the project, six years ago now, I had just finished an exchange with Vichama Teatro, which had been an important source of inspiration in my search for identity as a young adult. I was feeling social pressure to specialize in some field, to become a professional of some kind in contrast with my own need to belong to myself and to fulfill myself in something that appealed to me in order to give my life meaning.

I have two interests: the pleasure of doing art — if only I could do nothing but that all the time! — and social activism. I'm aware of the ills of our society, the many inequalities, injustices, wars, etc. So to me, only being an artist is a bit like living in a bubble cut off from everything. I have a strong need to participate in social life, and my encounter with Vichama Teatro, which works to make people really *experience* art as a tool for social change, was very important.

Through my involvement with Vichama Collectif and the Organisation populaire des droits sociaux (OPDS), I wove my connection to the community as an artisan of a more just world. So the *Manipuler avec soin* project was a concrete transition to a sharing of human encounters that allowed me to fulfill my dream through action. I was able to find a way of existing in the sensory and sensible world through which I can welcome, share and discover with others, and thus create artistically and socially.

*I work lovingly with children in Ste-Émélie de l'Énergie in the Lanaudière region. Play, learning activities and the arts are excuses for developing self-confidence, autonomy, mutual aid and communication.*  
— Mélanie Riverin

When we worked with the OPDS, their members were discouraged because demonstrations had become too risky for their health, which was already fragile, as a result of the tear gas bombs used by the police. The purpose of our working together was to find a creative way to demand their rights.

At the beginning, I felt insecure, because as a young artist, I was discovering how to make community art my own while sharing with the others.

We proceeded slowly, letting people move at their own rate, adapting step by step without imposing anything on anyone. The members expressed their uneasiness at doing a theatre intervention; so we decided together to create masks. Each participant created a character based on his or her own personal or political claims.

I felt as if we were sharing an island, a space of freedom outside the confrontation and the constant struggle for survival and dignity. We struck a vein that allowed us to reconnect to our roots and collectively build the tools of our hope. Each person created a mask based on his or her face, and the mask took on life. The person agreed to wear the mask and enter into a process of creation. In human terms, this opening enabled us to meet and to recognize our capacity to act with confidence against our oppressors. After these first steps, a lot of avenues opened for us, each one more motivating than the next. One day we had a great surprise. Everyone went and demonstrated in the street, masked, to express their discontent. It was a success! We had succeeded in carrying out a political action using theatre!

In the second part of the project, this time with a larger number of participants, the members told us of the many areas they were interested in. The activist members expressed themselves by creating a multidisciplinary theatre piece, which we presented in their space. They brought their voices and their reflections in the form of poetry, music, installation and dramatic texts.

Engrenage Noir / LEVIER had created conditions conducive to turning research into action. They played an important role in my development because I felt free, supported and fragile at the same time. Basically, we grew collectively through our discoveries, which allowed us to invent a co-creation that showed each person's talents.

For me, the project was a chance to approach other situations and issues involving some marvellous people. I became aware of the similarities between the situation of artists and that of the activists of the OPDS with regard to job insecurity. The experience we gained in the project enabled us to form relationships with each other and increased our sense of belonging and respect.



## Miriam Heap-Lalonde



Photo: Miriam Heap-Lalonde



This project took place so long ago that my recollections of it are mixed up with those of other experiences. At the time of the project, I was already thinking about what distinguishes artists from other people in the community, in this case the Organisation populaire des droits sociaux (OPDS), and I'm still thinking about it today.

When I took part in *Manipuler avec soin*, I didn't consider myself an artist, but rather a member of an art collective, a person who wanted to meet other people in order to share an experience, to reflect together through exchanges using theatre, mask making and street art.

*I've spent many years loving music while being tortured by the idea that the world was so rotten that I absolutely had to do my best to change it and feeling guilty for not doing enough. Later, in Peru, I learned that art could recover pieces of humanity, decolonize bodies and create communities. Now I feel much less guilty since I've been making music with an anarchist marching band.*

— Miriam Heap-Lalonde

I've always had trouble with the term *artist*, but this process enabled me to find myself, to discover the expressive potential of my body, to peel off layers to get down to my essential self. Without considering myself an artist, I felt a desire to share a creative process, which gave me a lot.

At the beginning of the project, there were members of Vichama Collectif who were sharing artistic processes and activists from the OPDS who were sharing experiences and knowledge. We quickly realized that the distinction between us (Vichama Collectif) and them (the OPDS) was not real, because in the final analysis, we were all people who felt a profound discomfort, a feeling of not fitting the norm and of wishing we could. The violence of the capitalist system seemed to have a greater impact on the activists of the OPDS, but basically we were all, at various levels, the targets of its attacks.

It was the first experience of creation in which the strong group culture of Vichama came into such close contact with the culture of another group. One of the positive things about the project was everything that came out of this "culture shock." I was comfortably ensconced in the Vichama culture: communication, decision making, conventions of creation, the nature of the emotional bonds between people. *Manipuler avec soin* got me to let myself go in the totality of the experience of collective creation. Throughout the project, there was a constant movement back and forth between Vichama's practices and those of this new culture that was emerging from the encounter of the two groups.

Everyone who participated in the project went through a process of personal change in all kinds of ways. I can't talk about the

changes of the other people, but collectively, we experienced tensions, knots and successes. The tensions and the knots taught me to accept my own areas of vulnerability and uncertainty and share them with others. They are often springboards for going elsewhere in creation and experiencing more authentic encounters with people around us.

In terms of social change, the project left me with a lot of questions. In my view, the exercise in collective creation enabled us to know ourselves better, to express ourselves without holding back, to initiate dialogue about our private thoughts and feelings. It was also empowering for the people involved. I feel we succeeded in creating a space of freedom together. I also think that, to a certain extent, this artistic experience helped enhance the cohesion of the group: when we share our deepest feelings, the effects are powerful and we connect more deeply.

At times, we achieved a quality of dialogue, of encounter, and we moved in a zone of freedom; this was in keeping with my motivations in community art and, in a way, with the aims of the project. Where I have questions is about the medium-term social impact of the project. I wonder how much of the process has stayed with the participants, how our way of interacting with people changed and to what extent we recovered our own power.

The effects of community art are less tangible than, say, direct action; they're more on the level of consciousness or humanity, the organic level: it touches something sacred that goes beyond the person experiencing it. This is the contribution I can make, but I find it hard to measure its impact in the context of a human race in total crisis, in a state of absolute emergency. To me, it's obvious that the struggle for social justice takes place on several levels simultaneously and that many kinds of actions are needed. I don't see social action from a hierarchical point of view.

In the end, the need to contribute, to react to what outrages us and does violence to us, and to give meaning to our everyday lives, is always there, and it makes us take actions whose value is hard to measure. It is my consciousness, my feelings and my body that tell me if my actions are right. Every action is relevant. *Manipuler avec soin* opened me up to ways of thinking that were subsequently fuelled by other experiences and that are still part of me today.

# De fil en histoires [From wire/thread to stories]<sup>1</sup>

Montréal

October 2003 —  
June 2004

Maison des jeunes de Rivière-  
des-Prairies [Rivière-des-  
Prairies  
youth centre]  
Alain Montambeault  
Claude Desrosiers (Ethics  
teacher at École secondaire  
Jean-Grou)

*Facilitating Artists*  
Lisa Ndejuru<sup>2</sup>  
Sylvie Tisserand

*Other Artists and Project  
Members*  
102 Secondary school stu-  
dents (from Groups 01, 03, 04,  
13 and 14)

*Collaboration between a pair of artists, a  
youth centre and a high school, leading to  
the production of photo-novels by special  
education students*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- What kinds of permissions are required when working with minors,<sup>3</sup> in particular on projects that aim to provide a free space for exploration and expression of how they feel about authority? How far can you really go in a project with young people if parental permission is required before the work created can be made public?
- With creative projects that focus on systemic injustices and their impact on individuals, it is very likely that strong emotions will come to the surface. What type of community support should be put in place to ensure that members who react this strongly receive the help they need to deal with their feelings?

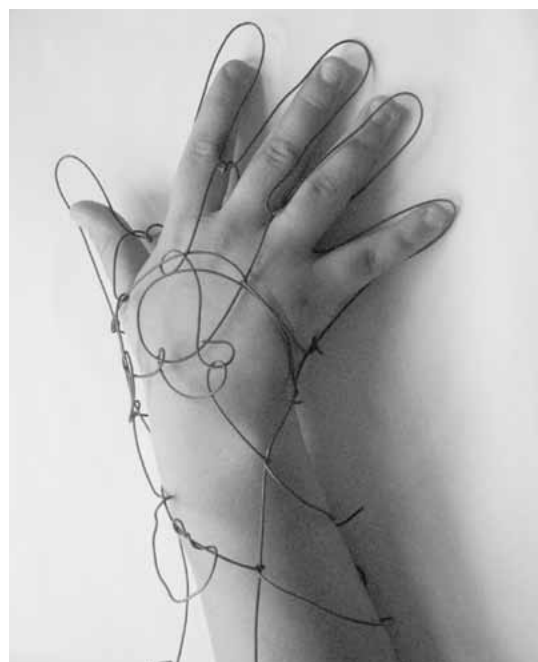


Photo: Sylvie Tisserand.

The primary mission of the Maison des jeunes de Rivière-des-Prairies [Rivière-des-Prairies youth centre] is to provide reception and intervention services for young people 12 to 17 years old living in the Rivière-des-Prairies neighbourhood, and to offer activities “for and by” the young people. Since 1995, it has organized an annual youth festival with a variety show, a fashion show, a photography or art exhibition, etc.

Lisa Ndejuru and Sylvie Tisserand did not know each other at the outset of this project, nor did they know the youth centre. But they both attended LEVIER *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*,<sup>4</sup> and it was there that Alain Montambeault, a staff member with the youth centre, took the initiative of approaching them (neither of whom had previous experience in community art).

The youth centre preferred that the project be carried out in the annex of École secondaire Jean-Grou nearby. The centre serves young people from economically disadvantaged areas living with the experience of racial violence and family abuse. The building reserved for them was called the Annex, which in a way reflects the isolation and ostracism the students who went there were subjected to.

The partners involved in this community art project had decided not to provide any directives other than to be attentive to the needs as they were expressed. This gave rise to some anxiety for the artists, and a period of adjustment was needed, especially since the large number of students involved made it difficult to establish relationships with them. Each artist found a way of relating with the young people that she felt comfortable with. Sylvie used an activity she had used before: creating wire sculptures on the students’ hands. Lisa applied her experience in theatre to doing improvisation and creating characters with the young people.

The title of the project, *De fil en histoires* (literally, “From wire/thread to stories”) describes the process adopted very well. Wire became the connecting thread as the artists and students worked together, still without knowing where the project was heading two months after it had begun. This is the moment when the artists returned to the photographic documentation that the students had already worked on in the classroom, and the layout of a photo-novel was done on the computer. After that, everyone could see what it was possible to produce, given the students’ abilities and the allotted time.

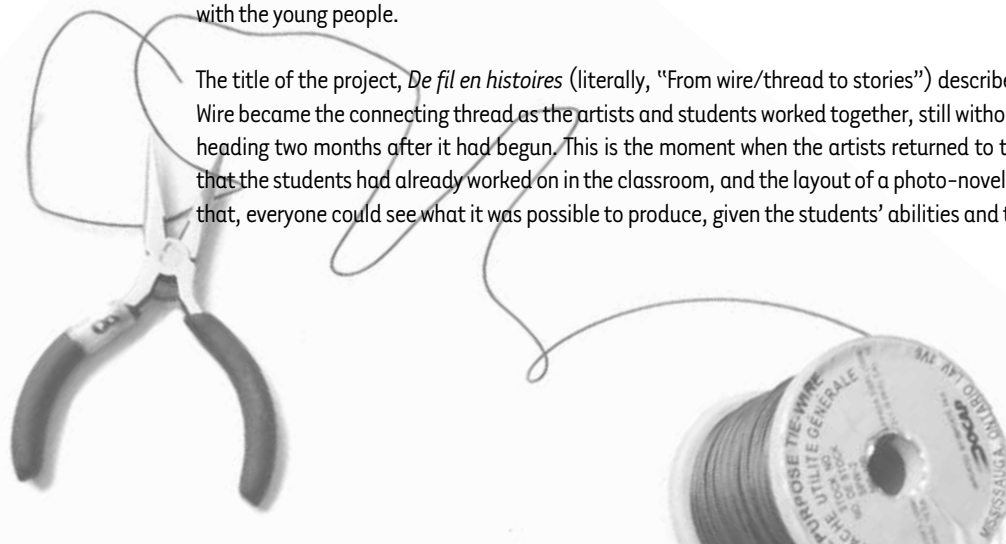




Image from one of the photo-novels..

The result was the production of 14 photo-novels. In groups of four or five, the young people created scenarios that they then staged, sometimes also photographing them themselves. With the photographs uploaded to computers, they could create layouts and insert dialogue. The young people thus had the opportunity to work in many forms of expression: writing, acting, scriptwriting, photography, staging, image composition and layout. The students chose what to produce; if they did not like the idea of a photo-novel, they could still contribute by creating a sculpture made from metal wire. They were also free to participate or not, as they wished.

In spite of the non-directive nature of the project established at the outset, Alain Montambeault, like Claude Desrosiers – the Ethics teacher at the Annex who was associated with the project – and the artists, felt it was important to produce a concrete finished product that the young people would be proud of. The students were able to express their feelings about exclusion and to feel validated. *De fil en histoires* came to an end at the end of the school year, when the young people's creations were exhibited at the Maison des jeunes.

Since no direction had been decided at the beginning of the project, no one had been concerned about getting permission and having release forms signed. But at the end, the issue had to be dealt with, because the informed consent of the parents was needed for the dissemination of the project, including the photos of the young people themselves. A consent form was prepared, but none were signed. Most of the young people were living in foster homes or had difficult home situations.

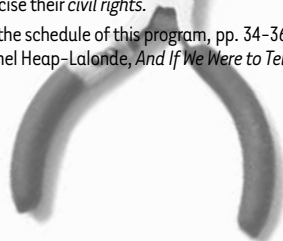
The failure to obtain the permissions was counterproductive in that it prevented the broader dissemination of the photo-novels. But the artists and the youth centre also felt that, since the photo-novels dealt with violence, drugs, taxing and even murder, they could be interpreted negatively and could even cause harm; they thought it was better not to publish them on a large scale, at least until the young people were ready to do so.

Since the project did not continue, the experience only lasted one year. The young people certainly learned a lot and came out of it with a feeling of pride in a project well done, but what next? Ethical considerations arose: for example, one girl would have liked to tackle the subject of the sexual assault she had been the victim of, and would have needed active listening and careful support, which the artists did not feel they were capable of giving her in the context of the project.

This project proved to be a valuable experience for the two artists involved. Lisa subsequently developed a project with the members of her Rwandan community.<sup>5</sup> She became aware that social involvement is not only political, but social, psychological and relational. Following this experience and reflection on the paths these young people might take in the near future, Sylvie enrolled in an MA program in visual and media arts at Université du Québec à Montréal, with a concentration in education. She developed the project *Les sentiers aléatoires* [Random paths] as a metaphor for life. The staff member from the Maison des jeunes provided constant collaboration, and the project could not have been completed without his support. The school demonstrated that it was not only a place of learning, but also a rich community environment.

#### NOTES

1. See also the participation of the members of this community art project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 67, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 79–80.
2. See her participation in the humanist activist project *Tuganire*, pp. 224–225.
3. Amongst the juristic limits established by Québec's Civil Code is the age of majority: at 18 an individual is considered legally responsible. Under the law, minors must be represented by guardians in order to exercise their civil rights.
4. See the schedule of this program, pp. 34–36, and the account of it by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86, in which she compares this program with the 2004 program.
5. See the description of this humanist activist project, pp. 224–225. See also the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 111, 118 and 119. See also the participation of the members of this project in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 121. See also the video *Tuganire* made the members of this project, in the video compilation *Documenting Collaboration*, inserted in the centre of this publication.





# Raising Mom<sup>1</sup>

Montréal

January 2005 —  
June 2007

(Names followed by an \* identify project members who also co-created the documentary *Raising Mom*, as part of the video compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.<sup>2</sup>)

Head and Hands —Young  
Parents Program  
Gabriela Richman\*

*Facilitating Artists*  
Jasmine Bliss (2005–2006)\*  
Sara Bessin<sup>3</sup>(2005–2007)\*

*Other Artists and Project Members*

Alana	Kanisha
Alana Richards*	Katania*
Alexis Richards*	Laea Morris <sup>4</sup> *
Angela Campeau*	Leigh*
Anita Schoepp*	Leveesa
Annie Hickey*	Lina Gonthier *
Ashlee	Louisa Neill*
Ashley*	Marie
Assia	Maxine
Caroline*	Melanie Fournier*
Carrie*	Melissa
Cassandra*	Michelle*
Cathrine	Nadia*
Diana Neill*	Nafeesa*
Elena*	Penelope
Iryna Gorbova*	Saleema*
Jenni Lee*	Sarah Coté*
Jennifer	Tatiana*
Jessica	Tessa Margreff*
Joani*	Zarlasht*
Kali*	

*Individual and collaborative multi-media visual art explorations leading to a public exhibition of artwork aimed at breaking down the stereotypes and internalized stigmas associated with being a young parent*

*QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:*

- *How to deal with the frustrations that arise when the reality of life makes it so that project members do not show up regularly to the activities, despite their best intentions?*
- *What are the pros and cons for using more or less conventional dissemination strategies (such as art gallery exhibitions) to connect with the public at large about pressing socioeconomic and political issues?*

Head and Hands is a non-profit community organization promoting the physical and mental wellbeing and empowerment of youth in an ethnically diverse, open, and friendly environment. Some participants are immigrants or refugees, and many of the women are on social assistance: all are low-income. The Young Parents' Program (YPP) of Head and Hands was started in 1988 to support young people under the age of 24 in their role as parents through a variety of free events and services. Children of YPP participants are provided with educational and recreational age-appropriate activities by qualified volunteers while parents get a much-needed break to socialize, have lunch together, and participate in more structured sessions (that for the most part are determined in advance with their active involvement).

The YPP art sessions project began with Sara Bessin and I attending the Engrenage Noir / LEVIER Community Art Training and Exchange Program in November 2004.<sup>5</sup> We had just finished a project with the Museum of Fine Arts and, excited by its' success, we wanted to continue incorporating art into the programming of the YPP. Politically, my motivation for this project was based on the repression of mothers: the welfare system, although generous, still tends to condemn mothers for choosing to stay home. I believe that an alternate and more substantial allowance program would be beneficial to all mothers, not just young ones. But young parents encounter the most challenges and have not had the time to establish their careers, nor to have a plan B, if money is tight. Most young parents live on a very tight budget and buying art supplies would likely be the last thing to cross their minds. I wanted to counteract this and bring art into their lives for free. Artistically, I felt this project would help me get back into doing art full time. I had spent three years on the edge of art without being immersed in it and I wanted to use the project to help me reconnect and explore.

— Jasmine Bliss

<sup>1</sup>During the opening of the *Raising Mom* exhibition at the Empress Theatre (with Eva, Austin and David).  
Photo: Sara Bessin.







Even prior to getting involved with LEVIER I had observed that creative and artistic activities had a very positive impact on the participants. First and foremost they enjoyed these activities. Second it brought them in touch with themselves. This is important because many parents of young children seem to be out of touch with themselves to various degrees due to their ongoing preoccupations and responsibilities regarding their children. Last, but not least, the aspect of a public exhibition appealed to me. There are a lot of misconceptions out there about younger parents that the participants of the YPP wanted to set straight. Sara and Jasmine had come back from the *LEVIER Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)* very enthusiastic about what they learned about community art and offered to write up the grant proposal after consulting with — and getting the approval of — the other YPP participants.

— Gabriela Richman

The element of choice was particularly important for this group since the thoughts they wished to communicate to the community were based on the members' own self-affirmations that they were mature adults worthy and capable of making decisions that might affect their children and their community. It was vital for the women to feel autonomous during the artistic process. There was already resistance on the part of the women towards "outsiders" who communicated with them in a strong authoritarian manner. The members were often very sensitive about making their own choices in all other aspects of life and could not be expected to accept having too many decisions made for them on a project that was so incredibly personal and important to them. Most members had moments of frustration just as I had and watching them find their own solutions propelled me to do the same. I feel that the project was successful on a level that I hadn't expected. The bonds that members created during the process, the unity of the group, the level of sharing by the women of diverse ethnicities was of great value and importance. The creative process was necessary for the members to be aware of living creative lives: as forces of change, they are important to each other and to this society.

— Sara Bessin

I thought that having a show and having our artwork out there in the public could help make society aware of its mistreatment of young mothers. Perhaps it would cause one less glance of pity on the metro... or one bus driver might actually let a stroller on public transit without glaring.

— Jasmine Bliss

Members were encouraged to be bold and to experiment, to let themselves go and not to worry about end results or perfection. They learned and practiced accessing their intuition and using their imagination to find symbols and metaphors with which to explore aspects of their lives and express themselves. They also learned not to judge or censure themselves and their work. The art project expanded the role of the parents: with each passing week they increased their consciousness, their abilities and confidence as artists and activists as they created new, more powerful, identities for themselves. This project did not shift, but rather confirmed, my understanding of the possibilities to promote social engagement through community-based practice. Creative and artistic endeavors have a special status and potential because they are enjoyable, they allow for an exploration of issues and emotions, raise awareness amongst participants and the public, and reinforce autonomy along the way.

— Gabriela Richman

Some people discovered for the first time — or rediscovered — that they were capable and even good at something. It restored confidence on a subtle imperceptible level. I don't think people knew it was happening, but they were changing. Only after completion of the process did I understand the full potential of the project.

— Jasmine Bliss

During the first few months in 2005, members familiarized themselves with different art mediums and techniques through a variety of exercises. Each session started with a short discussion about the themes and techniques specific to the session and before closing there was a check-in process during which everyone talked about what worked and what didn't. This information was used to make adjustments to the project along the way. Over the course of the weekly sessions, members gained experience in different literary styles such as poetry, journaling, short stories, autobiography and spontaneous writing. They learned about mixing colors and using different tools and media such as brushes, sponges,



pencils, pastels, acrylics, inks, spray paint, stenciling, and linoleum carving and printing. They also experimented with how to use certain colours to represent specific emotions. The combination of writing and painting provided members with an opportunity to reflect on and express their everyday experiences as parents. Members who were pregnant had belly casts made that were later decorated with images and messages selected from magazines representing concerns about the physical and social environment that could potentially harm their children or the tension between idealized versus realistic images of mothers.

As the project unfolded, members offered each other encouragement, feedback and technical advice; they also discovered the therapeutic benefits of creative activities and generally reported feeling an increased sense of wellbeing (including a reduction of stress and a growing capacity to get in touch with and channel strong emotions). With their hands busy doing art, they carried on conversations about the themes that surfaced in the writing and visual work such as how they felt being parents and how to deal with the challenges and frustrations that came with being a mother. Everyone had stories of discrimination based on their age. Especially at the beginning of the project, many of the moms were feeling oppressed, even outcast, by society.

By June 2006, the group felt ready to go public: The exhibition at the Empress Cultural Centre in the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce neighbourhood of Montréal was called *Raising Mom — Exposed*. Approximately 100 people came to the official opening. During the evening, some of the women presented extracts from the written works they had created in the preceding months; others spoke out about the role that this project played in their lives. Many of the works in the exhibition were sold, including greeting cards made for the event: over \$1000 was raised towards the summer camp retreat for the women and their children.

Since the YPP is an open group where new parents can join throughout the year, one of the challenges that the project faced was how to interest and integrate new members in the middle of the process. Sometimes it was not feasible to explain the whole project, the values and the objectives, nor was it possible to provide newcomers with all the training that was such an important part of the project from the beginning. While newcomers did contribute to the growing collection of artwork created through this project, none of the members who had visited YPP over the course of the

second year decided to stay on as regular members. The intimacy that had developed within the group amongst the initial members was too intimidating for newcomers and the collection of writing and visual artworks too daunting. So, in an effort to integrate new members, the group decided to change the process for the second year of the project (which stretched between September 2006 through June 2007). In order to avoid some of the stress related to collective creativity, they chose to work individually on personal scrapbooks in which they set out to explore their childhoods, teenage years, intimate relationships, parenting roles and their dreams and ambitions for the future.

It was during this second year that some of the members also got involved in the *Documenting Collaboration* video project.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the challenges this project was a success if we take into account what was to us the most important objective, that is, the process (rather than the end product). It helped that there was a common denominator; everyone was a young parent. We could not have just randomly set out to do this project without a unified group wherein many of the members shared similar feelings. In the end we realized that all parents struggle with parenting and that regardless of age every parent feels inadequate, even guilty, at times. It is clear that the benefits of this project are long term: we discovered concrete means to empower ourselves; the rest is a question of integration.

— Sara Bessin



During the opening of the *Raising Mom* exhibition at the Empress Theatre. YPP members: in the front row, Melanie, Ashley, Louisa, Lina, Annie and her daughter Mandy, Nafeesa and Gabriella; in the back, Sara, Jasmine, Alexis and Nadia.

#### NOTES

1. See the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 104, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 113.
2. For more information, see the presentation of this project (and DVD) in the centre of this publication. See also the introduction to the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, pp. 100–101.
3. Along with Laea Morris and Devora Neumark, Sara Bessin represented LEVIER at the *Connect: Towards a Socially-Engaged Aesthetic* conference hosted by Common Weal Community Arts in Regina, Saskatchewan (May 14–16, 2010). Sara spoke about the *Raising Mom* project as part of the *Art is Not Peace: Challenging Perceptions* roundtable.
4. Along with Sara Bessin and Devora Neumark, Laea Morris represented LEVIER at the *Connect: Towards a Socially-Engaged Aesthetic* conference hosted by Common Weal Community Arts in Regina, Saskatchewan (May 14–16, 2010). Laea spoke about the *Raising Mom* project as part of the *Art is Not Peace: Challenging Perceptions* roundtable.
5. See the program presentation and schedule, pp. 66–70, and the text by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86, in which she compares this program with the one held in 2002.
6. See the presentation of this video during the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122. Laea Morris, a member of this project — along with Johanne Chagnon, Maria from the *Rentrer chez soi* project and Aleksandra Zajko of the Société Elizabeth Fry du Québec — was part of the (January 2010) LEVIER delegation to the World Social Forum in Bélem, Brazil; in addition to taking part in the general presentation, she introduced the *Raising Mom* project video.

## Annie Hickey



△ O — ' P P

*I consider myself part of the young parent community of Montréal, the Inuit community of Quebec, the student community, and also the artistic community because I like to write, sing and create art. I'm inspired by real life stories about real people. I describe myself as socially engaged. My efforts to make the world a better place include bettering my own life, raising a wonderful child, furthering my education, attending church and being a good friend.*  
— Annie Hickey

I think I was three months pregnant when I started with the Young Parents' Program (YPP). At first I didn't say anything to the other moms. I was shy. But I felt the need to be there and I continued to go every week even though I didn't talk to anyone for quite some time. Eventually I opened up because I felt like I belonged there.

When I look back now, I cannot believe the amount of support that there was. I cannot attend anymore because I am now in school full time, but the majority of my closest friends still are from the YPP. As the years went by, we realized that we had much more in common than just our children such as many of our values, priorities, and goals.

I would recommend these types of support groups for everyone. I cannot even describe it: you get to share your life with other people! You are not alone. Through the YPP program I realized the importance of friendship and the necessity for consistent connections with others.

The pieces that I made for the exhibition that we put together as part of the YPP art project currently hang on my walls at home with pride. I love telling the stories to people who come in. I explain what the message was behind the work. I will keep these pieces forever. I think that everyone's home should have a piece of art that they made themselves and that has a story behind it that they can tell their guests, because it is the best conversation topic in my house.

There was one work in which I painted a butterfly family going through the forest with peeking eyes. This expressed how I felt when I would walk down the street with my daughter: I felt like everyone was watching me and judging me.

After the painting was complete I realized that no one was watching me after all. Once I turned my feelings into something real that I could touch and see, the negativity went away.

When the work was put in the exhibition I figured that people wouldn't really know what it meant when they looked at it, so it didn't matter anyway if they saw it. In that way, the work was really for me. It was weird, when I was told that there was going to be an exhibition, I remember thinking: "How can this be shared?" I didn't know what to expect from people, or what their reaction would be.

When I spoke to people during the opening night of the exhibition, I felt really proud to be there. I felt as if I was bringing awareness to the community about being a young mom. Some people really don't know what it is like. They have no idea.

It's easy for someone to spill their opinion, to not think twice about someone they don't know and instead to fall into making stereotypical readings of them. The experience of being a young mom is hard. It's challenging just being a good parent. There are so many things that you have to do and take care of.

I think that parents today, especially young parents, are worried about their children's development, and that worrying can bring on a lot of stress because you try to be the perfect mom and try to do everything 'by the book.' There comes a point where you realize that you cannot be perfect and you have to be honest with yourself. When I compared trying to be perfect with just being myself, to my surprise I found that being myself was a lot less stressful.

When you are honest about what you are feeling, you realize that there are lots of people who are feeling exactly the same as you: you just have to open up. It's actually really surprising.

After I stopped going to the YPP programs I decided to finish my high school and adult education. When I graduated I went into fashion design, although I didn't last long in that field. Nine months later, the same amount of time it takes to make a baby, I woke up to the realization that no matter what I do in life or how good I am at it, my number one priority is my daughter.

Now I am in a more realistic and am taking accounting classes in a family-friendly vocational school right next door to my daughter's daycare. Although I don't have a love for numbers, I prefer having a better lifestyle at home to a better lifestyle at school. Because I am in accounting, I still feel urges for finding creative outlets. I am always coming up with something. I recently started making humorous movies about everyday things just for fun, because I really need to express myself. The ideas keep pouring out. I upload my videos to YouTube because not only do I feel the need to create something, I also appreciate how much my friends get a kick out of seeing me wearing a blond wig.

I believe that art or any creation is the language of the soul. Without art, what would we be? Where could we go?

## Gabriela Nehmert

*My focus is health and wholeness, individually, collectively and environmentally. I explore and share simple life-sustaining practices and bring people together in "singing circles" to connect and express themselves in creating harmonies and rhythms.*  
— Gabriela Nehmert

*I re-create myself every day!*

I want to start by talking about how the community art project was part of a long road of personal growth in my life. I had read countless self-help books and had also done art and drama therapies. But through creative practice I discovered that I could get much deeper into my inner consciousness than I could through any other method I had tried before.

Having realized how much I enjoyed creativity, I was very eager to share this with the Young Parents' Program (YPP) participants. It was inspiring to see the art in progress and the effect it had on the participants, including myself. There is such wonder for me at the simple, unexpected potential of creative expression, especially when intimate sharing follows, bringing people closer to themselves and each other. Art is so effective in blatantly revealing what's hidden deep inside — both the positive and the problematic. It was really rewarding to see new self-perceptions emerge and potentials coming to realization. With each new art project new horizons opened for them as for me.

Now, after a year and a half away from YPP, I am professionally facilitating the kind of personal growth that I found so significant in my own life, which allows me to be creative on a daily basis and to provide opportunities for others to do the same.

Before I left Head and Hands, little feelings of being ready to move on had been creeping in slowly, but I ignored them. For example, I did notice occasionally my impatience with the continuous complications that surfaced, due to the complexity and the many challenges in the lives of the participants, or the inconvenience of the kids needing attention just when we wanted to do things. But because I really enjoyed working at Head and Hands and the YPP, I didn't give the feelings any space.

I felt an inner conflict. Since everything the moms experienced touched so very close to home, I was sensitive to their struggle. Nevertheless, I found myself frustrated when the program agenda, which could promote progress, needed to be set back.

Early on in my work with the young moms, and in my private relationships, I realized that whenever I felt frustration with the slow progress in the situations of others, it was time to look at my own progress and see what was stuck in my own life. Was I self-nurturing, self-respecting, being assertive enough, taking care of my needs and realizing my potential?

The YPP took so much space but it was also very validating. I felt close to the participants and my co-workers. I had a lot of opportunity to be creative in building the program, and the work there became a big part

of my self-realization, so much so that I didn't notice that the balance was missing between my professional and private lives. I perceived the needs of the program and the participants to be so huge, and I felt that I could do something about these needs. The importance of what I was doing there, and the recognition I got, made it so I wanted to do more and more, to the point where the work took a disproportional amount of space in my personal life. I was using the program as my own creative project.

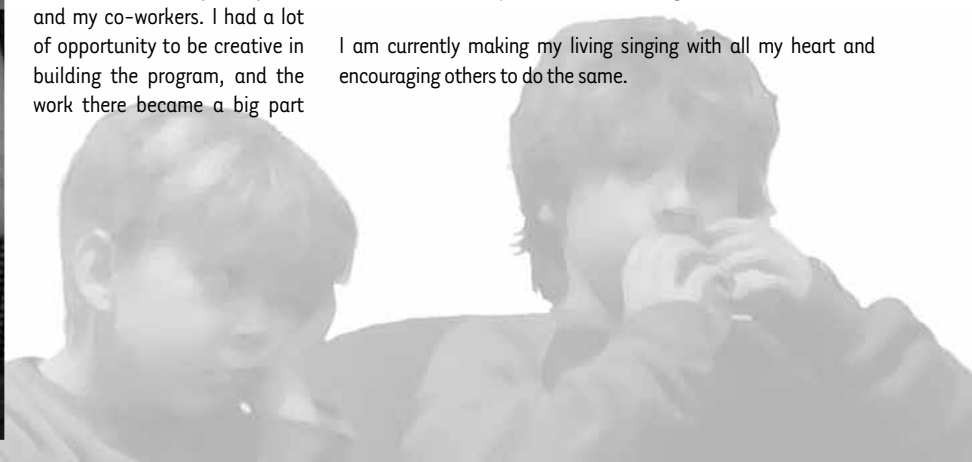
Because the work was boosting my ego and self esteem, I sometimes didn't set my limits properly and overextended my capacity to give. This pattern is woven into my entire life and all my relationships, and thus is my therapeutic challenge. Becoming more conscious of what is going on within me, and acting upon what that consciousness is telling me, has been a life-long process.

I was raised to suppress my feelings, to focus on other people, to sacrifice honorably with glory, and I developed excellent skills in sensing and fulfilling other peoples' feelings, wants, and needs... and thus became a social worker. I was really good at ignoring what I needed when I was young. With age, menopause, and especially through the art process, my own negative feelings of dissatisfaction, and the other things that I was once able to suppress, surfaced and demanded attention.

There were times when I participated in art activities that brought up issues that I was not willing to share. I had to censure myself because this kind of personal sharing would not have been professional in my role as YPP coordinator. However, and more often than other professionals in social services, I did share aspects of my personal experience, such as struggling to raise my children alone as a "welfare mom" or living through an abusive relationship. These experiences created a special connection with the moms in the program, yet the inconsistency between what I was advising the participants of the YPP and what I was doing in my own life finally became simply too much to ignore.

After I left the YPP, I took the time to do really intensive soul-searching. I took stock of my talents, my desires, my passions, and my abilities, and also questioned what I wanted to be the result of my work — what I wanted to achieve in the world through my life. I affirmed to myself the importance of creativity: it is what keeps me alive, growing and evolving. One of my desires was to continue to liberate my singing voice because singing and harmonizing is one of my deep passions. Although I had given increasing space to my musical endeavors through voice lessons and singing with friends, I was still quite constrained in singing in front of others, despite being musically quite developed. Having been a closet singer for a long time, I realized that liberating my singing voice would go beyond developing my singing capacity to also enabling me to express and develop myself fully. Ironically, it was still easier for me to liberate my own voice in showing others how to do it.

I am currently making my living singing with all my heart and encouraging others to do the same.





## Jenni Lee

What stands out for me the most in the *Raising Mom* project was that we were all young moms, but some of us were also coming from artistic backgrounds. Having children so early in our lives, we felt that everything, including our creative processes, had been disrupted. Looking back now I realize that these “disruptions” are what make us who we are.

I came to Montréal initially to pursue a Bachelor of Art degree in dance and along the way met my husband and the father of my three children. I had left my hometown of San Jose, California in search of life experience. As a choreographer, I was looking for substance. Technically I was at the top of my game in dance, but the emotional aspect was missing in most of my pieces.

Sara and Jasmine’s leadership and their ambition to pursue their passion inspired me to get involved with the NDG community and create my own community dance project. I saw how these two women made the connections they made and got the grants to do what they wanted. So by the end of the first year, as we were completing the *Raising Mom* exhibition, I leapt at the opportunity to participate in a pilot project entitled *Moms Teaching Moms*. I teamed up with partner Odessa Thornhill and we facilitated two African dance workshops at YPP and Women On the Rise, which were sponsored by Services intégrés en périnatalité et pour la petite enfance. When the community has a need and you give them what they want, then the project is bound to work. The response was so positive that now three years later, the dance project (whose title has since changed to *Rhythm 'N' Movement*) is still ongoing. It’s amazing how we can all get paid for what we love doing.

It’s interesting how life does not turn out how we expect. I came here because I outgrew my old community, and while all my friends were moving to New York, I came to Montréal pursuing the dream of becoming a professional dancer. When they found out I was pregnant, the comments I heard were: “Oh! What a shame! She could have been so good...” At the time I felt shattered, but was also relieved that I would finally have the chance to explore this social stigma in such a variety of artistic media through the *Raising Mom* project.

In Montréal everyone seems to be very involved with the process. Where I come from, it’s all about the product: we want to produce something; we want to be seen! The exhibition was a way of being seen, heard and acknowledged. It fulfilled my needs as a performer and validated my initiation as an artist.

Being an artist for me is not about only perfecting one skill; it’s a way of being. We take life experience in, we assimilate and process it, and we regurgitate it. Art is not just what you do, it is also how you do it. This whole experience has taught me that there is not only one way to achieve our goals.

The last week of my pregnancy, one month before the exhibition, I got a burst of inspiration and in 12 hours of obsessed concentration I carved the linoleum plate for the linocut reproduced on this page. It is the fertility Goddess and represents the earth elements, fire and water. At the top of the image is what is known as the rim of fire — the moment when the baby’s head crowns. This print was subsequently published in a book called *Healing the Planet and Its Inhabitants with Group Energy*, by Mary Swaine. Looking at it now, I am finally realizing the double significance of the image: The woman’s outstretched hands are embracing a vagina that is also the Third eye.

This connection brings me to where I am today and the work that I do as a massage therapist, healer, teacher, artist, wife and mother. The nurturing aspect is activated through my hands by giving to and taking care of my family. My husband is my support, my anchor. We are best of friends. Then there is the creative aspect that keeps life interesting. The teacher in me is knowledge passed on through experience and guidance to others. Besides all these parts of me, I am just I. A woman.



*I was a caged bird that  
longed for freedom.  
I am flat earth that  
finds joy in the everyday  
mundane. I choose  
the path less taken.  
— Jenni Lee*



## Laea Morris

*I am part of a community of Young Independent Parents. I use art as a tool to communicate my feelings and emotions of my life to society through experimental artwork and writing. Inspired by the outcome of my creations, I learned to value myself and my family. In confidence, I am guided to bring awareness to those around me.*  
— Laea Morris

For me, the easiest way to talk about my participation in the project is to start from the beginning. I guess I have to be honest, right? What if it's not flattering?

When the group voted to have art days twice a week every week, I felt like not coming. I dreaded the art days. I sat out and didn't participate for the first several sessions. They started working on different projects involving painting — which I really hated! So I watched. And then I started some paintings, but I never finished them. I continued to be negative when it came to the art days. I felt really terrible afterward and thought that I was a bad influence on the others... but I continued complaining anyway.

What got me connected with the group was when they started to do poetry. I always knew I had an interest in poetry; I just never had set aside the time to write. I really liked the vibe of sitting and doing poetry together. I felt closer to everyone; we learned things about each other through the poetry, and I enjoyed that. I also got good feedback about the poems I wrote. I never heard myself reading my poems before; it boosted my self-esteem. But what I appreciated even more was the chance to express myself in an indirect way about personal things that I didn't even realize were on my mind.

I got even more involved when we did a project with spray painting and stenciling. It was a collective portrait based on individual images from our childhood. I relieved a lot of stress through this process, even though I don't usually like tedious work. I've always had a fascination for graffiti; doing the spraying was the closest I ever got to fulfilling this fantasy of being a tag artist.

There was one person who wanted to take some of our stencils and reproduce them downtown. People were not very willing, to say the least... except I said: "Sure you can take mine."

I went from not wanting to participate in the painting project to not caring if my face would be plastered all over downtown. That's when my whole idea of art changed, and I realized why I didn't like painting: I felt as though when it came to artwork, people could be very critical. I don't know much about art, but I always thought that it was about being flawless. Knowing that it could take so many different forms, suddenly everything became art. Seeing everyone's work displayed in the exhibition really touched me. I thought each artwork was a masterpiece, and together they all looked amazing.

After the exhibition, I chose to take part in an art program at the Maimonides Geriatric Centre in Côte Saint-Luc with my daughter, who was barely three at the time. I wanted her to be able to get all messy and express herself through painting, if you can believe it.

It was this enthusiasm that I wanted to convey when I presented the *Raising Mom* project at the 2009 World Social Forum in Brazil, where, during the LEVIER workshop, I played the video we had created together. For me, it was only the third time I had seen the completed video. Upon seeing the finished video for the first time at the *Documenting Collaboration* training and exchange follow-up program, it dawned on me that I have so much potential. When I showed the video in Brazil, I was hoping that the audience would see just how therapeutic this project was and how much transformation was involved through the artwork.

Coming back from Brazil, I came to realize that I had no passion for my job as a mortgage consultant. After seeing, hearing and experiencing the different workshops, I felt like I wanted to be able to contribute more to society. I quit my job and enrolled in an undergraduate program at Concordia University with the goal of getting a degree in Applied Human Sciences.

I'm not exactly sure what I will do yet, but having taken part in the YPP community project, I know that community work is definitely an option for the future. I found that change is possible for me when I connect with who I truly am and begin relating to those around me.



REJOICE  
IN THE  
RIGHT



Sara Bessin

## BE THE CHANGE.

*I like to think of dissidence, especially as it pertains to youth, as a synonym for un-sewn seeds of change. I am currently working towards an art education degree. I feel that as a society we fail to give enough credit and instill enough hope in the younger generation, who we subsequently hold responsible for fulfilling our expectations for a better future. My hope is to bring much of what I learned through working with LEVIER into the public school system, where I might find easier access to the "seeds" for "germination" through the creative process.*

— Sara Bessin

Part of the mandate of the Young Parents Program (YPP) is to break the isolation that young parents feel. Ironically, by associating with the YPP, participants were still isolated but as a group, rather than individually. What contributed to this isolation was the individual and collective defensiveness related to feeling excluded from mainstream culture. This defensiveness led to even further helplessness and isolation.

The advantage of our project was that I was involved as a participant in the community before being introduced to LEVIER. This meant that there was a pre-existing mutual level of trust between the others and myself: also, we shared the same concerns and vulnerabilities.

However unintentional, there is a tendency amongst artists involved with community art to take a colonialist approach. I can see how easy it is to assume the identity of the one who has the tools: in holding the tools, the artist wields a different level of power. The attitude is "I have something you need."

It was quite by chance that I myself didn't fall into this same dynamic. I did need the strength of the collective to facilitate an outcome that would serve my needs. However, as a member of this community, I was also aware that others felt similar needs. I wanted to find a way to be proactive about the marginalization of young parents and I thought this could not be overcome individually, nor should it be. The feelings of marginalization could only be overcome by the strength of the collective working together. Through the sharing of our stories it was affirmed that the group's members felt both the same sense of helplessness and the need for change that I did.

Here is one of our stories: Each year, the YPP would have to do a lot of fundraising to go to family summer camp. This was a really big event for us. As soon as we returned from camp we began to think about getting back the next summer. This was a way to bond with nature, with our children and with each other. It was also a way that we were taken away from our labels as young urban parents, and even extracted from the process of being labeled, because in that environment, labels didn't exist.

I remember specifically once going to Westmount Park to fundraise. It was an environment that was local to our centre and we had assumed that the people who frequented the park could easily relate to us as fellow parents. Even though we had posters made with explanations about the camp project, one woman approached us and asked what we were doing. One of the moms from our group was very happy to explain how much the children and adults enjoyed the camp, and that the fundraiser was to make this all possible. She explained how we were offering homemade baked goods and juice boxes in exchange for donations.



Upon hearing this, the woman frowned and said "I'll keep my donation, thank you." And she walked away.

Though there were many of us in the park that day, not one of us responded to the woman because we felt frozen in our shock. Regardless of how this woman may have perceived us as a burden to society, what was so hurtful was that our children weren't deemed deserving of a week out of the city to enjoy nature with their mothers. We made no money that day.

Following this reaction and others of its kind, we developed a sense of defensiveness that manifested over time in feelings of inadequacy and negative assumptions about how we were perceived as young parents by the community at large. When we did the exhibition in the Empress Cultural Centre, the work that was exhibited formed the basis for communicating with the community that we felt we were excluded from. Regardless of our defensiveness at that time, we were willing to open ourselves to the community in the spirit of voices being heard. I think the exhibition was a catalyst for change. We realized then that the feelings of exclusion were at least in part arising from our perceptions rather than reflecting any external truth.

What had been strongly felt all through the process and affirmed during the exhibition was that despite our being labeled underprivileged, our love for our children was not decreased simply because of our young age and monetary situation.

The work in the exhibition (which was, on the one hand, symbolic of our feelings of exclusion and inadequacy, and on the other, celebratory of our love for our children), ended up being sold in a silent auction. We raised over \$2,000 from the sale of our work and had a fabulous time at camp later that summer!

A lot of stereotypes were broken on both sides. As a group of young parents, we let go of a lot of assumptions about exclusion and we were embraced by the community for the strong bright women that we are. This also brought us to recognize the strength of our own potential... Which brings me to where we are now. I, like all the other participants, am pursuing post-secondary schooling. My own program is art education. I want to further understand the dynamics of community art and to prepare myself to work with youth in the educational system, using an activist approach.

My pedagogy will undoubtedly benefit from this experience. I intend to facilitate a process with my students that will encourage them to recognize their own tools of change rather than assume that I have authority to identify and allocate tools on their behalf.



# Projet Ô [Water project]

Montréal

Preparation:  
March — June 2005  
Duration:  
September 2005 —  
December 2006

Facilitating Artists  
SolidArte:  
Bernard Beaulieu  
Luc Boisclair  
Michel Levesque

Other Artists and Project  
Members  
SUCO (Solidarité Union  
Coopération [Solidarity union  
cooperation]):  
André Fortin  
Jérémie Caron-Marcotte  
Marie-Noëlle  
L'Espérance  
Mireille Tawfik  
Pénélope Gaudreault  
Véronica Vivanco

*Alliance building between an artists' collective and a non-profit international cooperation organization in order to develop creative educational events about water*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- Under what conditions can two groups with very different cultures, skills and experiences work together to achieve a sense of satisfaction in the process and fulfillment of what they produce collaboratively?
- When is it appropriate to recognize that the challenges encountered within a community art project are simply too great and the collaboration, which is rife with conflict, should end? If during such a deliberation the decision is made to terminate the project, what are the conditions under which this can be done so that the members emerge without a feeling of failure? Conversely, if during such a deliberation the decision is made to continue the collaboration, what are the conditions under which this can be done so that the members emerge without a sense of disappointment and frustration?

SUCO (Solidarité Union Coopération) is an international cooperation organization established in 1961 that encourages developmental self-management by local populations in Mali, Nicaragua, Honduras, Peru and Haiti. Since 1997, the artist collective SolidArte has produced thematic cabarets involving a number of different engaged art formats and worked in collaboration with Cuban artists. The link between two groups was made when SUCO hired one of SolidArte's members.

*Projet Ô* aimed at creating alternative tools for social awareness while experimenting with popular education methodologies. The aim of this collaborative community art process was to pool both groups' practical skills and theoretical understanding around the issue of water in order to challenge traditional activist communication strategies by including the sensuous and the playful as an integral part of an educational program.

At the beginning of the project, SolidArte was in the process of renewal after several of its core members had left. The remaining members were eager to take on the challenge of collaborating with SUCO's members, who for the most part had no experience with collective creativity. Because of these challenges that each group was facing and the fact that they had never worked together before, LEVIER suggested that they take some time to consolidate their collaboration and allocated a three-month preparatory grant to them.

*Projet Ô* continued to take shape as project members contributed to a *Vox populi* on March 22, 2006 — in honour of International Water Day — during which people's opinions about water and the process of privatization were gathered. One of the project's main activities was the multidisciplinary event *Manœuvre liquide* [Liquid manoeuvre], which was first held in May 2006 and again (with many adjustments) in December 2006 at the Centre Lajeunesse Montreal. This was a 45-minute whimsical and sensory-laden event organized in celebration of water with the aim of inviting people to reflect critically on its supply and lack thereof. Both of these events were linked to more formal presentations in collaboration



During the *Manœuvre liquide* event (members of the public and participants in Bernard Beaulieu's sound environment).

with the Québec-based SOS Water Coalition Eau secours! and Development and Peace, the official international development organization of the Catholic Church in Canada and the Canadian member of Caritas Internationalis.

Despite the fact that SUCO and SolidArte shared a number of values and political aspirations, the results of this collaboration, according to some of the people involved, were rather disappointing; the experience proved much more difficult than first expected. Several members suggested that expectations were too high for such a hybrid group (whose members, after all, barely knew each other) working on such a complex issue. One element of friction between members was the working methodology: some people insisted that the process be completely collaborative, that is to say that the whole project should have been developed by group consensus, while others, faced with this daunting task, instead favoured a gathering of ideas developed individually or in sub-groups. Much time was spent in meetings discussing, evaluating and trying to seek a common place of understanding. Almost all of the members considered abandoning the project at one time or another. SolidArte was not able to renew itself as a collective; indeed, it emerged from this project very shaken. The few educational tools that did emerge from this project have not been put to use since. Despite these difficulties, the SUCO members completed the project with an interest in including artistic collaboration in its advocacy work.

Notwithstanding the general lack of satisfaction and limited self-defined success of the project overall, several individual creations (in written form as well as in song, visual collage, video, etc.) were developed along the way. *Projet Ô* also enabled members to increase their knowledge about the issue of water from a global perspective. Furthermore, it should be noted that all the volunteers who participated in the event *Manœuvre liquide* left feeling very enthusiastic about their experience. Other positive aspects of this project include the learning gained by members of both groups about interpersonal dynamics and environmental science, as well as the efforts to create a level playing field among all the members: no distinction was made between “artist” and “community member” when it came time to allocate the financial resources. Everyone in the group was paid equitably according to their participation. In the end, the public did greatly enjoy the *Manœuvre liquide* events, which they experienced wearing blindfolds, at least part of the time: appealing to the senses in an attempt to raise political awareness about important issues such as the state of fresh water is a powerful means of inviting critical reflection.



During the *Manœuvre liquide* event.



During the *Manœuvre liquide* event (*Maima Tsungi, mère de l'eau et des poissons*, Mireille Tawfik's performance).



During the *Manœuvre liquide* event (participants watching Luc Boisclair's video).





# Corps parlants [Speaking bodies]<sup>1</sup>

Montréal

2005 — 2007

(Names followed by an \* identify project members who also co-created the documentary *Corps parlants*, as part of the video compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.<sup>2</sup>)

Women's Centre of Montreal  
Daniela Repetto\*  
Hélène Hauspied\*

Facilitating Artist  
Reena Almoneda-Chang\*

Other Artists and Project  
Members

Claire Laforest\*  
Diana Obregon\*  
Elizabeth Duplaa\*  
Marites Carino\*  
Mathilde Ste-Amour\*  
Monica Arias\*  
Patricia Lazcano\*  
Shermine Sawalha\*  
Maria Benitez

as well as 14 members who  
wished to remain anonymous

*Creation project in dance/movement implemented to supplement services provided by an organization for women of all origins*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- In the event that a key staff member of a community organization supporting a collaborative art project leaves, what conditions are necessary in order for the project to continue?
- If the members in a community art project are involved in its organization and development from the very beginning of the conversations between the artist and the representatives of the community organization, will their commitment and sociopolitical, artistic, logistical/administrative and temporal involvement be greater, and therefore more in line with the objectives of the project?

The Women's Centre of Montréal, founded in 1973, is an organization buzzing with activity, with many employees and volunteers, whose mission is "to provide services to help women help themselves."<sup>3</sup> The services are divided into two categories: front-line services — food and clothing assistance, crisis intervention, education, reception and assistance for newly arrived immigrant women; and employability services to facilitate women's integration into the job market. The association between Reena Almoneda Chang and the Women's Centre of Montréal had begun prior to the start of the project. Reena had been involved for two years as a volunteer in the front-line services, and thus was familiar with the needs and realities of the Women's Centre of Montréal members. During the first preparatory meetings between Reena and the two staff members of the Centre — Hélène Hauspied and Daniela Repetto (Daniela left the Centre soon after the project began) — the idea of doing a community art project took shape. They thought it would be interesting to offer the women a means, such as dance, through which they could express their life experiences and emotions, break out of their isolation, develop a sense of belonging and stimulate their creativity. Many of the services of the Women's Centre of Montreal already had these objectives, but it seemed interesting to develop an art project, especially one focusing on the body, that would also enable women to express themselves in a new or different way.

Another objective of this project was to bring the women using the services of the Centre together through intercultural exchange. Women immigrants have specific problems related to integration into their new country. Many other problems, of course, are common to all women: those related to poverty, motherhood, discrimination, finding employment, sexual assault, conjugal violence and social isolation.

The project was an exploration in dance-creativity involving a co-creative process implicating the different collaborators. Each of the women had a say in the decisions on all aspects of the project, according to their needs and expectations, and recognition was given to each of the members for their creative contributions and the sharing of their resources. An intercultural perspective was also included in the creative process through the use of gestures, movements and forms of expression from different cultures. It was also the group that decided on the form of documentation.



Dora Villega and Michelle Juillet, June 2008.

At the beginning of the project, everyone, including representatives of the Centre, were shaken by the fact that several members left. There were various reasons for these departures: several of the women were in a difficult socioeconomic situation and needed to focus their efforts on survival. Other members had difficulty grasping the objectives of the project: it was first presented as a dance workshop rather than a community art project. This meant that many members were expecting an activity in which they would learn dance movements. They had trouble understanding the sociopolitical objectives of the project and found it demanding and daunting to embark on the process of creation. The high rate of absenteeism affected the morale of the group and made it hard to maintain

motivation. The relationships amongst the members were jeopardized. It would also have been helpful if the employees of the organization had been more involved in the project.

On the whole, however, the project had enough impetus to continue, and it was supported by LEVIER for a second consecutive year. A large part of that year was devoted to producing the *Corps parlants* video (as part of the LEVIER *Documenting Collaboration* project), there were also more creative dance explorations, albeit with fewer women involved than in the first year. These sessions provided the women who did participate with the opportunity to further develop their expressiveness, especially since they were very motivated and had more experience than some of the previous members.

Very early in the process, the project members had decided that there would be no public presentation of their work, in order to protect their identities. This concern for anonymity became a valuable tool in creation: one of the first solutions was to use Chinese shadows behind fabric; it gave the project a particular aesthetic. The video was produced later with women who were not concerned about this question and did not feel a need to remain anonymous.

This project had a positive impact for the women who continued with it and were willing to expose their vulnerability. Work on oneself is a risky exercise; emotions can get out of control and throw everything into disarray. As the women said, it takes a great deal of courage to expose yourself through dance especially when you are not a dancer, and to give free rein to your creativity. In addition, the members' reactions were influenced by their past experiences (for example, sexual violence or, for certain immigrant women, traditional cultural repression of creative expression). But overcoming these obstacles helped the members to affirm themselves and feel more comfortable in their bodies.

The question of who participated and who did not participate was one of the main challenges of the project. In order to maximize the chance of "success" and present the project clearly to potential members, the staff members of the Women's Centre of Montreal wanted to define the objectives and structure of the project, while Reena hoped to form the group first in order to create conditions conducive to the emergence of a dance collective.

The sharing of personal experiences enriched the vision of the group that formed, and the members learned to listen more, to take an interest in the thoughts of others and to see things from a different perspective. The women had widely varied life and work histories, and even though they did not all speak the same language, they shared some fundamental values.

#### NOTES

1. See also the participation of the members of this community art project in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 104, and in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122. See also the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 113, 115 and 116.
2. For more information, see the presentation of this project (and DVD) in the centre of this publication. See also the introduction to the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 100-101.
3. From the Women's Centre of Montreal Mission Statement as published on its website: [www.centredesfemmesdemtl.org/en/index.html](http://www.centredesfemmesdemtl.org/en/index.html).

Photographic documentation: Reena Almoneda Chang.



## Maria Benitez

*I come from Paraguay. I have been in Canada for six years. I am South American and I'm considered a member of a visible minority. I have two sons, 20 and 11 years old. I am a single mother. I am doing a certificate in business management at the Université de Montréal. One of my objectives is to promote women's rights in modern society in order to be recognized as a woman. I want to be an example to my children and to teach them what social activism means.*  
— Maria Benitez

I decided to take part in this collective workshop to learn about a different culture, and to get in shape while having fun. It wasn't traditional dance, but a mixture of several influences. We did exercises that deeply affected our being.

The whole workshop — dance, exercises and role-plays — developed my awareness of my body. For example, when there's a lot of external pressure on me, I get backaches. By learning to concentrate, I discovered that I could let go of my worries and that would completely get rid of my back pain. In the workshop, I had a moment of total concentration! I was able to visualize my whole body. It was amazing! It was good! It was strong!

One of the things we did was a kind of exercise with a partner. One woman was the spectator while the other was the actor. That encouraged me to succeed because I wanted to do better than the other person and also to contribute something original. In the role of actor, you want to do something different. Meeting that challenge allowed me to discover new resources in myself that I had never suspected I had. I did something really unusual and I was no longer the same, because it gave me a new self-confidence. I think that when we arrive here as immigrants, we are like newborn babies. We have to completely rebuild our confidence. Some women took part in these workshops just for fun, while others used them as a real tool.

I tend to be shy when I'm in an unfamiliar area of activity. But in the role of actor, I felt as if a mysterious wind was blowing in my whole being, and I was able to externalize my feelings in front of the others. It was an unbelievable sensation! We did all kinds of things. It was a wonderful experience!

I felt very at ease physically. My shyness disappeared and I again became an independent person full of assurance. A free person capable making decisions, as I was in my native country, where I worked as a self-employed accountant. Here in Québec, I have mainly had factory jobs. I've also worked putting inserts in the *Journal de Montréal*. It's been hard! So I went to school. I want to get ahead in the administrative sector, which is an area I already know.

The positive experience I had in the *Corps parlants* project has stayed with me. In everyday life, it helps me deal with my problems. Also, I've noticed that since that experience, I have been making time to take care of myself. This time is crucial! I am continuing, and will continue, to build something else, because the workshop was a catalyst. I encourage everyone to do the same thing! I come from another culture and my participation in this group experience was very stimulating, and I find that every day I learn and adapt more and more to Québec society.

Québeckers will have a different image of immigrants because of what we are doing. We have to take time, because for us, time is also a challenge. What we need is an expansion of time. We have to make up time, because we have already lived a whole other life, a different life. For us, the difficulty is compounded. Above



all, we need time, and it is only after integrating that we will be able to begin working towards our personal goals. Not to mention that results do not come automatically or immediately... For every action, there is a reaction and there are repercussions!

In Québec, I was trained to be an attendant in a reception centre, but I never got a job in that field. I had to adapt the way I promoted my skills. When I got help to work on my curriculum vitae, I realized it did not really bring out my experience or reflect my personality. So I improved it, and I decided to apply for jobs in the field I worked in in my country, and to apply for work as an attendant as a fallback.

After training in a new area, I eventually came back to my original field, but in a different context. And I think this situation is representative of the experience of many immigrants.

When I go to job interviews, I notice that when employers decide whether to hire an immigrant, they do not trust their intuition as they normally would. They don't go beyond the prejudices that keep them from appreciating my true value. And yet, what I need most is to work. The more a person is trained for a job, the more help they should be given, so as to avoid all kinds of complicated situations and needless expenses.

I need people's support to adapt and to do well, both in establishing my work credentials and on the job in administration or accounting, for which I was trained in my country and for which I still have to study in Québec.

If, as immigrants, we lack self-confidence, it would be all the more difficult to constantly adapt, to accept and express our differences. In this sense, the *Corps parlants* project helped me keep working to carry out projects that are suited to my identity.

## Reena Almoneda Chang

*I am a dancer, a healer, a warrior, a mother, a Chinese-Filipina, an Anglophone, a Vancouverite, a Montréaler, a teacher and a lifelong student. I am deeply moved by the fragility of life and of human beings, and I am fighting for the recognition of this fragility, which I see as a force for change that increases our power to act and create.*  
— Reena Almoneda Chang

I am still working on the evaluation for the project's second year. When I started this reflection, so much time had passed — unlike after the first year when I completed the evaluation with the project so fresh in my mind. The time that I took for maternity leave midway through the second year makes it more difficult to remember exactly what happened. I am also struggling to get feedback from the community worker who was involved with the project, since she works less at the Centre and says that she has no time for the evaluation process. I feel very disappointed and am reminded again about the challenges I've experienced with the Centre's support throughout the project.

After the first year, we had to figure out who wanted to continue and whether we should have a recruitment drive for the second year. We also had to decide what we wanted to focus on in this new phase. There were five participants who chose to continue (before my maternity leave). A sixth participant chose to continue only with the video documentary project (resulting in *Corps Parlants*). At this stage, the community worker also indicated her desire to participate.

While the group was almost always willing to welcome new women, I was concerned about how integrating new women affected the work we were already doing. Every time there was a new participant we had to start over and couldn't go deeper into the creative process. The cohesion within the group also suffered, and the flow that had been established from working together over a long period of time could easily be disturbed.

Having said all that, I also want to acknowledge that, at times, the arrival of new participants revived creative energies and revitalized the group. There is an interesting parallel to be seen in the tension between stability and change that is as core to this community dance collective as it is to Québec society at large. While in the end we decided not to continue inviting new participants into the project prior to my maternity leave, I wonder now if it might not have been a good idea to do so.

Quite soon after we began the second year, the community worker decided not to continue with the dance sessions. Several months later, two of the other participants left on account of being too busy. In the end, the project continued with only three other women besides me. Together we decided to further our investigations and develop the choreographic structure that had been established by the end of the first year based on the movement studies we had begun to explore earlier in the project.

After I returned from my maternity leave, we needed to do a new recruitment for the final quarter, as none of the initial participants from the first year-and-a-half chose to continue: schedules

changed, availabilities became restricted, and some of the women likely felt discouraged and fed up with the inconsistencies.

The second year was really difficult, not just because of the rupture due to my pregnancy and the birth of my son, but also because of the demands related to *Documenting Collaboration* that took time away from the dance project itself. Additionally, as already mentioned, the participants had such limited availability because — as recent immigrants — they were in a process of adaptation: their situation was in constant flux as they began their studies, looked for work, etc., and that all demanded a lot of their time.

The women had a tendency to say yes to whatever was being proposed despite not always being available to follow through on what the project demanded. Perhaps I was expecting too much, but now after all these months, I am left with a sense of frustration and questions about whether I needed to do more in order to explain the challenges of the project from the beginning or change the way we entered into it. Indeed, all this brings me back to thinking about the way in which the group was formed at the very start and how the project was first announced.

If we had formed our group of dancers before the objectives for the project were defined, I wonder if things would have turned out differently. The community workers did not agree to this way of functioning, as it is not in the culture of the Women's Centre of Montréal to include participants in a steering committee. I did agree to their way of working, but in hindsight, I wonder if the women would have had a greater sense of commitment, responsibility, and accountability to the project — seen it more as their own — if they were part of the decision making process from the beginning. Even at the end of the second year, some of the women still referred to the project as "Reena's project"... when I never intended this to be anything but community collaboration.

I cannot help but see this entire process as an important learning experience for me. Organizations tend to have an institutional mentality, however left-leaning and grassroots they may be. And this institutionality enters into everything that gets done. There are limitations within organizations for sure, but what are the spaces within which we can work together?

Despite all the disappointments and frustrations, there were many moments and exchanges that confirmed the value of working with the body and dance as a means of empowerment (including my own). While contact with the organization was not sustainable, some of the women indicated their desire to continue working with me in the future.

What is most important to me is the ability to effect change. Personally, I've had a level of responsibility in this project greater than in the past. That, and the fact that this project has provided me with the first place to have a hand in realizing the connections between artistic practice and sociopolitical engagement (something that I've always considered very important), have been very empowering for me.

body dance  
empowerment.  
RAACG





## Shermine Sawalha



*Born and raised in Amman, Jordan, I moved to Montréal in 2001, to pursue my life and career in the arts. Three academic degrees later, I find it difficult to summarize my bio and do justice to all the contemporary artwork and creative collaborations I am currently involved in. One highlight however is the Ctrllab art house that I am co-owner of, an alternative cultural space on St. Laurent Boulevard.*  
— Shermine Sawalha

My experience with *Corps parlants* was more than three years ago. I joined the project because I was interested in contemporary movement for women and at the time I was applying for a university degree in contemporary dance. I was intrigued by the project because it didn't require any dance training or special physical abilities.

At the beginning, the class that I joined was fairly large. Over the course of the first several weeks many of the women switched sections and so I ended up collaborating with one other woman, Monica, in addition to Reena, who was introduced to me as the artist/teacher. We met on average once a week for at least four months. The three of us brought forward our ideas, texts, emotions, and dance movements that we wanted to explore within the context of the project. One of the texts was Borges' *Labyrinth*, which we all found captivating for the many ways it referred to presenting movement, theatrical setting, and emotional states.

We started off exploring the idea of a labyrinth and improvising different ways of finding its path from within. We also investigated various means of creating labyrinths by using our bodies, string, and light to open up and block pathways of movement and exploration. The multiple characters and their states of being were identified and researched separately to create connecting lines between our explorations of the labyrinth and our reinterpretation of this story.

All this research made me more aware that dance isn't just about movement. To be able to create movement, one has to believe in one's creative process and the environment that surrounds and influences the choreographical decisions. Our research became more than movement and stories, it became us. We were the Minotaur, Ariadne and Theseus. We were the pathway to the light and the darkness we fear.

This project widened my perception of dance and creation as a visual artist: it broadened the dimensionality of creating art in its many forms. Having this awareness contributed to the success of my audition to the University dance program I had applied to. While I had less technical background than many of the other applicants, I was able nevertheless to stand out by relying upon my improvisational and research skills that I had developed through *Corps parlants*.

One of the things that I appreciate about this project is that while I can point out what I've learned and integrated from my exchange with Reena and Monica, I am also aware of what I was able to share of my skills and experience with arts and technology. In the early stages of the *Documenting Collaboration* video project, I was interviewed as one of the *Corps parlants* participants. The work that Monica, Reena, and I had done on the labyrinth was also documented for inclusion in this video. In the following phase, when I was no longer a dance/movement participant, Reena hired me as a video technical assistant and engaged my company Collaboratory Productions to provide a video workstation, equipment, and a meeting location to complete the video project.

The hardest part about doing a community project is having people commit to the project when there is no participation fee. The fact that people don't feel obligated to show up because they are not paying for it tends to make the group unstable. It also makes us underestimate the value of what is being offered. This was generally the case in our situation. Nevertheless, Reena, Monica, and I were interested in continuing our process together as a small group. Despite all the changes, we stuck to our concept and our commitment to this project in order to create a learning environment for others and ourselves.



I personally tried to integrate myself as much as I could into the second year of meetings even when my schedule didn't fit with the *Corps parlants* schedule. I still showed up whenever I could even for short periods of time, because, although I couldn't be involved myself any longer, I was still curious about how the project was evolving.

Now three years later, as I approach my graduation from the Contemporary Dance Program at Concordia University, I look back at the *Corps parlants* project and am amazed at how much it has helped me in achieving this degree. Dance and choreography are about people, relations and the possibilities that arise from these encounters. The simple yet honest collaboration between people and the fight to make things work even though our respective schedules were so difficult to coordinate was a dance in itself.





# Rentrer chez soi [Coming home]

Montréal

March 2006 —  
June 2007

(Names followed by an \* identify project members who also co-created the documentary *L'art est vaste*, as part of the video compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.<sup>1)</sup>

Herstreet

Emmanuelle Poitevin Chaignon  
Huguette Léveillé  
Léonie Couture\*  
Ma Deva Eshana\*  
Suzanne Bourret

*Facilitating Artist*  
Diane Trépanière\*<sup>2</sup>

*Other Artists and Project Members*

C. Laflamme\*  
Chika  
Hélène  
Henriette  
Isabeau  
Isabelle\*  
Louise\*  
Lyne  
Lyse  
Maria<sup>3</sup>\*  
Maria  
Marie-Danielle  
Mojdhé  
Odette  
Renée  
Soumaya  
Suzanne  
Sylvie  
Sylvie  
Thérèse\*  
Yana\*

*Photography-based project with homeless women and women in difficulty hosted by a community-based organization*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

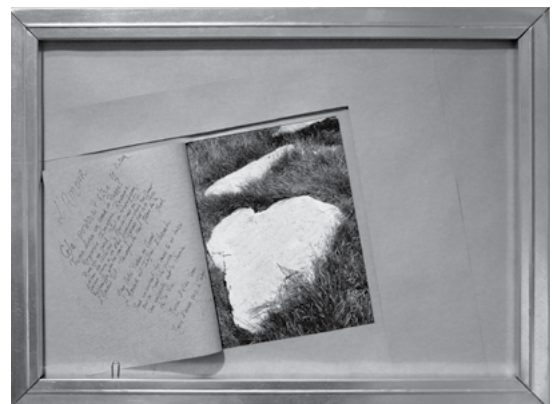
- What are the conditions necessary to support artists as they come to realize they are just as vulnerable, if not more so, than the people with whom they collaborate — who may or may not identify as artists?
- Under what circumstances can art be used to challenge community organizations to avoid treating the people they serve as mainly individuals needing “help” and encourage them to focus also on working with each individual to develop their strengths and especially their creative potential?

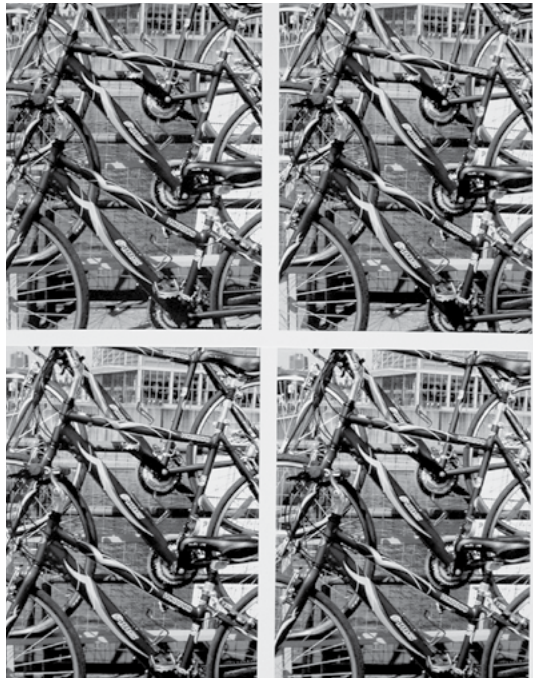
Since 1994, Herstreet has been providing psychosocial care to homeless women and women in difficulty with the aim of creating favorable conditions for these women to heal and regain a sense of personal integrity. In 2002, the organization took up residence at Maison Olga (Olga’s house), a brand new building designed and built to offer a fully integrated program of services including an overnight shelter with 20 rooms, a day centre, regular meals, therapeutic assistance, and creative expression workshops.

Diane Trépanière first began volunteering at Herstreet in 2000. Her longstanding involvement with the centre was a determining factor leading to the creative collaboration that eventually was funded by LEVIER. At Herstreet it is crucial that all workers, paid or not, understand and share the culture of the organization; becoming involved in the daily tasks — such as meal preparation and serving, dish washing and cleaning — nurtures a crucial sense of empathy and contributes to establishing and maintaining relationships with women seeking services. Diane responded positively to this “rite of passage.” She soon became implicated full time with the members of the organization through a government employment program that helped cover her salary for one year. And so it was, the “photographer” slowly began to feel a sense of belonging as she took pictures on a daily basis, at parties, and on other special occasions. In her personal practice, Diane has explored the issue of women’s historical and social identity — including her own: “Art was a way for me to speak out, to locate myself in the world. I chose photography as my medium because it requires quiet withdrawal while at the same time a lot of listening to others and attention to what is happening.”

Eventually, Diane proposed making photography available to the women at Herstreet and thus the project *Rentrer chez soi* [Coming home] emerged as a way to invite members to meet in a context other than one dealing with urgent needs. Herstreet made a point of doing everything possible to integrate *Rentrer chez soi* into its therapeutic and learning programs.

Beginning in February 2005, three to five women came on a weekly basis to do photography: they would go out as a group to take pictures and then collectively look at the digital images on the computer purchased for this project; alternately, they would study photography books or visit photography exhibitions. These outings were an opportunity to identify with a sense of belonging rather than exclusion — as was more often the experience of the majority of the women who participated. Movement through the city became associated with pleasure rather than a search for shelter or aimless wandering in order to burn time until the next meal.





Initially members were each provided with a disposable camera — thanks to a sponsorship deal that Diane was able to obtain. However as the women's skill improved they found the disposables too frustrating technically as the quality of the images was rather poor; and so, rather quickly, they turned to using a digital single lens reflex camera that was purchased for the collective use of the project members and which provided them with instant results and a greater degree of flexibility in manipulating the images.

*Rentrer chez soi* had positive repercussions on both individual and collective levels. For many of the members, the photography became associated with a search — however small — for a moment of instant happiness, beauty and quotidian wellness. As the weeks and months passed, the women increasingly began to feel at home — in the city as much as within themselves. They began to show interest in each other's work and generally found their place within the group; something that everyone (no matter what degree of attention, support and care is needed) values and appreciates.

Project members also took part in some public events including the 2<sup>e</sup> *Festival de photographie amateur de Montréal* [Montréal amateur photography festival] whose theme *Une invitation à dévoiler un lieu secret* [An invitation to reveal a secret place] was well aligned with that of *Rentrer chez soi*'s. Eleven members took part in this city-sponsored event and worked for more than four months individually and collectively on developing their ideas. One of the women was awarded a prize in this competition and five of them also exhibited their works at Herstreet in November 2005.

While in many ways this project was a success, it was also quite challenging as adjustments had to be made in light of the many missed sessions by members whose precarious living situations and related instability made it not always possible to attend the weekly sessions, however much they were motivated to do so. Additionally, individual survival mechanisms and protective strategies sometimes got in the way of being able to relate to one another: interpersonal conflict was a rather common experience, sometimes resulting in the cancellation of the activities.

LEVIÉ supported the project for a second year, during which there was another exhibition, this time at the Artothèque Gallery in Montréal. It was during this 2<sup>nd</sup> year that a significant amount of time and energy was devoted to the video documentary as part of the *Documenting Collaboration* project.<sup>3</sup> The video was as an opportunity to present a counterimage to the demeaning stereotypes often associated with homeless women in our society.

After one-and-a-quarter year of LEVIÉ funding and two-and-a-quarter years of accompanying the organization as well as the artist and members (which involved regularly scheduled quarterly meetings with LEVIÉ and occasional additional conversations to critically discuss the development of the project) — along with successful applications to the Canada Council's Inter-Arts Office in 2002 and 2005 — Herstreet found a way to integrate Diane as part of the paid staff on a part-time basis. Thus, thanks to Diana's perseverance and her involvement in fundraising for the project, photography has been integrated into Herstreet's activities for quite some time and serves as an important means of addressing social exclusion and women's self-development.

#### NOTES

1. For more information, see the presentation of this project (and the DVD) in the centre of this publication, and also in the introduction of the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, pp. 100–101.
2. See the humanist activist project description for *Des pas sur l'ombre*, which she carried out, pp. 268–269; see also her participation in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004), p. 67, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our*

*Journey*, pp. 76–77. See also the humanist activist project description *Opération : à nous les sarraus* in which she took part, pp. 218–219.

3. Maria, a member of this project — along with Johanne Chagnon, Laea Morris from the *Raising Mom* project, and Aleksandra Zajko of the Société Elizabeth Fry du Québec — was part of the (January 2010) LEVIÉ delegation to the World Social Forum in Bélem, Brazil; in addition to taking part in the general presentation, she introduced the *L'art est vaste* project video.

Photographic documentation: Anonymous.





## Final Report Questionnaires for LEVIER-supported Community Art Projects

Throughout the collaborative process, when it comes to project assessment, LEVIER-supported community art project members establish their own criteria of success. There are however, several specific issues that LEVIER considers crucial to address before, during and after each project (for example: personal motivation; co-creativity and group dynamics; and the sociopolitical context within which the project is being framed). These issues were highlighted within a set of questionnaires that took different forms depending on the development stage of each community art project funded between 2002 and 2007.

Caroline Alexander-Stevens, in collaboration with Devora Neumark, first developed these questionnaires for use during a research project initiated by LEVIER in 2001 in order to gather information to flesh out the history of community art in Québec.<sup>1</sup> The questionnaires were then adapted and used during the community art grant application process<sup>2</sup> before being circulated amongst the project members as a tool for critical reflection.

The three sets of evaluative questions reproduced below were distributed to the community group representatives and collaborating artist(s) at the start of every project; they thus served as a check-in throughout the duration of the collaboration. Then, for the final report, the community representatives, artist(s) and other project members presented the completed questionnaires to LEVIER, along with whatever other support material they chose as a way to document the achievements and challenges of their process.

Completing such a set of assessment questionnaires was quite a feat; the list of questions is long and the themes, which focus on a wide range of issues related to collaborative co-creation, are rather exhaustive. Beyond being a useful exercise for everyone involved in this process, everything that was articulated by the different project members was taken into account as LEVIER continued to develop capacity as an advocate for community and humanist activist art.

### NOTES

1. See the text by Caroline Alexander Stevens, *"How shall I live?"*, pp. 276–289.

2. See the questionnaires, pp. 37–38.

### Artist Questionnaire

#### Description of the Project

How was the project conceived?

How did this project begin?

How was the project structured?

Understanding that there are numerous competing – and sometimes conflicting reasons – for creating community art projects, what were your personal, political and artistic motivations? What did you want to achieve in this project:

- As an individual artist?
- For the other project members?
- In terms of the social context in which art is made, interpreted and received?

How did you achieve each of the above?

Why art? What is it about the creative process that motivated you to choose it as the mechanism for social engagement?

What did you consider the affective or emotional possibilities in inviting the other project members into a creative process?

Prior to beginning the project what did you know of the political and social conditions, and/or activist aspirations of the other project members, and how did you think an artistic project could impact their situation(s)?

Describe all the steps involved in this project including the preparatory stages such as brainstorming and workshoping through to the project's completion and including any follow-up activities.

#### The Community

How was the particular community group chosen?

Describe the community group or organization hosting the project.

How would you define the nature of the community group or organization and the relationship amongst the members of the project?

Community art projects do not usually begin immediately with art making: How was the relationship between the community and you initially negotiated? How did you first encounter the community group or organization? How was the project introduced to the other project members?

Describe the on-going relations between the other project members and yourself.

Did you anticipate that the project would alter the relations between individuals within the community, and if so, how?

### **Collaboration**

What was your approach to working collaboratively?

Collaboration is complex and ever changing dynamic: How did the group function collectively? Who did what? Why was the labour divided as such?

Did you encounter any challenges relative to maintaining motivation to stay involved throughout the project? If so, please explain the challenges and how you dealt with them.

What elements of choice were there for other project members and how were these determined?

Who was responsible for make aesthetic choices? Why?

Were there difference or disagreements within the group? If so, how were they negotiated and resolved?

How is your artistic process within a collaborative setting different from, and similar to, your practice when you are not working within the community? Creative practice with specific communities can involve delicate and complex interpersonal relations: What were your ethical considerations during this process?

If objects were produced as the result of this project, what was done with them, and who retained ownership after the completion of the project?

### **Evaluating the Project**

Frequently the public presentation of the work is not the end of the process: What short and/or long term follow-up activities, such as celebrations, meetings, or continued or new projects have occurred?

How would you evaluate the success of the project?

How has this process shifted your understanding of the possibilities for community art practice as a form of social engagement?

What role do you believe the creative process served in furthering the personal/social and/or political goals of the other project members?

Was it important to the project to have the involvement of a community group or organization? If so, how?

Given the affective potential of art, what were your personal emotional experiences during this project? Can you describe similar experiences that you witnessed of other project members?

To the best of your knowledge were there new connections made between the group and others implicated in the project (e.g. sponsors, partners, etc.)?

Did you continue to have any involvement with the community after the project was completed? If yes, what was the nature of your involvement?

If you were to repeat the project, or undertake another similar one, what changes would you make based on your experience?

Do you have any additional information, thoughts, or questions about community art practice that this experience has evoked?

## **Community Group or Organization Questionnaire**

Who are the members of your community and what is the nature of their relationship to each other and to the community itself? For instance is the community formed along lines of culture, gender, geographic location, interest or other defining factors?

### **Describing the Community Art Project**

Describe the community art project.

How did this project fit within the mandate of the community group or organization and what aspects of the project specifically appealed to you as an individual?

List all members of this community art project including individuals who were involved in any stage of the creative process, whether they provided administrative or technical support, volunteers, board members, and any other organizations or partners who played a role in the project.

What was the duration of this project? What were the dates of the public events related to this project that the community organization was involved in?

List all existing documentation and public recognition of the project, e.g. press notices or reviews, photo or video documentation.

Are there forms of written or visual documentation of this project that would be available for research purposes, such as minutes of board meetings where the community art project was discussed, internal evaluations, or other potentially relevant documents?

Was additional funding needed for this community art project, and if so who was responsible for securing the other financial support?

### **Description of the Community Art Process**

How did this community art project begin?

Were there specific aspects of artistic production and the creative process that motivated the community group or organization to choose this community art project as a site for social engagement?

What did you want to achieve through participation in this process:

- For the project members?
- For the community organization?
- For yourself as an individual?

How did you achieve each of the above?

What did you consider the affective or emotional possibilities in inviting the project members into a creative process?

Prior to beginning the project what did you know of the political and social conditions, and/or activist aspirations of the project members, and how did you think an artistic project could impact their situation(s)?

Describe all the steps involved in this project for the community group or organization including all preparatory stages such as brainstorming and workshopping through to the project's completion and including any follow-up activities.

### **Collaboration**

Community based projects do not begin with art making: How was the relationship between the community group or organization and the artist, and the artist and the community members initially negotiated?

Describe the on-going relations between the community organization, the artist, and the other project members.

How did you anticipate that the project would impact the relationships between individuals within the community?

Collaboration is complex and ever changing dynamic: How did the group function collectively? Who did what? Why was the labour divided in that way?

Did you encounter any challenges relative to maintaining motivation to stay involved throughout the project? If so, please explain the challenges and how you dealt with them.

Did the community art project change the role of any individual community members and if so how?

What elements of choice were there for the project members and how were these determined? Who was responsible for the aesthetic choices, and why?

Were there difference or disagreements within the group? If so, how were they negotiated and resolved?

If objects were produced as the result of this project, what was done with them, and who retained ownership after the completion of the project?

### **Evaluating the Project**

Frequently the public presentation of the work is not the end of the process. What short and/or long term follow-up actives, such as celebrations, meetings, or continued or new projects have occurred?

How would you evaluate the success of the project?

How has this process shifted your understanding of the possibilities for community art practice as a form of social engagement?

What role do you believe the creative process served in furthering the personal/social and/or political goals of the project members?

Why was it important for the community to participate in this community art project?

To the best of your knowledge were there new connections made between the group and others implicated in the project (e.g. sponsors, partners, etc.)?

Given the affective potential of art what were your personal emotional experiences during this project? Can you describe similar experiences that you witnessed amongst other project members?

Did the artist continue to have any involvement with the community after the project was completed? If yes, what was this involvement?

If you were to repeat the process, or undertake another similar one, what changes would you make based on your experience?

Do you have any additional information, thoughts, or questions about community art practice that this experience has evoked?

## **Other Artists and Project Members Questionnaire**

### **Involvement in the Community**

When did you begin your involvement with the community group or organization that hosted the community art project?

What motivated your involvement with the community group or organization?

How would you describe the nature of the community organization? For instance, it is a run by a full time administrative staff and governed by a Board of Directors, or is it an informal association of people with common interests?

What was your initial role in the community group or organization?

What brought the members of this community group or organization together: common interests or political aspirations; shared experiences; local or regional interests; etc.? In other words, what makes this group a community?

How would you describe the relationships between the members of the community group or organization: Are people close friends? Does the group get together for regular and frequent events? Is the membership of the group changing and flexible?

Has your role in the community group or organization changed during the course of your involvement, and if so, how?



Did (or does) your involvement in the community group or organization impact who you are and how you perceive yourself?

Are you still a member of this community organization? If not, when and why did you leave and are you still in touch with any other people from this specific community?

### **Description of the Community Art Process**

How did your involvement in the community art project begin?

Why did you decide to participate in this community art project?

What was the duration of your participation in this project? What are the dates of the public events that you were involved in?

Did you have any creative or artistic experience before this project? If so, what was the nature of this experience?

What did you hope to achieve through your participation in this process:

- Creatively?
- Politically or socially?
- Personally?

How did you achieve each of the above?

What did you consider the emotional side effects of participating in such a creative process?

Do you think an artistic project could effect your social and/or political and/or material situation?

Describe all the steps involved in this project that you participated in including the preparatory stages such as brainstorming and workshoping through to the project's completion and including any follow-up activities.

Do you have any documentation of the project, e.g. newspaper clippings, photographs and/or videos?

Did your participation in this community art project cost you anything? If not, who provided the financial support?

### **Collaboration**

Community based projects do not begin with art making: How was the relationship between the artist and the other project members (including yourself) initially negotiated?

Describe the on-going relations amongst various members including the artist involved in this process.

Collaboration is complex and ever changing dynamic: How did the group function collectively? Who did what? Why was the labour divided as such?

Did you encounter any challenges relative to maintaining motivation to stay involved throughout the project? If so,

please explain the challenges and how you dealt with them.

Did the community art project change your role, or the role of any other individual community member, and if so, how?

What elements of choice did you have as an individual within the artistic process and project in general?

Who was responsible for making aesthetic choices, and why?

Were there differences or disagreements within the group? If so, how were they negotiated, and resolved?

If objects were produced as the result of this project, what was done with them, and who retained ownership after the completion of the project?

### **Evaluating the Project**

Frequently the public presentation of the work is not the end of the process: What short and/or long term follow-up activities, such as celebrations, meetings, or continued or new projects have occurred?

How would you evaluate the success of the project?

How has this process shifted your understanding of the possibilities for community art practice as a form of social engagement?

What role do you believe the creative process served in furthering your personal/social and/or political goals?

Why was it important to you to participate in this community art project?

Did you make any new connections or form new relationships with other project members during this project?

Given the emotional or affective potential of art, what were your personal experiences during this project? Can you describe similar experiences amongst other project members that you witnessed?

Did participating in the creative process of this community art project change you or affect the way you perceive yourself?

Have you continued to make art as a result of your participation in this project? Has your creativity and/or artistic practice been altered by this process?

If you were to repeat the process, or participate in another similar one, what changes would you make based on your experience?

Do you have any additional information, thoughts, or questions about community art practice that this experience has evoked?

# Abondance et partage [Abundance and sharing]<sup>1</sup>

Granby

*Creation of a collective outdoor work focused on the gaps in our largely affluent society*

October 2005 —  
April 2007

L'Atelier 19  
L'Autre Versant [The other side]  
Carrefour Jeunesse-Emploi  
[Youth employment centre]  
Solidarité Ethnique Régionale  
de la Yamaska [Regional  
Ethnic Solidarity of the  
Yamaska Region] (SERY)  
SOS Dépannage [SOS  
troubleshooting]

*Facilitating Artist*  
Francine Charland

*Other Artists and Project  
Members*

Hélène Dion  
Hélène Plourde  
Louise Scott  
Luce Grenier  
Lucile Alix  
Luz Marina Cassanova Diaz  
Marie Bourbeau  
Monique St-Pierre  
Nina Pelletier  
Suzanne Paré

12 adults from l'Autre Versant  
— an alternative mental health  
organization

12 youth (16–24 years old)  
from the Carrefour Jeunesse-  
Emploi

Approximately 50 children  
(9–11 years old) from the  
école l'Assomption and the  
Loisirs de Granby day camp  
3 adult members of the SOS  
Dépannage community garden

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- What are the differences between community advocacy projects and community art collaborations and how do these differences matter?
- What are the conditions that make it possible to develop and sustain broad based coalitions between different community groups and organizations? Particularly, what role can art play in these socioeconomic and political processes?

Granby, located 80 kilometers from Montréal, is a city that has experienced rapid economic development; but despite its growth, poverty has not diminished. Created in 2001 as a nonprofit organization, L'Atelier 19 [The studio 19] is dedicated to initiating and testing innovative co-creative solutions to the challenges in education, environment, health and the economy. L'Atelier 19 — founded and directed by Francine Charland, a Granby muralist — works closely with local schools and other community groups to promote creativity as a tool to develop self-awareness, healing and social integration.

With *Abondance et partage* [Abundance and sharing], Francine wanted to share her reflections about all what is “lacking” in our affluent society, which is based on *having* rather than on *being*. Initially, the project was meant to be a collaboration between Francine, L'Atelier 19 and Solidarité Ethnique Régionale de la Yamaska [Regional Ethnic Solidarity of the Yamaska Region] (SERY) — a community organization that annually welcomes hundreds of immigrants who work in the factories in Granby and surrounding areas. The aim was to unite the youth and middle-aged woman through a creative exploration. Prior to granting financial support to this project, LEVIER requested Francine to further develop her critical analysis relative to the distribution of wealth within the current capitalist system and, in particular, the ethical dimension of this problematic and the role of the artist in this type of collaboration.

Even before contacting SERY, Francine had invited the SOS Dépannage [SOS troubleshooting] to participate in the project by allowing her to hang the final work on the exterior walls of the old factory it calls home: SOS Dépannage is both a community organization and a social economy enterprise involved in a variety anti-poverty activities. In response to yet another invitation Francine sent around, nine middle-aged women agreed to participate by contributing financially to the project or by volunteering their time — including two members of L'Atelier 19's Board of Directors. Despite several meetings with SERY during which Francine tried to recruit members, only three women decided to get involved due to general unavailability of immigrant women to participate during the hours set aside for the activities (on account of their factory employment). Only one participant of Colombian origin stayed with the project until the end.



In order to ensure the completion of the artwork (10 six-foot by eight-foot paintings decorated with mosaics mirrors<sup>2</sup> that were to be installed overtop the barricaded windows of the SOS Dépannage building), Francine also presented





the project to l'Autre Versant [The other side] and the Carrefour Jeunesse-Emploi [Youth employment centre] — both organizations agreed to have some of their members participate in the project. Members from all the different groups worked separately on their designated sections of the paintings before the pieces were assembled at l'Atelier 19.

The group of women followed Francine's proposal to work with the priorities that were named during the *Vision 2015* forum held in November 2005 about the future of the Upper-Yamaska region. Five paintings were produced thanks to the passion and commitment of these women — who eagerly kept up their involvement twice as long as originally planned. The themes were as follows: welcome, freedom, expression, creativity and equilibrium. While this all was going on, Francine was also facilitating drawing and painting workshops with the participating members from l'Autre Versant and the Carrefour Jeunesse-Emploi. The self-portraits that were produced in these workshops were completed in black and white — a choice determined by Francine who wanted to illustrate the light and dark aspects of every person. After these members completed their self-portraits, Francine instructed them to add something to one of the five paintings created

by the women and inscribe the following statement: "I am important, I have a role to play and I make all the difference." Additionally there were self-portrait and mirror mosaic workshops held in the SOS Dépannage community gardens during the summer in which students from l'école l'Assomption [The Assomption school] and youth from the Loisirs de Granby day camp took part. It had originally been planned that the workshops would allow for a dialogue between the middle-aged women and the youth and be an occasion for the women to share their visions with the younger participants. This exchange unfortunately did not take place as was expected, leaving many of the women disappointed.

The inauguration of *Abondance et partage* was organized jointly by l'Atelier 19 and the Chairman of the *Vision 2015* forum. Invited guests included political representatives, businessmen and women, community organizations, artists and project members. During the inauguration, two of the paintings were symbolically sold to local business associations. The money raised was put toward the creation of the *Abondance et partage* fund, which is intended to finance future activities of l'Atelier 19 and also covered the expenses related to documenting the project.

A major technical problem emerged in February 2007; the paintings began to deteriorate on account of the inclement winter weather. After consulting with several experts, it became obvious that the only way to halt the erosion of the images was to bring the work indoors. Francine realized that she had neglected an important technical aspect — that of the suitability of the paint for outdoor use and conservation of the paintings — and although she was quite disappointed, the project members and implicated community groups were able to affirm again the importance of the whole process and were pleased to see that the works were safeguarded from further damage by being hung at the entrance of l'Atelier 19.

Completing the project within the given time frame was a major challenge; nevertheless, most of the members felt satisfied with their experience. Moreover, Francine herself realized — and this is one of the positive repercussions of this project — that she had not clearly enough identified her own needs relative to feeling a sense of belonging. Through the course of the project, Francine came to understand just how much she needed to be recognized as an artist amongst women with whom she identifies — a sentiment shared by many of the other l'Atelier 19 members.<sup>3</sup> Another beneficial outcome of this project was that the regional art, community, economic and political alliances were expanded.

#### NOTES

1. See the participation of project members in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 115 and 118.
2. All of the artistic projects carried out by l'Atelier 19 employ only found and recycled materials.
3. Devora Neumark made three trips to l'Atelier 19 during the course of this project (including one trip with Sylvie Tourangeau doing the interviews for this book) and on each occasion spent a full day with the women members discussing their work, the ideas behind it and how they felt about the process.

Photographic documentation: Collaborative effort on the part of the project members



## Francine Charland and Hélène Dion

*I was born 52 years ago and I explore life through creative experience.*

*This nourishes me and enables me to accept the unacceptable. Life and death become sources of hope for me.*

— Francine Charland

*I was born in 1948 to a family of pioneers in a rural community in the Abitibi region.*

*Sociology and urban planning are my areas of interest. I am learning from my daughter to see the beauty and strength of youth. I am in my own way a builder, a social entrepreneur, an adventurer. Involvement in the community by way of Atelier 19 has led me, through the play of creation and co-creation, to make peace with the words cooperation and collaboration so they no longer mean alienation for me.*

— Hélène Dion



**Hélène Dion:** I'm very happy to meet with you along with Francine. I've been dreaming of Atelier 19 with her since 2001, and I still am.

**Francine Charland:** I'm happy too, I'm just delighted! I love meetings because, to me, creation is associated with meeting. When there's meeting, there's creation!

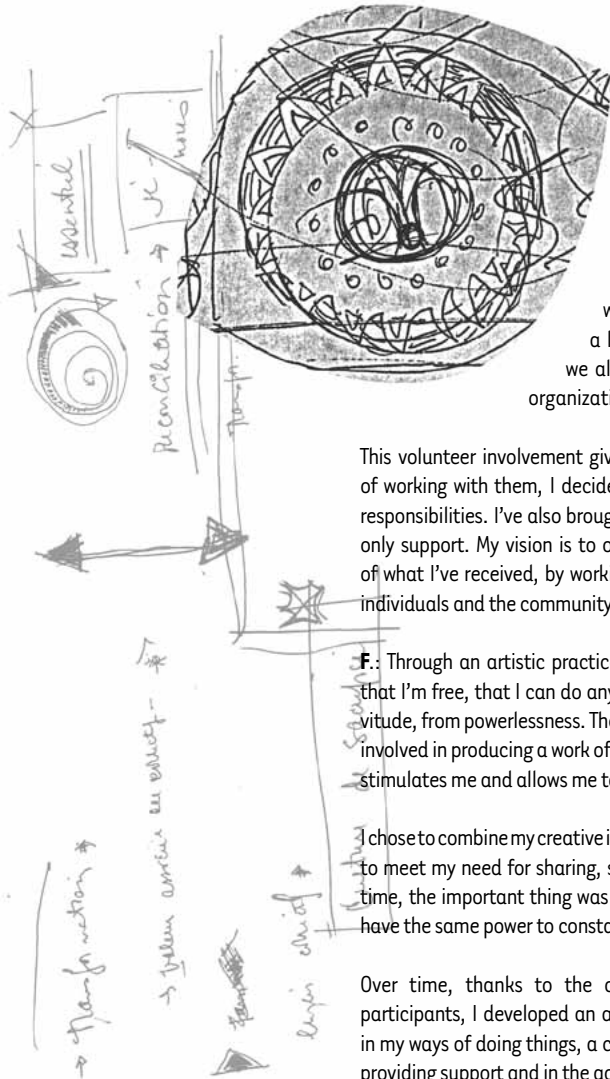
**H.:** The *Abondance et Partage* project to produce a collective work was completed in 2006, and I had met Francine in 1998. At the beginning, nobody was thinking of creating an organization that would support collective creation, which is what Atelier 19 became. It all began when I met Francine in an artistic expression workshop. I couldn't have predicted what it would lead to. The magic came like a bolt of lightning out of the blue, and it's still happening!

**F:** When we met, I was coming out of a period of intense individual creation, which had been very fulfilling for me and in which I had discovered how infinite the path of creation is. It was visceral, a

not an artist, my first questions about her project were related more to how I could help her fulfill that dream.

**F:** Through diligent creative practice, I've rediscovered the spirit of play and the feeling of wonder I had as a child, which I had lost and which had been taken away from me. When I place myself within the creative process, I find that it's a space of trust for me. And I realize that the path exists. I don't have the power to create a space for others: each person has their own path. It is this intense practice and this state of really letting go that make it possible for me to teach differently.

**H.:** For a long time, I had a dream that I couldn't carry out on my own. At the beginning, I worked with Francine to fulfill her dream of promoting artistic expression and democratizing art in the community. I come from Abitibi, from one of the last villages created during the period of colonization of the north. My parents were very involved in setting up local institutions in order to create a prosperous, autonomous community. They were real agents of



In fact, that's how I reacted to the experiment Francine proposed, which allowed me to continue developing with her while discovering the meaning of community art. We created Atelier 19 in 2001. We now are a core group of six people who believe in the value of art as a lever for social development, and we all offer our talents to support the organization's actions.

This volunteer involvement gives my life meaning. In the course of working with them, I decided to get more involved in sharing responsibilities. I've also brought my own vision to the group, not only support. My vision is to offer my adopted community a bit of what I've received, by working to support the development of individuals and the community.

**F.:** Through an artistic practice that's my own, I am discovering that I'm free, that I can do anything, and this frees me from servitude, from powerlessness. The awareness of the creative process involved in producing a work of art, a garden, a meal or a dialogue stimulates me and allows me to constantly create myself.

I chose to combine my creative impulse and my teaching experience to meet my need for sharing, social justice and equality. At that time, the important thing was to convey the idea that all people have the same power to constantly create themselves.

Over time, thanks to the observations of H       and the participants, I developed an approach out of what was intuitive in my ways of doing things, a concrete method of working both in providing support and in the act of creation.

**H.:** If I refer to my experience, I remember in 1998, when I was taking part, out of curiosity but also with some fear, in workshops where Francine presented us with a page of art history, an artist, a stimulus, a theme and materials and we had to create a work based on those elements, how it was a voyage in my heart every time. I remember the first time I had to show my work... That's how I established a relationship of trust with the other participants, which led me to a collective space and made me want to create with others. When I look at the young people who come to Atelier 19, I can understand their reactions to the works they create. They're so surprised to see what comes from themselves. Thinking about my own experience gives me a lot of hope for their potential.

**F.:** At the beginning, I didn't know yet that I would build something. It was by sharing the creative process, by being associated with others in a space of freedom, that the collective dream was built.

In a collaborative process, my vision doesn't take precedence; it changes while remaining connected with other people's visions. It goes farther, and every time another person is added, it's amplified. All this is profoundly human!

H      's dream and my own merged. A dream is something alive. It has a head, a heart, etc. We discover it gradually, we invent it as we go along. The community has needs and we also have to define our needs and our limits.

**H.:** Today, I realize that creativity is not only expressed by producing material works. I used to think talking about community art meant discussing the production of art. In the long run, I became a co-creator in Atelier 19. Experiencing this transformation would have been impossible without dialogue, without meaningful connections! All in all, it's this awareness of the collaborative process that created Atelier 19. So the art object is Atelier 19 itself as a whole as well as each of the works produced; the projects as well the management. So too our thinking and our contribution to changes in practices in the community. Nothing is known at the outset — there's always a new idea, a new partnership, a new project.

**F.:** In our ways of doing things, we favour *power with* rather than *power over*. This "simple difference" in the process really lets people rediscover their own power. In this way, through meeting people in full possession of their power, more and more sharing takes place. Here, the idea of working collaboratively is a vehicle for creation, and that's the adventure of Atelier 19!

**H.:** We're always learning and asking questions. Nothing is ever taken for granted, everything is wide open. The challenge of being, of becoming.

**F.:** The collective work *Abondance et partage* and the collaboration with Engrenage Noir / LEVIER allowed me to recognize that I'm an artist and to accept having a different practice. The training sessions, the discussions, the meetings and the individual support helped me put words to my work. I understood then that I was part of a movement of engaged art. Before that, I thought I was alone and isolated in my way of seeing, saying and doing. I felt I was outside the great community of artists; their concerns did not seem to be my concerns. I needed support. Meeting Johanne and Devora from LEVIER, and Louise Lachapelle, who worked on the organization of the training sessions in 2004, gave me an opportunity to come together with artists who spoke the same language I did. I received recognition from my peers.

These external links gave me the strength to continue the work I had undertaken in my community. Now I realize how much the collective work *Abondance et partage* that was produced as part of the LEVIER project once again expanded the space of trust needed for openness to new paths, for me and for Atelier 19.

**H.:** The great adventure of co-creation nourishes me deeply. I am constantly re-aligning myself to the values associated with it and building with what my parents passed down to me in terms of knowledge and belonging to a community. I do it in honour of my parents, but differently.

**F.:** This interview process has made it possible for me to create some distance from Atelier 19 and that distance lets me see it as part of an art network. At the beginning, I saw Atelier 19 as a unique creation belonging to the Granby community. Now I see it as one piece of a great collective work. And I really like that!



## Marie Bourbeau

*Like all those who are  
"mad with hopes,"  
I dream of reaching the  
human heart, in myself  
and others, by every  
means possible. Art is a  
bridge across fear and the  
numbing power of fear.  
— Marie Bourbeau*

The main reason I got involved in the project was that I had already been exploring visual arts for a few years. I had taken workshops on free expression, like one given by fine arts students that I took when I was six years old. At that time, I discovered an unrestricted creative space. I wanted to rediscover that kind of pleasure of creating, that space of freedom, when a friend told me about Atelier 19.

I didn't question the whole context surrounding this experience; all I knew was that I was going to create with a group of women my age and that we would be working with troubled youth. So I became immersed in *Abondance et Partage*, which wanted to become part of *Vision 2015*, a project of the Granby regional municipality that included a community aspect. I have to admit that this really affected me!

Francine very soon provided a framework for our reflection. We had to define how we envisaged the development of our community, and I wasn't even from Granby. I found that we didn't explore the space of freedom enough. The framework was established before we had explored the pleasure of creating together. We were given assignments too soon for my liking. For me, that was the source of the problems we had, and of a uneasiness that was never resolved. Plus there was the fact that the young people ended up working separately, so we never met them.

I stayed to have the group experience with the women, and not for the *Vision 2015* project, that's quite clear. Working as a team with the women was both enriching and difficult. I soon had a strong and singular vision, which I imposed on the others. In a collective process, how can this attitude be changed so that the process remains collective all the way? I was uncomfortable and unhappy with this situation throughout the project. Even though the final work was appreciated by everyone, personally, I was left with a certain dissatisfaction, because the experience did not live up to my desire to create together. My own behaviour sometimes results in my sabotaging the very experience I wanted to have.

The feeling I'm left with is that a collective creation process, with everything it entails — "This is my idea, that's your idea, whose idea is best? How much space will I be given, or will I take?" — required a more reassuring atmosphere to support the work in teams. After each of the groups encountered problems, Francine tried to help so that the works could be completed on schedule. And she was successful in that: the panels were finished. But personally, I feel that, although when she talked about community art she said process was important, we missed out on that.

It's true that when you ask people to create together, there are some very demanding challenges. The essential first step is the sharing of visions, which requires the means and the time. Also, words and images are not always enough for everyone. Sharing your vision without being competitive is already difficult. We did it in part, but not enough, and that had an effect on the following stage: the collective decisions about the task to be carried out. How to achieve that? It's a problem you find at every level of society: in couples, in families, at work, in every kind of organization and in politics.

Then it came time to produce the work, but working collectively, in such a way that everyone would have a place. How to learn to create together, using each person's skills and not passing judgment? Trust is the key to this whole process. It takes time to build trust. How to accomplish this? We've gone quite a ways toward establishing trust, and that's something. There are still gaps, and I would add that that's what makes me want to try other, similar experiments.

After the *Abondance et Partage* project, I found a new space of freedom by working in a small group in the studio of an artist, without doing collective creation. We work together, but each of us pursues her own explorations. With this Montréal artist, who's involved in her neighbourhood, Centre-south, and with community organizations, we're preparing a community art project with young people. Working with young people has been a dream of mine for a long time. The idea of being with them in a space of freedom in order to nurture the child in us will, I hope, spur me to give enough time to the process to establish trust.

*Confiance*



## Suzanne Paré



*Born in 1947, I have been a studious child, a woman of many loves, a wife and a mother. I was a salaried worker for 38 years, and it was only after my retirement in 2003 that I understood who I really am. My involvement as a volunteer two days a week with the community group Atelier 19, which works with art and creativity, allowed me to discover and, especially, to accept and to fully be who I am.*  
— Suzanne Paré

When I agreed to take part in this interview, I went back — in order to satisfy my chronic need for efficiency — and checked my notes and looked at my sketches, because it's been almost three years since the *Abundance et Partage* project ended.

I realized that my personality changed for the better through my involvement in the project. I reread part of the text I wrote in April 2006, which enabled me to observe how I now give myself the right to be. In the group of 10 participants in the project, there were some women with whom I didn't really establish a relationship. "Why? Indifference, antipathy or similarity to my own pain — all synonymous, no doubt!"

When I read that sentence in my notebook, I realized how much I've changed since then. During that creation workshop, I was more attracted by people who reflected my positive side than by people who reflected my negative side. This discovery about my way of relating made me aware of *difference itself*. It became obvious to me that the more I accept my shadow, the more I accept that of others.

During the activities associated with the project, I felt that I sensed judgment by the others, when they weren't judging me at all; I was the one who was judging myself. I was the one who was afraid of not measuring up, of not being *the* perfect woman. I'm striving to be kinder to myself, to step back a bit and be more detached and to include more humour in my life as an artist and a woman. With time, I've grown and I've learned that in any collective, people are both similar and different. Basically, wherever I go I only meet reflections of myself, so I choose to move toward this process of total, unconditional acceptance of myself and others.

One of my ways of accepting and respecting differences is to see these differences, not as faults, but rather as characteristics. I accept the fact that I was first shaped by a family, a city, a country and an educational, political, economic and cultural system; now, as a free adult, I exercise my power to choose my own values. So it's easier for me to accept the values expressed by others.

Some people may call me an anarchist, but I view myself simply as an adult who is free to think and to be. That's what it is to be conscious!

I think that in the working groups, one team was having a hard time getting their heads and their hearts together in harmony, expressing the theme of exclusion in their painting. In reality, this was once again the difficulty of accepting other people's values. I must have taken that conflict harder than they did, without knowing why until this morning.

Rereading another section of my notes, also written in April 2006, which I titled "Je veux être" [I want to be], I realize that I've always excluded myself, and that's why this disturbed me so much at the time. I realize it now as I describe it. This is all so extraordinary! This new awareness was also part of the process related to *Abundance et Partage*, it was another stage in the process that I hadn't discovered until today in the interview.

With regard to the symbolism of *Abundance et Partage*, I associated it with our project to save the factory and to spread the idea of renovation, expansion and the creation of a centre for developing creativity while saving Granby's industrial heritage. It was about creating something for the community, while in reality, the abundance was for me, I was the one who was experiencing it, since I received a better knowledge of myself from the others.

When I drew the first sketch, combining the ideas of the three members of the team, it was of a gigantic tree growing through the walls and roof of the factory. We found that drawing aggressive and violent, so it had to be reworked. And then, a few days later, on a very windy day, a steel beam from the adjacent building ripped through the roof of our studio. Was that an omen?



Through that community adventure, I learned the power of dream and fantasy. It was a creative, enriching adventure. I was able to imagine the future of a building based on its past, and it awakened in me the capacity to dream.

I consider myself part of the community's wealth. I want to reach out and share, and to do it with joy, and I want to work in the community with that joy in my relationships with other people and other places.

I accept my value and I enrich myself by accepting the value of others. Abundance is for everyone, and I'm part of everyone. In the end, I always come out a winner!

# Une chanson pour un logement [A song for an apartment]

Sherbrooke

*Choir performance by tenant activists to raise awareness about housing rights*

April 14, 2005

People's Rights Over Urban  
Development (PROUD)  
[FRAPRU]

Marie-José Corriveau  
Lucie Poirier

Association des locataires  
de Sherbrooke [Sherbrooke tenants' association]  
Normand Couture

Solidarité populaire Estrie  
[People's solidarity Eastern  
Townships]

La Table ronde des organismes  
volontaires d'éducation  
populaire de l'Estrie [The  
roundtable of popular educa-  
tion voluntary agencies in the  
Eastern Townships]

## Facilitating Artists

DaZoque!<sup>1</sup>

Alec McElcheran

Gregory Anderson Smith

Hélène Boissinot<sup>2</sup>

Laura Vannicola

Minda Bernstein<sup>3</sup>

Norman Nawrocki<sup>4</sup>

## Other Artists and Project Members

Chorale du FRAPRU:

Béchir Gacem

Denis Lévesque

Gaétan Roberge

Guy Lévesque<sup>5</sup>

Huguette Doyon

Jean-Claude Laporte

Julie Dion

Julie Leblanc

Karina Montambault

Line Carrier

Lucie Poirier

Marie-Claude Thériault

Marie-Ève Bouchard

Marie-José Corriveau

Martha Jara<sup>6</sup>

Pierre Marcotte

Suzanne Thériault

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- In the attempt to garner public awareness for subjects that are often considered less than "sexy" — such as the plight of people living in poverty or the lack of adequate affordable housing — what means can be used successfully to reach people who tend to not be interested in social activism?
- In addition to personal growth and individual empowerment, activist projects aim to challenge the status quo and influence policy: what scale of intervention is necessary to achieve these systemic changes?

Since 1978, FRAPRU — a Québec-based umbrella group comprised of 130 organizations — has been defending the right to housing and promoting social housing for people with low income. FRAPRU also addresses the problems of urban development and the struggle against poverty; they also promote social rights.

The professional musical ensemble DaZoque! — co-founded by violinists Minda Bernstein and Norman Nawrocki — performs edgy world beat, neo-klezmer and East Europe-inspired compositions. DaZoque! is well known for its socially engaged performances.

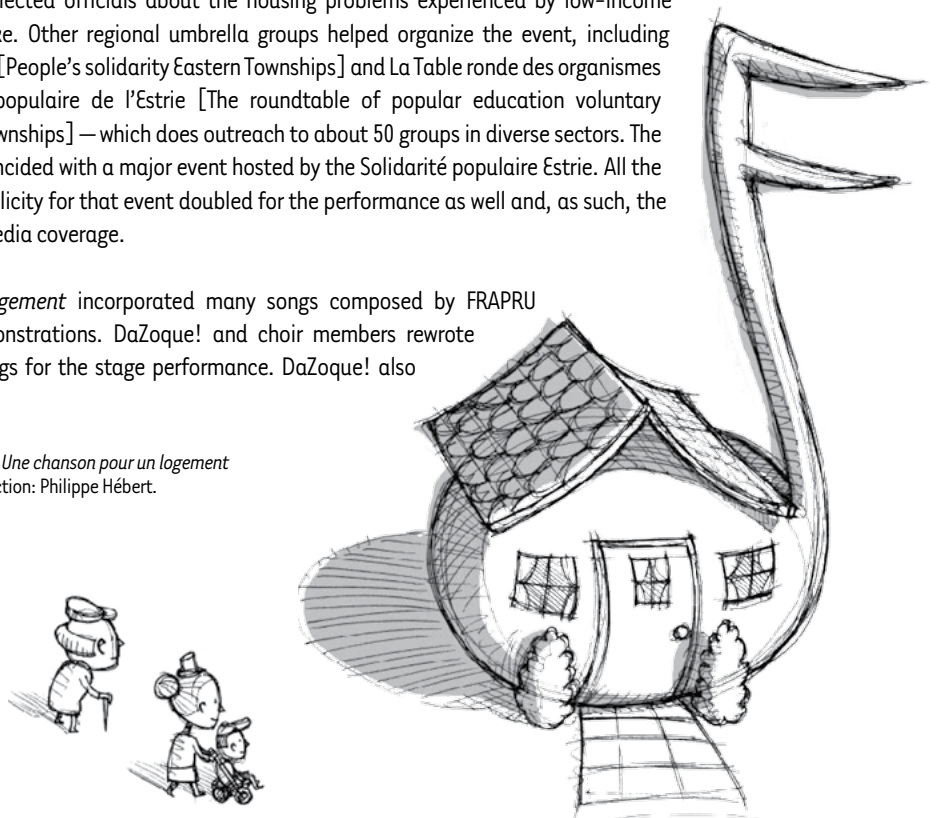
In the spring of 2004, FRAPRU and DaZoque! collaborated on a project to develop, produce and perform a show to raise awareness about housing rights. Thirteen FRAPRU activists formed a choir;<sup>7</sup> five others joined the five-piece DaZoque! ensemble. Together they performed *Une chanson pour un logement* [A song for an apartment] for 400 people in Montréal, and later in Quebec City, on the eve of the deposition of a new Québec housing policy statement by the Jean Charest government.

The financial support extended by LEVIER provided the group with the means to perform this show a third time. Members of the Association des locataires de Sherbrooke [Sherbrooke tenants' association] participated in making this encore presentation relevant to their region, where the available number of rental units was, at the time, the lowest in all of Canada.

By producing the show in Sherbrooke — which happens to be Premier Jean Charest's own electoral riding — during the activities marking the second anniversary of his government, the Association wanted to raise awareness amongst the general population and elected officials about the housing problems experienced by low-income local renters in Sherbrooke. Other regional umbrella groups helped organize the event, including Solidarité populaire Estrie [People's solidarity Eastern Townships] and La Table ronde des organismes volontaires d'éducation populaire de l'Estrie [The roundtable of popular education voluntary agencies in the Eastern Townships] — which does outreach to about 50 groups in diverse sectors. The April 14<sup>th</sup> performance coincided with a major event hosted by the Solidarité populaire Estrie. All the promotional work and publicity for that event doubled for the performance as well and, as such, the show enjoyed extensive media coverage.

*Une chanson pour un logement* incorporated many songs composed by FRAPRU members for street demonstrations. DaZoque! and choir members rewrote and rearranged these songs for the stage performance. DaZoque! also

Elements from the poster for the *Une chanson pour un logement* performance. Design and production: Philippe Hébert.







composed new works specifically for this show. For many of the tenants' rights activists, this was their first live stage performance. Some of them even sang solos!

According to the Association des locataires de Sherbrooke, the performance was an important piece of advocacy; the show enabled them to connect with a portion of the population otherwise difficult to reach. They also noted beneficial The FRAPRU choir.

effects of this experience on the singers in terms of increasing their confidence speaking in public during protests and discussions in large groups.<sup>8</sup>

#### NOTES

1. See the description of *La Virevolte en musique et en chansons* humanist activist project in which this group also participated, pp. 198-199.
2. See her participation in the *La Virevolte en musique et en chansons* humanist activist project, pp. 198-199.
3. See her participation in the *La Virevolte en musique et en chansons* humanist activist project, pp. 198-199.
4. See his participation in *LEVIER's Second Orientation Meeting*, pp. 25-27, and in the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 35, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 74 and 79. See his participation in the *La Virevolte en musique et en chansons* humanist activist project, pp. 198-199. See also the analysis of *Le Cirque en Ca\$h : où rien n'est caché*, in which he also took part, in Caroline Alexander Stevens text "How Shall I Live?", pp. 279-281. Norman acted as coordinator of
5. See his participation in the *La Virevolte en musique et en chansons* humanist activist project, pp. 198-199.
6. See her participation in the *La Virevolte en musique et en chansons* humanist activist project, p. 198-199.
7. With the assistance of Laura Vannicola as Director of the choir.
8. This experience with music and song had quite a few repercussions: see the description of the project subsequently developed by la Maison La Virevolte (see pp. 198-199).



# La Virevolte en musique et en chansons

## [The turnaround in music and song]

Longueuil

20th Anniversary  
Performance:  
November 3, 2005

Performance in  
solidarity with the  
Repas du passant  
[The passerby's  
meal]: May 11, 2006

La Maison La Virevolte [The  
turnaround house]  
Guy Levesque<sup>1</sup>

Facilitating Artists

DaZoque!<sup>2</sup>

Hélène Boissinot<sup>3</sup>

Minda Bernstein<sup>4</sup>

Norman Nawrocki<sup>5</sup>

Sylvain Auclair

Sylvain Côté

Other Artists and Project  
Members

Dominique Moffet

Émélie Millette

Hilda Viveiros

Jeanette Patterson

Joanne Stockless

Julie Leblanc

Laurence Barthelémy

Marie-Elsa St-Jude

Martha Jara<sup>6</sup>

Sonia Girouard

Stéphane Chalifour

Stéphanie Gélinas

Suzanne Malouin

Valérie Lévis

Véronique Marsan

*Collaboration between a professional musical ensemble and a community choir aimed at highlighting the problems associated with poverty*

QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- There are many challenges facing a community choir whose aims are aesthetic quality, individual and communal empowerment, and sociopolitical critique. What conditions can help sustain such a project for the long-term?
- How can such a project reach audiences that are unaware of systemic socioeconomic oppression?

La Maison La Virevolte [The turnaround house] is a community organization, which originated in 1985 with the affordable housing movement (HLM). It has been supporting families in Vieux-Longueuil ever since. Currently the organization—with its 844 members, dedicated volunteers, interns and multiple partners—is a hub of support for parents and children and is well known and respected for its advocacy work in relation to family rights.

La Maison La Virevolte takes a strong political position protesting the lack of adequate affordable housing and the living conditions of people who need to rely on social assistance. It also seeks out ways to counter the primacy of the capitalist system along with the technocratization it generates and the social control it engenders—to the detriment of social equity and popular education. La Virevolte affirms that the pleasure of being together (e.g. fellowship, friendship and hospitality) is central to the willingness to get involved in one's community and advocate for one's rights.

As a member of People's Rights Over Urban Development (PROUD), La Virevolte contributed to the April 2005 Sherbrooke performance *Une chanson pour un logement* [A song for an apartment] in collaboration with the DaZoque!, a professional musical ensemble. Following on the success of that event, La Virevolte decided to create a choir composed of their members as a means of self-empowerment. Through music, the community could take ownership of its own history and experiences—and express these through song. On a daily basis, La Virevolte identifies the needs and the strengths of its members. The shared musical experience enhances this process and reinforces positive aspects.

One such opportunity arose during the preparations for the 20th anniversary celebration of La Virevolte. In order to highlight the cultural and musical activism of its community members, the organization sought funding from LEVIER to be able to collaborate once again with DaZoque! resulting in *La Virevolte en musique et en chansons* [The turnaround in music and song].



During the 20th anniversary performance of *La Virevolte*.



During the 20th anniversary performance of *La Virevolte* (Guy Lévesque and DaZoque!).



La Virevolte represents an entire culture — complete with its own values, principles, ideologies and sociopolitical stripes — as much for its members, as for its employees. Its activities are shaped by and for the community participants. The project *La Virevolte en musique et en chansons* was no exception. The women who make up the La Virevolte choir are for the most part single mothers or women living alone living in public housing. A few of them are employees of La Virevolte.



During the 20th anniversary performance of *La Virevolte*.

With DaZoque!, La Virevolte established different committees to develop the various aspects of the performance. The Text Committee (primarily members of the choir), composed original songs and selected popular songs for the choir to perform. The Music Committee (DaZoque! and two members of La Virevole) created the music based on the choices of the Text Committee. La Virevolte designed the show with the cooperation of DaZoque! and placed the choir centre stage. This creative process resulted in a one-hour performance of 14 songs on November 2, 2005 in the Champlain Regional College auditorium (Longueuil) with nearly 400 people in attendance.

On May 11, 2006, the show was performed a second time, an act of solidarity with the community group Repas du passant [Passerby's meal], which serves over 150 meals a day for individuals and families living in poverty in the Longueuil region.

These two events, in close collaboration with DaZoque!, provided the choir with the opportunity to develop their musical skills and affirm the mandates of both La Virevolte and the Repas du passant. The careful selection of original songs and covers of popular music allowed the choir members to transmit their alternate worldview — a critique of the capital-obsessed, patriarchal society. Instead of the exclusion and marginalization to which they are too often accustomed, this project showcased their talent and creativity.

In keeping with the principles of popular education, these performances were effectively a celebration of “being” in a society where “having” is predominant. For La Virevolte and its members, these performances are affirmations of participatory social practices such as mutual support and solidarity and a rejection of the kind of competition, aggressiveness and hyper-efficiency that is so prevalent in the current late-Capitalist system. While *La Virevolte en musique et en chansons* highlighted individual accomplishment, it did so towards a common objective — the aesthetic experience was integrally linked with a gesture aimed at social transformation. This orientation has been maintained ever since these events as the choir has continued to perform on a number of occasions and music is now an integral part of La Virevolte.

#### NOTES

1. See his participation in the *Une chanson pour un logement* humanist activist project, pp. 196–197.
2. See the description of the *Une chanson pour un logement* humanist activist project in which this group also participated, pp. 196–197.
3. See her participation in the *Une chanson pour un logement* humanist activist project, pp. 196–197.
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5. See his participation in *LEVIER's Second Orientation Meeting*, pp. 25–27, and in the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 35, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 74 and 79. See his participation in the *Une chanson pour un logement* humanist activist project, pp. 196–197. See also the analysis of *Le Cirque en Ca\$h : où rien n'est caché* in which he also took part in Caroline Alexander Stevens text “How Shall I Live?”, pp. 279–281. Norman acted as coordinator of this book and in this capacity he wrote the Foreword entitled: *When Activists and Artists Become One*, pp. 9–10.
6. See her participation in the *Une chanson pour un logement* humanist activist project, pp. 196–197.

Photographic documentation: Simon Chaloux.

## Guy Levesque



Photo: Simon Chaloux

*I am a king of hearts who imagines, questions and changes position, who does not do things by halves in life or in art. I am coordinator at Maison La Virevolte, a community group for families in Old Longueuil, where I am in charge of the choir project.*  
— Guy Levesque

Personally, the collaboration between Engrenage Noir / LEVIER and La Maison La Virevolte allowed me to confirm and deepen my artistic, philosophical and political approach. It has also been an opportunity to further my self-affirmation as a creator, because I had given up music and performing 15 years ago. Music was always a passion for me and I came back to it through the production of *Une chanson pour un logement* with the group DaZoque! It was after this cooperative activity that La Maison La Virevolte decided to start its own music project. We did the benefit show for the 20th anniversary of the Repas du Passant. Today we still make music together and the project is continuing.

This return to music allowed me to continue a process that had been interrupted by life circumstances and certain choices. Creating and playing music has added important value to my life. To me, creation in the broad sense is self-expression! It's also a level of communication that goes beyond words, and a way of fulfilling myself by giving what's best in me. Over the years, my passion for music has enabled me to have new experiences, to work with a variety of musicians, to play different styles of music and to seek a range of vibrations and colours.

I consider my work in the community the same process that takes place in art. Creation is existence; to live is to create! My approach to community work is fundamentally an artistic approach in that I look at and experience things in terms of aesthetic experience. Improvisation, rhythm and harmony are central to many aspects of my profession of social work. We could also speak of teamwork, participation and commitment, which are the basis both of creating engaged art and working for social change.

As I learned when I studied philosophy, the concepts of the good and the beautiful may be associated in aesthetic experience. In today's society, the concept of the beautiful is distorted because of the influence of mass culture and consumption; but from a less stereotypical and plastic perspective, the beautiful and the good can be joined to give rise to something that transcends us and gives meaning to existence. In my case, there is a never-ending quest to join these two concepts in my development as a creator.

The good corresponds to a perspective involving political and social activism to change the world, to create a society that's more egalitarian, less patriarchal, more just and more inclusive. Within this worldview, there is greater solidarity with the disadvantaged, of whom I consider myself one.

We cannot keep believing that artistic creation resolves inequalities and injustices, but it does lighten people's burden and thus allows them to act on the world. Committed art enables people to reappropriate a lived experience that has been stolen from them by the technocratic organization of our society. *Being* becomes more important than *doing*, which in a society that is obsessed with capital, is fundamentally revolutionary in relation to the dominant culture.

This model illustrates the terms that my world-view is based on. As an artist, I use a variety of vehicles: aesthetic, political, activist and communal. Whether through music, painting, video or theatre, all these elements are part of a whole that enables me to fulfill myself, have a sense of belonging to the world, and above all, to express my world-view. The same is true for my community involvement. Social involvement and political action are only other means for attaining the same goal of exploration, expression and transformation of the world.

When I came to La Maison La Virevolte, I found a place where I could not only be myself in my radicalism as a political and artistic activist, but also where this was considered an asset in carrying out my functions as coordinator. My alliance with La Maison La Virevolte allowed me to express my dissidence and to feel that it could be appreciated and valued in an organization.

Like most creators and artists, I've experienced a lot of exclusion and marginalization in my life. In the society of comfort, conformism is dominant. When you have a critical perspective on society, political and artistic expression is disturbing to the established order. It's a counterculture in opposition to the dominant cultural model. La Maison La Virevolte is an anchor point from which I can take action while belonging to an environment where freedom of thought and action are basic values.

*Libérez-vous par la création !*

Photos of the interviewees: Devora Neumark (unless otherwise mentioned).

## Julie Leblanc

*Nous irons jusqu'au bout  
de nos cris et de nos rêves...*



Photo: Simon Chaloux

*I am a citizen of the world, and I dream of a world without borders, a society freed from capitalism and patriarchy! I join my voice and my actions with all those who are protesting in a thousand and one ways. I sing and shout my rage against the system!*  
— Julie Leblanc

When I started singing in the choir, I was at an emotionally difficult time in my life. I'd had a series of losses, my mother had just died and I was sad. But I had a chance to join a choir to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain (FRAPRU).

At the first practice, I realized it was doing me good and that I had forgotten what was going on outside me. At every practice, I had moments of intense happiness, creativity and transcendence.

Although creativity had been part of my previous experiences of activism, it was then that I really realized how good engaged art made me feel. I also observed the gradual blossoming and affirmation of the group I was singing and making music with. And we realized that the songs reflected our experience and that singing them helped us to "collectivize" our pain, our courage, our anger and our solidarity by taking a position on different forms of discrimination and violence by the state, the patriarchal system and capitalism.

These systems and their violence do us harm. Speaking it, naming it, singing it and shouting it with music frees us and heals us! Even though the words of the songs sometimes speak of us, it's by singing the political message that we become aware of this reality we've known without ever having named it. We develop an ability to listen to the lives of the people around us. I sometimes catch myself observing the girls I create with and I recall their stories. Seeing them today denouncing the injustice and violence they've experienced, I'm moved and impressed. For example, the song *Je survivrai* [I will survive], a feminist song, is a statement saying *no* to any form of violence. It shows us that our aggressors can be very close to us.

It makes us aware of the fact that no woman is exempt from violence in its different forms — the "dirty uncle" every family has, the aggression we experience in the street, the various mutilations, the harassment. Every time I hear this song, I analyze my life and

I think of the thousands of stories I've heard in the course of my work, but also the discussions with my friends, my sisters, about their own experience. By singing together, we create solidarity and reject the discrimination and oppression women have been subjected to for centuries.

When we arrive for choir practice, it's important to know how each person is doing, because we sing of real things that affect us directly. If something is going badly in our lives, it will come out in our dynamics and in our voices. But being there together in solidarity eases the burden.

Often when I'm singing, I stop and look at the other members of the choir. Seeing them giving their all, shouting, crying out their pain, but also expressing hope for a better world, I recall when I met them and what they were going through then. For me, the choir is the denunciation of what we reject but also the affirmation of what we want.

I've been an activist for a long time, but what I especially like about the people at Maison La Virevolte with the choir and my work every day, is going from theory to practice.

I love the gentle madness of the choir, the fact that we don't take ourselves too seriously. It's not only about artistic performance or achieving perfection, but about speaking out, affirming ourselves and having fun together.

After the performances, the audience often tells us they see themselves in what we sing. We create a dialogue, because people come and talk to us about the things they saw themselves in. They no longer feel alone going through them. Some would even like to join the choir. We provide comfort for the public, because we share our pleasure in singing together.

We will go all the way with our shouts and our dreams. We will remain together, united in solidarity in engaged art and in action.



## Minda Bernstein and Norman Nawrocki

*Connect  
for  
change*



Photo: Michel Laplante.

*I have focused on community, the arts and personal development through music, theatre, writing, and spiritual and life coaching for the last 35 years. I believe that people connecting to each other in inspiration co-create a better world.*  
— Minda Bernstein

**Norman:** We were invited to work with La Maison La Virevolte.

**Minda:** Yes, it was because of the work we did with the FRAPRU (Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain - Québec's largest housing rights organization with 125 member groups). La Maison La Virevolte was a member group of this coalition. Guy's participation as one of the drummers in that incredible project led him to invite us to help create a similar experience for and with La Maison La Virevolte.

**N:** They wanted us to collaborate with them to commemorate their 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I remember being flattered that they wanted to continue working with us in a new direction. Their enthusiasm was touching and contagious. I remember Guy saying: "We want to work with you and will do whatever it takes to make a similar experience for our members." It is one of the things that struck me from the beginning. It is not every day that a community group calls up with such enthusiasm for the creative process.

**M:** And vision. That's the unusual part: we are often solicited by community groups, but not ones that back it up with funding and the resources to make it happen.

**N:** And the initiative to acquire them...

**M:** Because that is often the bottom line: how much can one give to the community?

**N:** And continue to survive?

**M:** And sustain the ensemble?

**N:** Especially in music, it's not easy.

**M:** Guy is unbelievable. The power of his direction to envisage such a project, make it happen, and get everyone so involved even to this day is truly phenomenal.

**N:** It is a testimony to his organizational skills, and also to the drive and motivation of the community group with which he works.

**M:** Guy is the force that allows the community's goals to manifest. He heard the need and desire of the community members to do this — they were ready to do this. It was their dream and they picked it up and ran with it.

**N:** Not just community goals but also personal goals. One of the striking things that we noticed when we met this group was how much individual talent there was. They wanted us to cooperate with them to articulate their emotions, ideas, and passion. The entire DaZoque! band embraced the project with dedication, enthusiasm and creativity.

**M:** A lot of creation was going on here. They gave us the music and words they liked, the slogans they wanted to work with, and even an original musical composition written by one of the community members.

**N:** We worked with the material they gave us, added a bit of our own, and through an exchange of musical, lyrical, and political ideas together came up with a show.

**M:** Yes... one of the striking things about the way that this organization operates is that it is grounded in democracy.

**N:** And respect for everyone's contribution, role, opinion...

**M:** And talents. Each person had a voice and their individual talents were underlined...

**N:** The highlighting of the talent and the division of roles on stage were part of this democratic process allowing everyone to participate to the best of their abilities.

**M:** Each person had their moment in the sun.

**N:** We witnessed this process and were part of it. They were impressive. It is a very impressive organization. I have worked with lots of community groups over many years and the degree of respect for individuals within the larger organization is a rare quality here, and well worth noticing.

**M:** Don't you find that a lot of people talk about how "the personal is political" but don't really integrate the two?

**N:** Here they do, and in the end, the quality of this process and the dedication to the principle was reflected in the final stage show.

**M:** One of the amazing things about this project was the integration of professional artists, community organizers, staff of the organization, and the members themselves of the family drop-in centre, who happen to be mostly single moms...

**N:** From one of the poorest neighbourhoods on Montreal's South Shore. We fortuitously stumbled into a collection of artists from this community, a community that is fairly isolated geographically and economically from the rest of Montréal. We had the pleasure of meeting, getting to know, and creating with this incredible group. We interacted with them musically, artistically, socially and politically. We rehearsed together, we workshopped ideas and songs together, we ate and danced together...

Norman Nawrocki  
(see p. 9)

**M:** And amazingly, together we all created a space where we were able to share deeply personal poignant moments off and even on the stage. There were two special musical pieces in the repertoire that we created together during which each member of the choir delivered a personal statement to the audience. Isn't that the riskiest of all? It's one thing if I reveal my personal challenges to one or two people in confidence; it's another thing altogether to divulge this to a greater public. These moments of poetic vulnerability moved the audience to tears. For me that sharing is what art is really all about. It was like I was witnessing the divine in each person and it reminded me how we are all connected.

**N:** The solidarity within the La Maison La Virevolte group was what enabled each of them to step forward and make these personal declarations. The musical backup that DaZoque! provided simply helped boost the confidence of the choir members.

We were aware that as outsiders we were being given a unique opportunity to work with this group of people who offered us their trust and confidence in our abilities to collaborate with them on their dream project. As invited guests we were always conscious of the honour that was extended to us and the responsibility that this entailed in working with them to realize their dream. We appreciated their artistic vision and shared the underlying strong political engagement. For us it was always important to never forget the reason that we were invited: it was equally important for us to prioritize their aesthetics at all times. Our goal was to create the strongest possible musical framework to enable the multiple messages (e.g., about the rights of tenants and welfare recipients and stopping violence against women) to be conveyed with artistic integrity and to have a powerful sociopolitical impact.

**M:** Personally speaking, this process was so satisfying from a human and artistic perspective because it fulfilled the desire in me to be useful as an artist.

**N:** But you are always useful as an artist...

**M:** Yes, but this was a *different* kind of useful. Here I was useful as an artist because my talents contributed to the realization of this community's own dream. A lot of times as an artist I am just simply doing my own thing, expressing my own passion, and connecting directly with the audience. Here we were clearly supporting their passion and their desire to connect with a greater public, a public for example that would never have come to one of DaZoque!'s own shows at the *Montreal International Jazz Festival* in the stratified air of Place des Arts. And ultimately we expanded not only our audience but also our vision as artists.

**N:** I have admired La Maison La Virevolte's work for years. I collaborated with them almost ten years earlier. I was so tickled to have had another chance to work with them because I share their radical political vision for social justice and the eradication of poverty. Personally, I have always wanted to see their work brought to a larger audience.

**M:** Every time the choir and their own musicians do a show from now on brings us a step closer to the kind of world I want to live in. I feel a sense of satisfaction because on the one hand, these presentations raise public consciousness about issues that are important to me, and on the other hand, they validate my efforts as an artist in the community.

**N:** If every project could only be gift wrapped like this...

**M:** The entire process was remarkably free of conflict. I am guessing that this is because we had such a sense of sharing intentions and common goals.

**N:** Plus, at the time of our collaboration, they had 20 years of community experience to draw on; we had 15 years of fruitful collaboration between the two of us. They knew how to work with each other and so did we. Any potential for conflict was channelled into a meaningful and politicized musical statement. We were all clear on the work that had to be done, and it was done in a climate of mutual respect.

**M:** The culmination of this creative exploration was the performance that exploded on stage. This for me is the positive palpable energy that creates change. As an artist, it was a privilege to be a part of it.

**N:** As a community organizer and artist: ditto.

*ditto. Ditto!*  
*ditto. Ditto!*





## Suzanne Malouin

*I really like being part of such a dynamic team.*

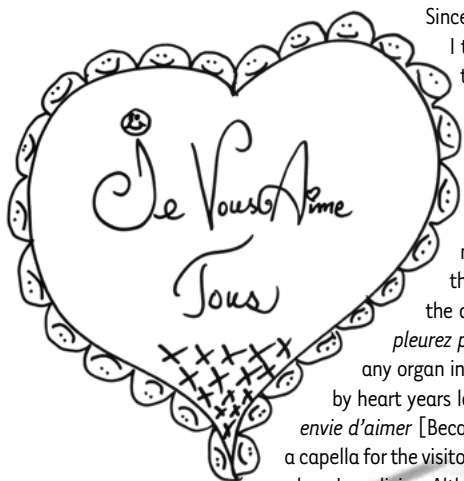
*I love to sing, dance, laugh and have fun with my friends. My dream is to become a singer and to be well known, because I love the public. Another thing that's dear to my heart is to fight poverty and defend social rights such as access to housing.*

— Suzanne Malouin



I really like people! Like the entertainer Rose Ouellette, La Poune, who loved to make people laugh, I'm a bit of a clown. I can't wait for our upcoming show! I like making music with people, and with my friends in the choir.

I sang in public for the first time in my life at the 20th anniversary of La Maison La Virevolte. I was very nervous because there were about 350 people there, and especially because I was the first one on! I sang a tune Joël Denis used to sing, called *Hey Hey Lolita*, but I wrote new words for the occasion and called it *La fête de La Virevolte* [The Virevolte party].



Since I was young, I dreamed of being a singer; I think I had that dream even before I could talk! I really started singing at eight, when I started talking. I was brought up in a series of foster homes. In the first one, where I spent eight years, I sang along when listening to vinyl records. A little later, I had access to an organ and learned to develop my ear. I didn't suspect then how important that would be. Later I accompanied myself on the organ. I started with a song called *Non, ne pleurez pas* [No, don't cry]. Although there wasn't any organ in the other foster homes, I was able to play by heart years later. At twelve, I sang *Comme j'ai toujours envie d'aimer* [Because I still want to love] by Marc Hamilton, a capella for the visitors and residents of the rehabilitation centre where I was living. Although I had difficulty speaking well, I learned to articulate the words by listening to cassettes. I sang in a church choir at Pont-Rouge, outside Quebec City, twice when I was 15 or 16, and I sang again in Quebec City at 20 — but these performances were not what I would consider "public."

When I was younger, I didn't have access to any musical instruments, so I would use various objects as percussion instruments. I did sound mixing with two mono tape recorders. I would record my voice (the low part) and then I'd play it back and record the high part with it on a blank cassette in the other tape recorder. Then I'd record again with another part or some percussion, and so on.

I wish someone had given me a kick in the ass when I was young, to get me to take courses and learn more, but I was not that lucky. I would have liked that kind of support. Because I never had those opportunities, I had to push myself. One of the things I wanted to do was compete on *Star Académie*, but I wasn't eligible because I was over the age limit by the time I was ready.

I got involved in a project with the l'Organisation populaire des droits sociaux (OPDS) and then with the Comité logement Centre-Sud, where I met my friend Gaétan Roberge, a very nice man. He introduced me to Julie Leblanc, who was my first contact at Maison La Virevolte. I made a banner for them, and then the choir was formed. I found the people at Maison La Virevolte very warm and welcoming; they were like a second family to me. They had no prejudices and they accepted me as I am. There was respect and real human contact, and I quickly became connected to them. I'm not really sure how the choir started, but the impression I have is of something that took root and then flowered.

Maison La Virevolte gave me a chance to sing solo, which was part of my childhood dream. They had confidence in me; I wouldn't have been able to sing solo with a choir anywhere else. With Maison La Virevolte, I'm fulfilling my lifelong dream!

I'd like to have musicians and write songs that are closer to rock'n roll and pop music. My goal is to make a name for myself, to record CDs and to share my music with lots of people. I never had any love when I was young, and I want to give it to others. That's why I like the direct contact of doing shows. I need honest people to support me, like those at La Maison La Virevolte.

As well as singing in public, I've kept on writing songs. What inspires me is the people around me, homeless people and others. One day, after a demonstration with the Comité logement Centre-Sud, I met an elderly homeless woman who stuttered. I must have put her at ease, because she didn't stutter with me. We talked all night. And I understood what it was to be homeless, and I wrote a song about it. You can't judge people or point fingers, because all of us have our ups and downs.

I sing in two other choirs, the firefighters' choir and the choir at Sainte-Catherine's church. Those are the only two places where I can work on my voice and increase its power. I like to experiment with different repertoires and learn new tricks from the choir directors. I really want to learn so that I can discover all my talents.

The advice I would give as a friend would be never to give up. All of us are amazing creatures!

# L'autre [The other]

July 2005 —  
December 2006

*Creation of a portrait series — with people who self-define as marginal — through a dialogue between the artist and his models*

*Facilitating Artist*  
Louis Perron

*Other Artists and Project Members*

Alexandra  
Claude  
Daniel  
David  
Éloyse  
Julie Papineau  
Maxime  
Raymond Leroux  
Roxane

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- In a world filled with images of "perfect" idealized bodies, what impact can projects on a modest scale have in changing the general public's expectations about representation and portraiture?
- What conditions are necessary for the long-term support of creative projects whose success is directly based on the development of one-to-one interpersonal relationships?

Louis Perron considers that his interventions as a painter affirm the dignity of people who are reintegrating into society, receiving social welfare, unemployed, working as volunteers, holding unstable jobs or living with disabilities by "officializing" them in portraits. He responds to all these people, who are too often anonymous, ignored or disadvantaged, as unique individuals. Their unstable, marginal situations confine them to a social status that does not reflect their human value and too often robs them of the dignity everyone needs to fulfill his or her potential. According to Louis, "If the executives of big companies hang their portraits for prestige and posterity, why shouldn't people who are homeless have the right to the same honour?"



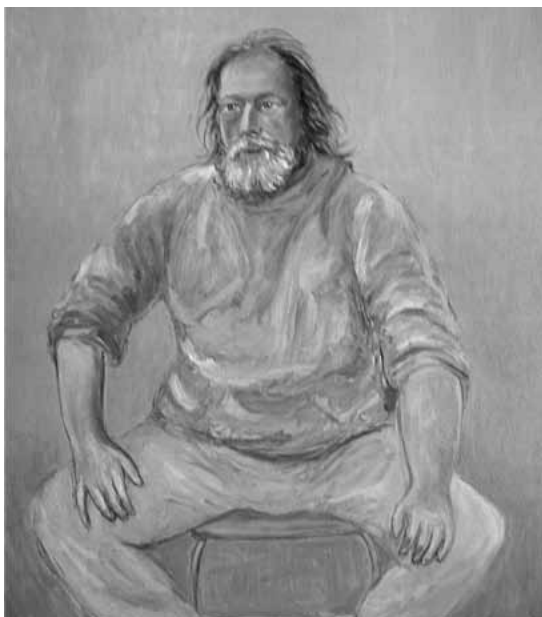
Portrait of David.

Through his previous experience in drawing homeless people in the metro, Louis observed the pride people tend to feel when they recognize themselves in a painting. That led him to develop a first project, and in 1999, he approached the Montréal street magazine *L'itinéraire* [The homeless itinerary] to do portraits of its vendors — people who are unemployed or homeless, whether or not they are alcoholics or addicts. Little by little, he gained the acceptance of the group by going to the *L'itinéraire* café and drawing people on site. He obtained their approval by demonstrating his skill in drawing their portraits: "I did not feel out of place there." Then he made lithographs based on his drawings for an auction to raise money for the *L'itinéraire* group, which was developing social economy projects to improve the living conditions for homeless people in Montréal. Later, at an exhibition at the Maison de la culture du Plateau Mont-Royal to mark the 10th anniversary of *L'itinéraire*, all the magazine covers were displayed along with the portraits Louis had done of the vendors.

For the *L'autre* [The other] project, Louis painted about ten portraits in oils and kept a journal describing the process of their creation as well as the encounters and the dialogues he had with the people who modeled for him. The people whose portraits he did were full participants in the process from the outset. They themselves chose the elements in the composition of "their" paintings and determined how they wanted to be perceived. As the paintings progressed, the process of creation was demystified and the models gradually took responsibility for the image projected of themselves by their portrait and the representation of their physical features and their social status. Hence they felt increasingly validated. The project involved a close relationship between two people, with all that it implies in terms of the need for trust and respect. The individuals could keep "their" paintings once they were finished.

To give his collaborators visibility and to create a public record, Louis would still want to end this project with an installation honouring these people as individuals, in a public place or a gallery.





Portrait of Maxime.



Portrait of Alexandra.

*HERE IS LOUIS'S ACCOUNT OF ONE OF HIS EXPERIENCES WITHIN THE L'AUTRE PROJECT:*

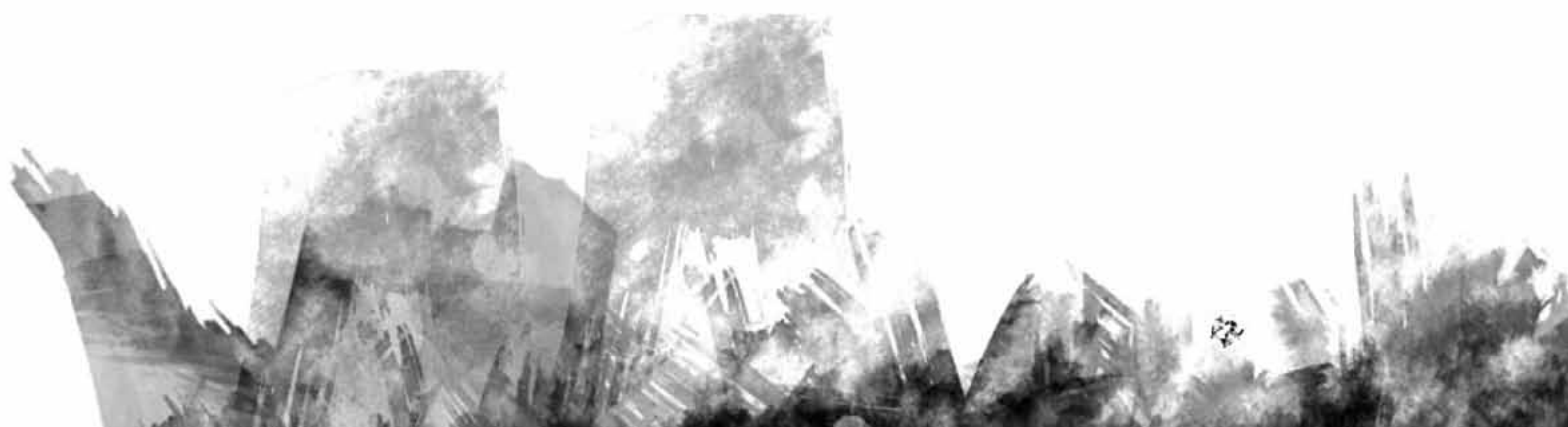
During a sitting, Pierre, a *L'itinéraire* vendor, suddenly asked to have his "portrait displayed at Salle André Mathieu" — a concert hall next to CEGEP Montmorency, in Laval, which was his favourite place to sell his magazines. He came up with the idea of displaying his portrait there because he had a serious dispute with a clerk at the ticket booth, who didn't want him there. "That would teach him a lesson," he said, smiling in anticipation of his revenge.

A few days later, I decided to have Pierre pose outside Salle André Mathieu, right near the main entrance. People on their way to the CEGEP and the concert hall stopped, at first out of curiosity, and then, realizing that the "important person" being painted was none other than Pierre, the *L'itinéraire* vendor, began to express their approval. The "thumbs-ups" they gave him made Pierre break out in a big happy smile, and I saw a sense of pride shining again in this man's eyes.

When the painting was finished, I asked to meet with the director of Salle André Mathieu and proposed to him that Pierre's portrait be displayed in a place where everyone could see it. Two days later, the portrait was in the lobby, next to the ticket booth. The central place given to the portrait gave the impression that tickets were being sold for Pierre's show. In the days following the exhibition of the portrait, Pierre was no longer anonymous. When buying his magazine, several employees and members of the audience of the concert hall congratulated him on the "beautiful portrait." Pierre was no longer faceless!

I recounted this anecdote during a workshop for the cultural animation program at the Université du Québec à Montréal. And to my great surprise, one of the participants, who worked for Salle André Mathieu, confirmed that there had been a radical change of attitude on the part of the staff and users of the hall with regard to the *L'itinéraire* vendor and his social situation. He said that when he had been hired, one of the questions from the Personnel Director concerned the attitude he would adopt toward a homeless person selling magazines at the door of the hall.

This unexpected change of attitude on the part of the hall's employees toward Pierre confirmed my intuition that painting a portrait of a marginalized person could transform his social image and relationship with others. I consider myself very lucky to have sometimes been one of the instruments of social rebirth for a few people.





## Julie Papineau

*I am a young woman of 25 who, at the age of six months, received a vaccine that did not do me any good. Since then I have been disabled, but that has not prevented me from living my life as normally as possible. I give talks to increase people's awareness of the situation of people with disabilities, because I find that even though society has made progress, there are still too many prejudices.*  
— Julie Papineau

My friend Louise introduced me to Louis. Louis is one of her closest friends. When I met him, I found him really nice! He's very shy. I found him charming! When he asked if he could do my portrait, I said yes right away. He said he only chose people who were unique to paint. I was pleased, because not everyone gets the privilege of having their portrait painted. And I do feel unique! And the painting turned out really beautiful. That's very important to me.

Louis had asked if I wanted to be alone or with my chair. I decided to have the chair, because it's an integral part of me. I was the one who chose the colours and the symbol of the butterflies. Blue is my favourite colour and it represents the sky. The sky is big! Blue gives me the impression of a very broad horizon, a little like the sea. I feel I'm in a larger space. And butterflies represent freedom. Butterflies reflect who I am; they fly all over, and I'm always moving. They're small, but *they're so full of life!* I love life! I'm very sensitive and I like helping people around me; that's why I give talks to raise awareness about people with disabilities. Our disabilities don't prevent us from doing what we want. We're just like everybody else.

I started giving talks five years ago because my friend Karine, who's an elementary school teacher, told me her students would complain about nothing. She said, "If they knew you, they wouldn't complain so much." So she suggested I go talk to the kids in her class. At first they were impressed by my chair, and after that they asked me, "What is life like for you?" They were surprised that I love life so much. That gave me the bug! Since then, I've been a community worker in a high school and I've continued to give talks in high schools and to teenagers.

For the portrait, Louis came over three or four times and I posed for him. It was hard, because I couldn't move. It was also very intense and even embarrassing to have someone gaze at me.

People really react when they see the painting. I'd like it to be exhibited with other paintings so that people can see Louis's talent; not everyone can do that. My being shown in a wheelchair can also raise awareness, as I do in my talks, and can be another way of promoting the integration of people with disabilities.

I find it appalling that in 2009 people are still excluded because of a disability or for racial or religious reasons. In 1999, I was very good in math and was in an enriched math class. I had a teacher who wasn't used to people with disabilities, and at that time I didn't talk. I wrote my exam and got 95 percent, and the teacher assumed that someone else had answered the questions. He thought I had cheated with the Special Education teacher, who had only read the questions and written down my answers. My mother met with the teacher. She asked him, "Do you watch her working?" He said, "No. What's the point? What will she be able to do in life?" My mother was beside herself! But finally, she didn't yell at him. There was no point. He wouldn't have understood.



There are still prejudices in society, but if we want to be integrated, we can't hide. I'm against special schools, because they keep us apart from other people. I'm not saying they're not good, but if we want to be part of society, we can't stay separate. In "regular" school, we can mix with others and have so-called "normal" friends.

Society still doesn't make enough effort. Another example from the schools: there are not enough schools adapted for people with disabilities. There's no passenger elevator at the school where I work; I have to use the freight elevator, which is ugly and smelly... but it's the only way to get upstairs. They could find a better solution. I feel like a piece of merchandise being carried up and down, which doesn't make me feel very good about myself. There haven't been any people with disabilities in the school before, and the teachers don't really know how to act and are not very open.

Seeing Louis's painting, a symbolic mirror of myself, every day convinces me that I can do all kinds of things — more than I might imagine!

## Louis Perron




*For forty years, my career as an artist has been guided by “visual listening” to the Other, transposed into vibrant colours with genuine feeling. In landscapes and portraits, respect and love for a trade passed down from father to son shine through with truth and intensity.*  
— Louis Perron

When I was on my way here, a lot of things came back up to the surface. It's the same situation as when I went and showed my father my paintings for his approval. It was a bit like I was coming here seeking the same approval. I feel nervous, I have a mixture of feelings that are not very pleasant.

To express myself in this project, I simply had to ply my trade as an artist, and in order to do that, I created a project for myself instead of waiting for galleries or orders. I gave myself a mandate to do portraits and to meet people who would permit me to exist as an artist. There's an exchange between me and the other person, and it's an opportunity for them to leave a trace of themselves. The idea is to leave a trace of the other person and also of myself.

It was painful before I did the first portrait. I had a sensation of powerlessness mixed with a feeling that I was sabotaging myself. I wanted to do it, but at the same time I was stopping myself. It took me a year before I managed to do my first portrait. When you take action, that's when things happen! It snowballs. The process is set in motion and there are more and more sittings with other people.

Following this logic, I allow myself to do my work as an artist without wondering whether it will sell or how it will be seen. My goal is to practise my art. What is important is the relationship with the other person in the present moment. It happens through action, and when there's no action, I feel anxious, uncertain and all that.

After painting a certain number of portraits, I made requests to exhibit them. I was frustrated by the rejection from the Écomusée du fier monde, because I studied museology and I know that an ecomuseum is supposed to reflect its community. It has a responsibility to exhibit works that show the diversity of everyday reality here and now.

After that rejection, the people selling the magazine *L'itinéraire* and I decided to organize an exhibition at the Café de la Rue, which was then associated with the magazine. The great thing about it was that the exhibition had results I hadn't expected — what I had experienced with the Écomusée du fier monde happened again, but in a different way. This exhibition led not only to a sense of belonging in the group, but also to the rejection of certain people, who others refused to be associated with: “Who are you? Why would someone want to paint your portrait?” Friends made comments expressing their recognition of certain people: “We recognize you! We see you! Yes, it's you!” At the same time, you

heard things like, “We don't like him! We don't want him to be shown with us!” These were people who, like me, have problems finding a place to belong.

I was *extremely* happy to realize that hanging a canvas on the wall could create so many situations. At the same time, I saw the impact it had on the friends of the models. For example, there was Michel, who brought his girlfriend to verify the accuracy of his portrait. When the group confirmed his resemblance to the person in the painting, that proved my ability to represent that person well. Whether the painting is hung in a gallery or elsewhere doesn't take anything away from the value of my work as an artist. Just seeing their portraits on the walls made people very proud.

It's encouraging to know that what I do isn't a waste of time, that my work has a real impact and is leading somewhere for me. During the process of creation, you're working in the unknown, so I need results to confirm that I'm on the right track. When I paint a portrait, there are no expectations. The process has a therapeutic aspect, and being in the present moment affirms both what I'm doing and what the other person is experiencing. What we experience during the sitting, the incredible relationship that develops, won't be visible in the painting. For the nine portraits I painted, I chose the same approach.

The process of creating a painting takes longer than the time of the sitting. The conditions of production mean that I can take years to complete the work. Often, I realize that the time I've taken was necessary to finish that painting as well as for the personal satisfaction.

The first few hours are crucial! There's the contact with the model, building trust; the painter has to prove himself; the emotional charge is established. At the same time, there's a whole ritual: I take out the easel, the brushes, the paints, etc. As the mother of a model once told me, “You're my official portrait painter, just like in a court.” By the second meeting, trust is already established. All this doesn't happen under ideal conditions — it's the groundwork.

Now I feel as if I were on a starting platform at the edge of a swimming pool. I'm especially happy I did this exercise, that I took part in this interview, because it validates my work as an artist and gives it official status. I think that will take me in a new direction in my process. It's a little as if I had just painted my own portrait on a blank page.





## Raymond Leroux



RESPECT  
INTEGRITÉ

*I feel that every person is rare and unique and has hidden wealth deep inside. I want to share that wealth and teach others about it. The flame within me is love, respect, integrity, and I want to pass it on to others. I like to live by finding solutions, and I never stay with a problem for long.*  
— Raymond Leroux

I agreed to do this interview because I want to make my mark in society in some way, and I'm here because I think this will contribute to my making a positive mark.

I'm a very spiritual person, and that's what led me to want to share my knowledge. To me, spirituality means respect, faith, love and integrity. Faith, to me, means always giving, and sowing the seeds that we will reap. To always give is to listen to people and their needs. And you have to feel at ease before you can do it. I'm feeling more and more at ease and I'm listening to others more and more. I can feel it when someone isn't at ease.

When two people meet, there's an energy that circulates. It can be positive or negative energy that goes directly from one to the other. For example, when I feel good energy, it's automatically transferred to me. If I feel negative energy in a person, I'll protect myself so that their energy doesn't get to me. Then I re-centre myself and reconnect with my positive energy. In order not to be affected by the person's negativity, I'll withdraw and give the person the space he or she needs.

I have to start with myself in order to be available to others; otherwise, I'll just be exhausted. I also have to think of me. I say to myself, "What can I do? I won't enter into their little world, I won't answer in any way, or I'll risk becoming negative too." I don't want to absorb the other person's energy, or have them absorb mine. I don't want to be influenced by the other person's energy, because I want to keep on transmitting positive energy. My goal is to take the internal tools I've adopted to send love to the person.

I hope to guide people, I want to encourage them to discover their inner strength. When people ask me to, or if I perceive their need, even if it's impossible for them to express it physically or otherwise, I'll make suggestions and offer them tools they can choose whether or not to use. This gives me the satisfaction of listening to people. I feel the well-being I can bring to them. It's my way of affirming myself, of demonstrating my integrity, of being useful to society. This way of being meets a deep need. It's the essence, the serum, the oxygen of my life!

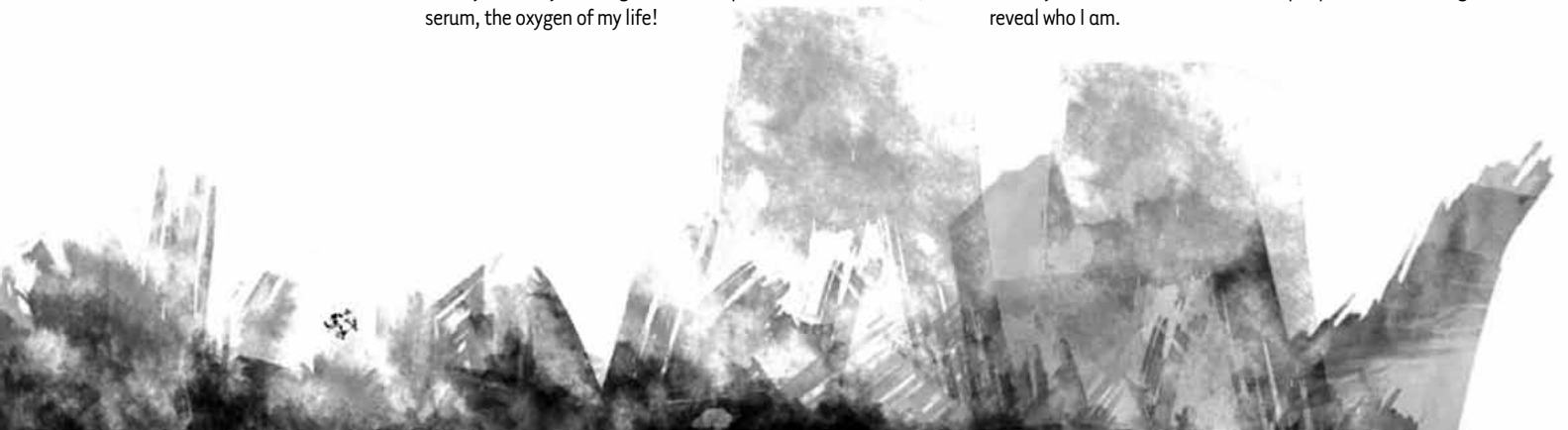
Relating to Louis Perron wasn't difficult. Lise, a friend of his, sent me to him. I've known Lise for a very long time and she knows my development. I agreed to meet him because I wanted to go further. I wanted to bare my soul and I was having trouble. I was even hesitating. I didn't want people to discover my weaknesses. It was my humanistic side that made me agree. If I want to do good work, I must be able to show people who I really am so that they can consider my suggestions. If I'm weak, I have to show them that as well.

It wasn't easy for me to expose myself. I didn't expect the portrait Louis Perron did of me with the information I gave him, although I know I have that image. It hurts, but at the same time, it brings a sense of well-being. I see myself as I want to. I hadn't thought Louis would show that side of me. He asked me some questions before we started working, and he used some things I said to him. Louis did it with respect. I can't open myself up if I don't feel respect, a connection, trust; sometimes I don't need to say anything and trust is established.

Louis hasn't finished the painting yet, and when it's done, he'll give it to me. The painting will become a tool. Sometimes I look at it and I tell myself that's how I want other people to see me. I explained to him that to me the eagle is a symbolic animal because of its power, its sharp vision and its freedom. That's essential. I've had one tattooed on me. The eagle is also an angel, and Louis put that in the painting. I see that he reproduced what I felt. It's as if I could have represented myself with everything I know, but without being capable of doing that painting.

The symbol is important! What I reflect has to be reality, not a dream. To me, the symbol is the reflection of my authenticity. If I take the example of the eagle, it's an angel, freedom; it's a vision, it's going beyond my perception. In other words, limiting my way of seeing prevents me from seeing farther. As soon as I open my spirit, my vision becomes broader and I surpass my abilities.

Thank you for the chance to meet people who encouraged me reveal who I am.



# État d'urgence [State of emergency]

December 1 — 5,  
2004

Montréal

November 23 — 27,  
2005

Montréal

ATSA (Action terroriste socialement acceptable)  
[Socially Acceptable Terrorist Action]  
Annie Roy, Pierre Allard

## Other Artists

### Performing Arts:

Kitchose Band

Kumpania

Loco Locass

Nathalie Derome and the

Écoutilles

Tomas Jensen

Trio Triptyque

### Theatre:

Nuit d'encre

UTIL (Unité théâtrale

d'interventions loufoques)

### Comedy:

Les zappartistes

### Cinema:

Les Lucioles

### Installation:

César Saez

Farine orpheline

## Other Artists

### Storytelling:

Claudette L'heureux

Éric Gauthier

Éveline Ménard

Isabelle St-Pierre

Paul Braley

### Installation:

Mario Duchesneau

Ana Rewakowicz

### Performance Art:

Louise Dubreuil<sup>1</sup>

Claudia Bernal

### Theatre:

La Ligue nationale

d'improvisation

### Music:

Balthazar

Kumpania

Mireille Girard

Polémil Bazar

### Cinema:

Vidéo Paradiso

## Other Project Members

A large number of unidentified  
Montréal residents and people  
who have no fixed address  
also took part in this project

## Other Project Members

A large number of unidentified  
Montréal residents and people  
who have no fixed address  
also took part in this project

*Support for the art programming of two consecutive annual interdisciplinary events open to the public at large and offering short-term free access to services for homeless people*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- Can equitable subject-to-subject relationships ever really be established when power and control are not shared equally? How can the reproduction of a corporate system — even under the guise of activist art — lead to anything other than a continued dominant dynamic?
- What are the problematics associated with “doing good for others” (as if there was not always some personal interest involved)? How is the exploitation of others an almost assured outcome of such an approach, despite the best “intentions?”

Beginning in 1998, ATSA (Annie Roy and Pierre Allard) has been orchestrating an annual outdoor get-together that they call *État d'urgence* [State of emergency]. This event, which receives a lot of media attention, is modeled after a humanitarian refugee camp and has been established in Émilie-Gamelin Park (in the middle of downtown Montreal) since 2002. During the five days of activity, multiple free services (food, clothing, lodging, etc.) are provided 24 hours a day to homeless people. Extensive art programming for the large public is part of the event.

For two years, Engrenage Noir / LEVIER provided financial support to cover the honoraria of artists invited to participate in this short-term intervention. It is difficult to know what impact this project has had on the artists. It is even more difficult to estimate its impact on the homeless men and women whose participation is key to the “success” of this event, but who continue to remain nameless — as ATSA's promotional material and documentation is rather limited in this respect. LEVIER has made several attempts to engage ATSA in a critical conversation about the ethics of *État d'urgence* to no avail.

## THREE OF THE ARTISTS THAT TOOK PART IN THE 2005 EDITION RESPONDED TO LEVIER'S INVITATION TO TALK ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS PUBLICATION:

I began with the aim of transforming our perceptions of exclusion into experiences of human solidarity. I believed I could achieve this through direct exchange with the homeless people. But once I was on the ground, everything changed. Instead of organizing a direct intervention, I created a dialogue of solidarity through works that people could make their own by using them as they wished in my absence. Curiously, it was one of my strongest experiences of human solidarity.

— Louise Dubreuil, commenting on the installation she created as part of the series *Cent Cœurs* [A hundred hearts], a set of works created using various recycled materials

The thing that's special about storytelling is that it makes it possible to have direct contact with the audience. It is a deeply human exchange. We proved this under extreme conditions. I also organized an open mike session for . I also really wanted to give the street people a chance to speak, although I was afraid that no one would be interested. It was a real success, very moving, full of emotion. I feel that my collaboration with *État d'urgence* was one of my most intense experiences as an artist.

— Isabelle St-Pierre, slam poet and storyteller who coordinated the storytelling and open mike events



Installation from Louise Dubreuil's *Cent cœurs* series:  
(image taken from a version of this work done in 2009).





Above: Claudia Bernal's performance installation *Les voies silencieuses*. Image taken from the video documentation by Pierre-Yves Serinet.

I gathered together the blankets of the homeless people, still warm from the night, to create the performance space. This quilt, made of what is most personal and precious to a person facing the cold of the city, allowed me to form an intimate relationship with the residents of the shelter. The elements of the performance (a picture — the only memento of my mother and grandmother — a chair and a red ball of wool) remained in place for a time, so that people who wanted to could reproduce my action as a kind of personal ritual.

— Claudia Bernal, commenting on the adaptation of a performance installation entitled *Les voies silencieuses* [The silent paths]

#### NOTES

1. Louise Dubreuil wrote the accounts and verbatim proceedings of LEVIER's two training and exchange programs in community art (2002 and

2004), which were used as the basis for Rachel Heap-Lalonde's text, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86.

# Il était une fois mon quartier

[Once upon a time, my neighbourhood]

Montréal

Community theatre project based on a local women's citizen's manifesto

September 2004 —  
October 2005

Centre d'éducation et  
d'action des femmes de  
Montréal (CÉAF)  
[Montréal women's centre for  
education and action]  
France Bourgault  
Huguette Cossette  
Julie Raby  
Sherley McLean

Facilitating Artist  
Suzanne Boisvert

Other Artists and Project  
Members

Alice Fontaine  
Carole Libion  
Catherine Pilon  
Édith Belley  
Irène Duquette  
Ismaël Berger  
Louise-Judith Brunet  
Manon Choinière  
Marie-Laure M. Rozas  
Michelle Poirier  
Monique Lebrun

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- The references and aesthetic challenges for community and professional theatre are often quite different one from the other. What are the specific challenges facing theatre practitioners who navigate between the two type of practices and what are the conditions necessary to address these challenges and meet them?
- How can theatre productions intervene effectively to challenge negative perceptions, stereotypes and prejudices widely held about poverty and the individual and communal impact related to it?

Founded over 30 years ago, the Centre d'éducation et d'action des femmes de Montréal (CÉAF) [Montreal women's centre for education and action], located in the Ste-Marie neighbourhood in South-central Montréal, has long been referred to by some of its problems: poverty, under-education, substance abuse and general decay of the local built environment. The CÉAF aims to break the isolation that many neighbourhood women feel; provide the means for them to develop their emotional, social and economic autonomy, and to enlist their involvement in the community. Cultural activities and artistic creation — such as theatre workshops, choir performances, improvisation, comedy and journalism — have been a feature of the centre since its inception.

*La Déclaration citoyenne des femmes de Sainte-Marie* [The Sainte-Marie women's citizens' declaration] is a written manifesto, which was proposed, discussed, debated and finally drafted in the spring of 2004 by members of the CÉAF's local action committee. This feminist vision for the revitalization of Sainte-Marie was meant to lay the groundwork for a neighbourhood wherein it would be easy to live as a woman. The manifesto focuses on helping to ensure that more equitable choices — impacting women — are made relative to urban planning, security and mobility, while also promoting greater participation of women in local development.

The project *Il était une fois mon quartier* [Once upon a time, my neighbourhood] was thought of as a way to continue the initial critical reflection about citizenship; this time by involving more women by focusing the individual and collective deliberations around the manifesto into a theatrical process. The theatre project was also intended to further promote *La Déclaration citoyenne des femmes de Sainte-Marie* and impress upon the different levels of government the importance of being more attentive to citizens' needs.



Presentation at the Maison de la culture Frontenac; *La pauvreté c'est selon...*: scene with Suzanne Boisvert (as the Minister), Marie-Laure M. Rozas (as the mother) and Carole Libion (as the child).

The CÉAF had already collaborated with Suzanne Boisvert on two previous theatrical productions — once in 1997 and again in 1999.<sup>1</sup> For this latest co-creative project, the organization assumed all the costs except for a portion of the artist's fee and the expenses related to an in-house videotaping of the project (for documentary purposes); these expenditures were covered by a LEVIER grant.

For one year beginning in September 2004, women involved with *Il était une fois mon quartier* participated in all aspects of the collective creation: they set out on neighbourhood tours to gather material in the form of words, photographs or simply impressions of what they saw and heard. The material gathered during the research outings were shown in an exhibition called *Sainte-Marie vu par les femmes* [Sainte-Marie as seen by women]. They took part in writing workshops during which they were invited to work with questions such as:



At the end of the presentation at the Centre d'éducation et d'action des femmes de Montréal, Carole Libion, Édith Belley, Marie-Laure M. Rozas, Irène Duquette, Michelle Poirier (and not appearing in the photo, Catherine Pilon).



Presentation in the backyards of L'Écho des femmes de la Petite-Patrie.



Discussions with the group after the presentation in the backyards of L'Écho des femmes de la Petite-Patrie.

What do I dream about when I walk in the streets and alleys of Ste-Marie? What fears do I have about talking to a neighbour or when the doorbell rings? Work on the script was based on this material and also involved vocal improvisation sessions as well as breathing, movement, play, and visual exploration (e.g. drawings, paintings, collages, photographs) workshops. The characters in the play were shaped from the women's reality, as was the stage set, and in fact, the entire scenic production. Throughout this process the women also participated in a number of sharing circles as a way to enhance their personal experiences and promote strong interpersonal connections amongst them.

The production, once completed, was presented in five different locations between June 9 and and September 7, 2005: at the CÉAF location; in the backyards of Le café Touski and l'Écho des femmes de la Petite-Patrie; at the Maison de la Culture Frontenac — a professional theatre space; and finally, during the opening of the Parc Des Faubourgs, a neighbourhood green space that was just being inaugurated. As each presentation had a different setting and called for a different dramatic sequence, the team had to continue to be available to the creative process with great flexibility. This mini-tour resulted in a more profound experience for everyone involved: individuals had a chance to tame their stage fright and become increasingly comfortable with each performance when introducing the project and participating in the talkback sessions.

While the CÉAF's objective to make the citizens' *Déclaration* more accessible and solicit more local support were achieved,<sup>2</sup> the project was not without its challenges. This became most evident when the CÉAF declined LEVIER's invitation to participate in the *Documenting Collaboration* project.<sup>3</sup> As it turned out, tensions had developed between a few women within the project members who continued to visit the centre during the months that followed the final presentation of *Il était une fois mon quartier*. During the creation and production stages of the project, any tension that emerged was transformed into creative material and reinvested in the project's development: indeed, how could the members put on a play about "good neighbours" if they could not overcome their own relational challenges? After the project, when these conditions (time and tools, amongst others) were no longer available to discuss collectively what was happening, the old relational patterns reappeared. In the end, the centre's workers, who were lacking in time and energy, gave up trying to resolve these tensions. In this context, the group could not rally around the production of a video aiming at documenting the previous creative collaboration.

Nevertheless, the CÉAF does consider this project a big success; the performances fed discussions within the organization and outside of it. Additionally, in the year following the final performance, as an extension of *Il était une fois mon quartier*, the centre decided to organize the first edition of the *Mois des artistes* [Artists' month] inviting neighbourhood residents to display their works on the walls of the activity room. Furthermore, there were tangible repercussions on a personal level for many of the members: several went on to seek out professional artistic training, while three others initiated the first stages of a project to open a local arts café. One woman produced a short film available for viewing through the National Film Board of Canada's website.

#### NOTES

1. Between these two theatrical productions, Suzanne was involved in an exploration called *Détresse et tendresse*. See pp. 45–46 for a description of the LEVIER-sponsored performative event that Suzanne hosted based on this project.
2. Dozens of community groups were contacted during the promotion of the different performances. Following one of these performances,

the Centre des femmes de Laval hired Suzanne to help direct a theatrical production they had recently begun.

3. For more information, see the presentation of this project (and DVD) in the centre of this publication. See also the introduction to the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, pp. 100–101.



## Julie Raby

*A fervent believer in justice, solidarity and democracy, I express my feminist commitment through collective action and the development of projects with and for women.*  
— Julie Raby

I feel privileged to be here taking part in this interview. I was more of support person, so I didn't experience the project from the inside, since I was not directly involved in the collective creation.

Integrating artists into community groups brings in other perspectives and raises other questions regarding the groups' social practices culture and the work that they do. Through their extended involvement in a community project, these artists enabled us to strengthen the personal connections needed for the creative process. It was great! You can discover and create something in ten weeks — but with more time, you can establish trust. Then there's a deepening of the work of creation, the interpersonal relationships and the group dynamics. All these conditions make it possible to let yourself go in creation, which leads to change, personal responsibility and self-esteem.

Taking part in theatre processes has shown me that change does not only occur in terms of affect, but also through discovering hidden potential. When I was studying psychology, I went into therapy since it was strongly recommended as preparation for our future professional role. During the same period, I was also in a theatre troupe for fun, and my experience of relationships in that group fed into my therapeutic process. That context of expression and the closeness enabled me to enter areas of relationship that my usual mode of living had kept closed to me.

So I tried out a cultural process that had a therapeutic healing effect, although I hadn't originally got involved with that purpose in mind. Now, I wonder how to channel everything that openness created in the context of a women's centre. It's true we're working with people who are sometimes extremely vulnerable, and that's a very real challenge. I remember something Suzanne Boisvert said: "I practise, but I'm not a practitioner." In real situations that's an important distinction. To me, it's part of the questions and challenges inherent in social practice in cultural projects that do not have therapeutic aims.

As workers with organizations we accompany projects. It therefore seems to me essential to be close to the artist, since there are things the artist can communicate to us. We are always on the lookout for these things since they allow us to intervene in a more focused way with the women. This exchange also enables us to support the work of the artist as necessary. We aim to provide the safe space needed for everyone involved. The

degree of involvement of certain women in the collective can be a sensitive issue. This project was a long adventure, an expedition into ourselves with others, and the intensity kept mounting until its culmination in the performance. And after that — nothing. This emptiness following the public presentations really affected us. We tried to prepare the women for this transition, to at least soften the blow for them.

At the beginning of this co-creation, there were obviously objectives: to come together with other people and interpret in a different way the citizens' declaration of the women of Sainte-Marie. However, for me and my colleagues at that time, what was essential was to provide an opportunity for the women to have the experience of doing theatre. I remember thinking to myself when I was going to see them: "You lucky girls!"

The aim of this work was to meet the objectives of the centre and to carry out the mission I had committed myself to. The women spoke out, empowered themselves, shared a group experience and had a sense of personal fulfilment in this project. I've observed that this approach always increases self-esteem and changes the power dynamics that sometimes exist in community organizations. I feel that what motivates my actions is a desire to hear women, and especially, to hear them *in a different way*.

I also come from a background where words were held back, so I can understand the need to let go in theatre and the difference it can make. Inside, I want to shake things up, to innovate, to develop and to do things differently. In this case, it was a tall order, and being successful gave a boost to my self-esteem, because we did something daring. From the start, I totally trusted Suzanne Boisvert. In a way, I have the impression that I didn't put any effort into this project.

I don't feel different from those women, I'm not immune to poverty or violence. In this project, certain women changed physically because they were able to spread their wings and take control of their lives again. Women's power is not a myth and I'm always trying to promote it! I often hear people say, "Oh, they're only women!" A statement like that demeans women and trivializes feminist demands. In this sense, the tool of theatre that we used worked well.

As the project progressed, I had the privilege of observing how solidarity and mutual trust were established and how each woman found her place, and I can say that it's like watching a butterfly emerge from its cocoon.



Transformation

## Marie-Laure M. Rozas

*What is important to me is to feel I am part of the community I live in, and I dream that this could be true for everyone in this society. Interculturalism enables all people to see themselves in the social-political-cultural kaleidoscope, to be conscious of their concerns and to draw on the tools available to express themselves and take their place in society.*

— Marie-Laure M. Rozas



Beaucoup  
d'ouverture  
entre nous ...

I got involved in the project because I've always been attracted to theatre practice. I belonged to a professional theatre troupe in Guadeloupe until the age of sixteen, when something happened in the group that led me to leave it.

When I came to Montréal, I lived across the street from the Centre d'éducation et d'action des femmes de Montréal. Although I saw the name of the centre every day, I didn't feel it concerned me, because I felt I had enough education. It took an invitation from the centre in some advertising delivered to my door for me to learn more about the activities of this centre that I saw every day.

I signed up for a workshop that involved a collective theatre creation. I had some free time and the centre covered the daycare fees for my daughter. This allowed me to get back into something I once loved very much. I also wanted to form relationships with people and to get to know the life and the soul of my neighbourhood, although it was a poor neighbourhood and I had heard a lot of negative comments about it. To me, this neighbourhood represented rich diversity and great potential.

At first I didn't know anyone. So I had to introduce myself, to make contact, to find out about the women's interest in the project and who each person was. We did some exercises that built trust, encouraged discussion and created openness among us. This made it easier for us to work together. I don't remember if the theme of the neighbourhood was suggested by Suzanne Boisvert or if it came out of our first discussions, but we quickly got around to concentrating on how we saw the neighbourhood. The sharing of all our views gave rise to a rich, full, complex perception of this neighbourhood where we all lived in different ways.

By getting to know and see each other, and realizing that we all lived in the same neighbourhood, we ended up creating a sense of belonging. There were not only negative things, but also pleasant things. And we wanted to pass on what was positive to other women so that they could speak up, make a difference and create change. In fact, all the individual problems we saw brought us together and led to a new sense of belonging. Obviously, that strengthened our solidarity.

The sense of belonging I'm talking about was something that existed but that we weren't aware of. We hadn't realized we were part of a larger whole. That awareness led us to want other women to act with us, to get on board the train and come along with us.

The tasks and responsibilities were distributed on the basis of the women's skills, which sometimes led to conflict or unfulfilled expectations. Three women out of ten dropped out, each for very different reasons.

At the beginning, some of the participants who were less confident were afraid to perform in public. I think the solidarity created within the group over the ten months we spent together reinforced their self-confidence.

After the first performance, I was very proud! I was proud because I wasn't born here and yet I was at the centre of the valorization of a neighbourhood I had been advised not to live in. Finally, I felt I had experienced something deep and authentic. I also felt another kind of pride, because I presented this positive image of my neighbourhood to a broad audience in the five performances we gave.

The places we performed our collective creation were varied and rather unusual. We presented it in the outdoor space of two organizations. I found it very daring to work outdoors in front of an audience we certainly would not have reached otherwise. We also had access to the Maison de la culture Frontenac, a recognized cultural space run by the City of Montréal.

We adapted to the audiences, who were very present and, especially, very close. They felt very concerned and involved, they saw themselves reflected in our presentations, and that gave us a lot of encouragement. After the shows, they waited for us and showered us with praise. In every performance, we felt a closeness between the actors and the audience. The barriers were down!

This project allowed me to demystify the Québec theatre world and begin a concrete process of becoming a professional as an actor, director, facilitator and organizer of multicultural events. Now I'm a member of the Union des artistes, which confirms a certain recognition by my peers.

Our collective creation about our perceptions of our own neighbourhood had repercussions on the involvement of women in the area. Through the centre's local action committee and its popular education project, they learned to be agents of change and became aware of their power. They have since been involved in various citizens' meetings related to the city council and in different social groups.

All in all, I feel we have a lot of organizations working against the "ills" of our society. But it seems to me that it's very important to change the negative image these organizations have of poverty, as well as their perception of disadvantaged people as potential "cliente." That attitude ensures the survival of these organizations but doesn't lead to more long-term solutions. I think we have to focus our efforts on obtaining real social change while questioning how organizations function.

## Suzanne Boisvert

I came to the Centre d'éducation et d'action des femmes de Montréal in 1997 because the women had collectively written a play for the centre's 25th anniversary and they needed help with the staging. It was love at first sight! The staff invited me back the next year to do a collective creation with the women in the theatre group and the choir, and again the following year with a new group. About 30 participants contributed to *Femmes de paroles libres* [Women of free words] (1997-1998) and *L'Odyssée de Catherine Laliberté par une nuit tourmentée* [The odyssey of Catherine Laliberté on a tempestuous night] (1998-1999).

This collaboration was a turning point for me, because until then, I had always worked with other artists on multidisciplinary shows or occasional interventions. The context was completely different: I was in a women's centre in a working-class Montreal neighbourhood, an environment of everyday life and collective action, surrounded by women of all ages and all backgrounds, creating musical comedies from start to finish, over months. Most of the women were completely inexperienced. My involvement suddenly became more "involving," so to speak.

These projects were successful in many ways, but what I would like to talk about instead is the *flaw* these projects revealed in me. I often felt extremely impatient with the participants, and I couldn't understand why. Was it just stress, or ill humour, or fear? Was I bringing from a professional context approaches and demands that were inappropriate to the community context? I was working with vulnerable women (some very vulnerable) who were taking huge risks in participating in these projects. As a result, I was afraid my moods would be counterproductive or even harmful, and I felt I should take a pause to figure out what was going on. That pause lasted more than a year.

I came to the conclusion that in order to go further in my practice, I had to take more *personal* risks. I felt an intense need to bring together all the aspects of my life and to make this integrative stance the centre of my approach. I knew I had to develop the relationship aspect of my practice and I was struck by a very simple idea: in order to relate authentically to other people, I had to first relate authentically to myself! In other words, to be able to identify and abandon certain of my narratives, certain of the roles that made things easy for me, that gave me the illusion of being safe and in control, to embrace my most profound challenges as a human being with greater vulnerability, with more truth. To no longer give in to the temptation to hide behind my authority as Director, my aura as a professional artist, in order to avoid dealing with my fear of other people. I realized that to be more radical in my commitment, I had to open my heart and have the courage to be visible. I wanted to commit myself entirely along with my participants, and if I wanted them to become collaborators and co-creators, I had to be that as well!



The context that enabled me to make progress on this sensitive issue was my project *Détresse et tendresse: A Broken Heart is an Open Heart* (2000-2003), a journey to the land of consciousness that I embarked on with some elderly people with Alzheimer's and some young children. This experience, which consisted of face-to-face, heart-to-heart, body-to-body meetings, often in the privacy of a hospital room, went to the very heart of my quest for authenticity, for *pure presence* (as Christian Bobin would say). This practice of *invisible art* taught me so much. My co-creators were my teachers; my mother, who had this disease, was my first teacher!

I came back to practice in the community in 2003, through workshops I designed and led in several Montréal women's centres. I was able to experiment with groups doing creation without the pressure of having to produce a work at all costs. Each of the meetings became a performance in itself, without an audience. The more limited time (ten or twelve weeks rather than eight or ten months) made it a very efficient laboratory for me. My favourite workshop was called *l'art au quotidien* [art in everyday life], and it showed me new ways of experiencing creation and being with others. The moments of sharing at the beginning of each meeting would become an integral part of the creation. It was beautiful to see these women who were so different helping each other, discovering each other (in every sense of the word), making things possible for each other. Everything in them, and in me, could be useful; everything became meaningful, humanly and artistically speaking.

Instead of seeing everyday problems as external curbs on creation, instead of considering our personal "fault lines" (Nancy Huston) as artistic limitations, I suggested we use them as springboards. What if art was only paying attention? as Allan Kaprow asked. Yes, and this "extreme attention" (Mireille Best) we pay to each other also makes us visible to ourselves. When we share, we feel seen, validated and interesting, and we are often able to see ourselves through the eyes of others. In this way, we feel something that is new and transforming, through and beyond words. Sharing the baggage of our lives with the rest of a group not only makes a difference, but becomes an integral part of the artistic journey and gives it depth.

This is the artistic challenge of projects in the community, I think. That was what I had in mind when we tackled *Il était une fois mon quartier*: to welcome individual experiences, to start from one level of the daily life narrative, to transcend it and reach a poetic level where words, the body and presence surprise us in the discovery of something we didn't know we knew!

Suzanne Boisvert  
(see p. page 46)

Ouvrir mon cœur  
et être là, présente  
Pour accueillir les autres



# L'anus horribilis — Chronique militante d'une année merdique

[The anus horribilis — militant chronicle of one very crappy year]

Montréal

2005

*Completion of the independent feature film L'anus horribilis by Bruno Dubuc, a politically engaged filmmaker*

Facilitating Artist  
Bruno Dubuc<sup>1</sup>

Other Artists and Project  
Members

David Barbeau  
Étienne Denis  
Maxime Richard  
Michel Gaudreault  
Patrick Morency  
Pierre-Antoine Harvey  
Sylvie Lapointe

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- How are community and humanist activist art projects similar to and different from documentary films that aim to report on and contextualize the history of activism?
- Given the often wide-angle lens with which activism is covered in contemporary documentary film-making, what is the political significance of focusing on individuals trying to lead lives that correspond to their engagement?

LEVIER's funding provided the means for Bruno Dubuc to finish this nearly two-hour long feature film, which he began writing and filming (without financial backing and a filming crew) in 2001. Like with his earlier film, *Gambit du fou* [The fool's gambit], *L'anus horribilis* combines activist news events with documentation about rather ordinary people's lives; it chronicles the news highlights of 2003, that is the highlights according to the filmmaker, and includes coverage of the invasion of Iraq, the election of the Charest government in Québec, the repression of the street protests in Montréal during the World Trade Organization's meetings, as well as the detention and extradition of Basque activists Eduardo Plagaro Perez and Gorka Perea Salazar and that of Mohammed Cherfi, etc. Footage of several conferences by well-known intellectuals Omar Aktouf, Amir Khadir and Michel Chossudovsky, during which they speak critically about the current neoliberal ideological system in place, is also included.

Ultimately however, this is an autobiography that focuses mainly on the filmmaker's own process as a filmmaker. In the guise of a story told to a young child named Max, Bruno crafts a narrative about his journey to revive the independent newspaper *L'Anus* [The anus], short for *l'ABC du Nouvel Usage Social* [ABC new social usage] that at one time involved more than half a dozen of his friends. This quest becomes the pretext to question the political engagement of these individuals, who by now, are mostly in their mid-30s and, for the most part, uninterested in the newspaper that they had worked on together a decade earlier.

Disappointed by his friends' reactions and feeling personally politically impotent, Bruno flees to Corsica, where he embraces Raphaël Enthoven and Michel Onfray's hedonistic and subversive philosophy ("If I change, I change the world") and thus finds himself able to see things more serenely. Upon his return to Québec after the trip, Bruno realizes that while his friends are no longer militant activists, they have managed to find ways to live and work in keeping with their values: this encourages Bruno to continue his own sociopolitical engagement.<sup>2</sup>



## NOTES

1. Bruno Dubuc is the production coordinator of the independent monthly satirical journal *Le Couac*; he has also participated in activist video projects directed by Kino and Les Lucioles.

2. The film *L'anus horribilis* was broadcast on several occasions, most notably at the Montreal World Film Festival in 2006 and the *Rendez-vous du cinéma québécois* in 2007. Several Montréal video clubs have copies of this film for rent; it is also available for purchase through the filmmaker's website.

# Opération : à nous les sarraus

[Operation: Let's put on the lab coats]

Montréal

March 25, 2006

Regroupement Naissance-  
Renaissance (RNR)  
[Coalition birth-rebirth]  
Lorraine Fontaine

Facilitating Artists  
Le collectif Les sarraudeuses  
[The lab coat activists  
collective]:  
Annie Pelletier  
Diane Trépanière<sup>1</sup>  
Isabelle Gendreau  
Lorraine Fontaine  
Louise-Andrée Lauzière  
Nathalie Fontaine

Other Artists and Project  
Members  
many activists members of  
the RNR

*Co-creation of artworks by activists campaigning for re-humanizing the birthing process  
accompanied by visual artists and musicians*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- How can an art activity effectively be introduced into an activist organization that has had no prior experience with collective creativity and consequently could be afraid of "wasting time" when there are so many other important "things" to address and do?
- After having been intensely involved in a short-term collaborative art project, how is it possible to maintain a sense of solidarity with the group once it has been dispersed or changed its focus? How is it possible to find the courage to continue on alone as an activist?

Le Regroupement Naissance-Renaissance (RNR) [The coalition birth-rebirth] aims to have widespread recognition for the rights of women in all aspects of their perinatal experience. With over 35 member groups, this coalition — which was incorporated in 1980 — continues to mobilize women in the struggle against the medicalization of childbirth. It takes a critical stance toward hospital births and denounces the industrialization of birthing and other adverse effects of the race for productivity impacting families during the prenatal period.

In the period between 2005 and 2006, the RNR highlighted its 25th anniversary with a culminating day of celebration on March 25, 2006, which included a collaborative creative project funded by LEVIER. The event was organized by a collective of artists and community activists who were called *Les sarraudeuses* [The lab coat activists collective], a word formed from the combination of *sarrau* [lab coat] — which symbolizes the techno-medical system — and *saboteuse* [saboteur] — from the word sabotage, which has its origins in the actions of artisan shoemakers in the industrial era who put their shoes in the gears of the machines that manufactured shoes to prevent the disappearance of their craft. The RNR appropriated this term, with permission of the collective of artists and community activists, as a way of identifying its individual members: to be one of the *sarraudeuses* means to be aware of everything related to giving birth within the hospital system.







Diane Trépanière and Nathalie Fontaine, who were co-responsible for visual arts component of this project *Opération : À nous les sarraus* [Operation: Let's put on the lab coats], proposed a collaborative activity *l'Élan du sarrau — page blanche* [The momentum of the lab coat — white page]. During this activity, members of the RNR re-imagined and re-shaped white lab coats to create beautiful dresses meant to bring hope and a vision of the future where women can determine their childbirth experience as they wish. They were divided into sub-groups and given materials with which to create (including scissors, paint, markers, ribbons, feathers, threads, needles, pins, etc.). While the 60 workshop participants were women who had already given considerable thought to the imbalance of power between the main actors in the birthing process — that is, the pregnant women themselves — and the health system that should be supporting them, this was the first time they approached the subject through the use of art.

The women were accompanied in their creative process by a musical arrangement that was co-created by Lorraine Fontaine and Holly Arsenault called *Musique de la peur — musique de la confiance* [Music of fear — music of trust], which integrated the reflections of women activists who had participated in a musical brainstorming session in December 2005.

Although this activity was very limited in time, the RNR believes that language and creative expression (e.g. music and the visual arts) have expanded the set of tools at their disposal to continue their activism in a way that is quite different than speeches and statistics. The re-constructed lab coats-cum-dresses created during the March 25<sup>th</sup> event, as well as the photos documenting the process, continue to be used by the RNR in its efforts to renew its strategies of communication relative to its mission to the public at large, the media and different government bodies.

#### NOTE

1. See her participation in the community art project *Rentrer chez soi*, pp. 184–185, and in the humanist activist project *Des pas sur l'ombre*, pp. 268–269. See also her participation in the *Community*

*Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004), p. 67, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 76–77.



## Claudine Jouny

*I wear a white coat, and I am a citizen, woman, mother, nurse and nursing teacher. I train birthing coaches at the Maison des Familles Chemin du Roi and am a member and board member of the Regroupement Naissance-Renaissance. I contribute to empowering my fellow citizens by taking back control of birthing. "Changing the world begins with changing how we are born." (Michel Odent)*  
— Claudine Jouny

On the 25th anniversary of the Regroupement Naissance Renaissance (RNR), I realized I was not alone. I hadn't been aware of it, because although there are women, families and even men all across the province of Québec who are demanding the humanization of birth, this is not well known to the general public.

Community groups are generally underfunded. They are only the tip of the iceberg in that the huge contribution they make to society is invisible. Who is interested in their work, their actions or their demands? Are the media or the public interested?

I've observed that community groups wake up people from all backgrounds and raise their consciousness. Individually, it's hard to get things to move, but it's different when you're part of a group; and at our 25th, there were a lot of us together for the same cause.

When I was a hospital nurse, it was very hard to get any respect for my values, because the birthing process was treated like a disease. I see birth as a natural process and feel that parents are basically competent. Also, I've heard my colleagues recite the "fear and risk" monologue and seen the certainty they possess. They assume certain knowledge of what to do and think they can dictate to parents what is appropriate and what is not.

When we created the smocks, that was when I realized how much I wanted to work as a *sarraudeuse*. Basically, I was a *sarraudeuse* before I even knew what that was. And it was at that precise moment that I chose to teach future health professionals, that is, nursing students. I steer them toward awareness of the natural process of birth and its humanization.

Unfortunately, the graduates will have to model themselves on the practices in the hospitals they'll be working in. In doing so, they will be rejecting their own values; or else these competent people will leave this kind of institution.

What a *sarraudeuse* does is infiltrate the health field in order to humanize birthing. The most beautiful thing a *sarraudeuse* can say to a woman who is giving birth is "You can do it. Go for it! Your body knows how to give birth." Usually in the hospitals, they sing

a different tune. And I've observed that there are some women who are ready to hear this tune and others who aren't; I have to respect that.

I tell myself that if everybody who has the same ideals and the same values — health professionals, women or men — wore these smocks, we would be able to recognize each other.

In fact, this creative act of artistically modifying a medical smock has become an expression of identity. If I go into Sainte-Justice Hospital wearing my smock, I will not go unnoticed, but on the other hand, I'll have to reveal myself in front of the other health professionals and even the general public. If I wear the modified smock and I'm visible in a hospital, it's certain that I'm going to have to get involved in actions, discussions, reflections, everything! Becoming a *sarraudeuse* is a process of involvement.

As in any creative process, the works need to be seen by experienced people and by the general public. The *sarraudeuses* are at that point. I'm ready to broadcast who I am through this emblem of the personalized smock, and to go on to the next stage in birth politics. Here, we are dealing with the importance of not feeling alone. Individually, it's hard, but when there are a lot of us, we become disturbing. And if the *sarraudeuses* get media attention, they will take action collectively.

Becoming a mother confirmed my values with respect to birth and its humanization. I reconnected with my power as a woman, my power as a parent. When I talk about power, it's in the sense of personal power to act, to think, to express yourself.

During the workshop, we transformed the original white smock into a smock that expresses our values regarding birth. The front of the smock represents a "normal" girl, but we also see signs of a "crazy" girl. The letters CH, referring to the hospital centre (*centre hospitalier*), are accompanied by diaper pins decorated with sequins. There are three colours (orange, red and green), three feathers, three circles and three buttons, depicting the father, the mother and the child, or birth. They could also be the mother, the nurse and the teacher. All these elements represent the professional side of the girl and a little "wild" side with some subtle signs. If you pay very close attention, you'll see those signs!

On the back of the smock, you can read my personal experience as a mother, as a birthing coach and as a member of the RNR. I wear my history on my back. I represented it with a cave, as an analogy with motherhood. I added a she-wolf to reflect the physiological and natural process of birth among mammals. It also recounts the birth of my child. The silvery veil symbolizes intimacy and security. It acts as protection to keep the process of birth as natural as possible.

This project sowed the seeds of other actions that will soon be developed. This is a desire that is really close to my heart.



Photos of the interviewees: Devora Neumark (unless otherwise mentioned).



## Lorraine Fontaine



Art has the power  
to bridge gaps,  
to help us rethink,  
re imagine and transform  
established paradigms!

the words, rhythms and music of that fear? "You can't do it, we know better than you. I'm afraid of pain. . . " What were the words, rhythms and music of confidence? "Hang in there, you can do it! I'm here for you."

I came to the Regroupement Naissance Renaissance (RNR) seven years ago, out of my passion for the humanization of birth, which was born of my struggle as a woman to regain control over my body in a profoundly patriarchal health care system.

Society is more and more focused on technology. In this context, the work I'm doing involves defending women's rights, raising awareness in the public and among decision makers, and promoting respect for women's choices.

For the 25th anniversary of the Regroupement, we drew inspiration from a quotation by a doctor who supports our cause: "I have a warning for us (doctors, nurses, midwives, activists) against the music of risk and fear, because it can cause collateral damage."

In 2006, while we were organizing this event, we were at war in Iraq after the events of September 11, 2001. Society was obsessed with "security" and was prepared to take away many rights that had been won. There was an escalation of fear all around us, and the parallel with obstetrics seems more and more obvious to me today. I realize now how much this context contributed to our analysis of the situation in perinatal care, because internationally as well, we were being asked to submit to an authority exterior to ourselves. The obsession with safety in obstetrics creates an attitude of silent consent, which leads to behaviour that is contrary to the right of free speech, free choice and dissent. In this context, that quotation that came from a member of the medical community became a springboard for recontextualizing and taking stock of our demands, particularly because the organization was celebrating its 25th anniversary.

The artist Diane Trépanière worked with us to define the artistic aspects of the event, and we felt from the outset that she was acting with us, like a midwife. We came up with the title *Opération: À nous les sarraus* during a brainstorming session at a meeting, and I realize now, in the process of this interview, that we were influenced by both medical language and military language. The smock, symbolizing medical knowledge, became the object at the centre of the event and the song. So we found ourselves doing a community art action where we could all write our own stories and our wishes or our denunciations, so that we could refocus together on what birth should be, creating a new mobilization.

Diane Trépanière said to me: "Why don't you write a song for the event?" And that's when I decided to get involved as an artist. That decision became a truly personal gesture. Everything changed!

I asked myself, if we wanted to move toward something other than the music of fear and risk, where did we want to go? What were

Composing a song for a collective, a group, required a certain amount of humility with regard to my wishes as an artist, and I also had to be able to change my original idea to meet the needs of the event. This mandate led me to simplify, to get to the essence of what we wanted to say.

I'm very proud of the outcome because it reflects both my artistic impulse and the words of the women, and the result is a real fusion of a symphonic poem and a rallying song. I succeeded in using music as a tool of collective expression without compromising my artistic integrity. Just a few weeks before the event, that confidence was shaken by a certain hesitancy on the part of the Board of Directors of the RNR. Their reaction upset us because we saw it as a lack of confidence, but it may just have been a communication problem.

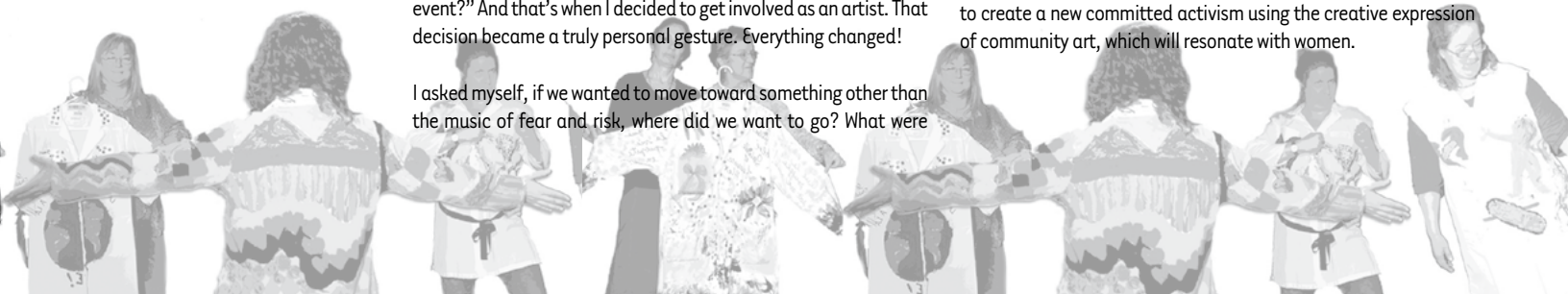
We managed to create a great team and a mobilizing event that may draw new attention to the work of the RNR in the years to come. Full of confidence, we imagined what would follow: exhibitions, the recording of the song, mobilization of the *sarraudeuses*. During the evaluation of the event, the members of the board of directors expressed their appreciation for the effect the 25th anniversary had in bringing people together, but also their concerns about the need for refocusing and realism, given our limitations in terms of human and financial resources. In spite of that, since the event, we have been taking advantage of every opportunity to show our smocks, sing the song or invite more people to become *sarraudeuses*.

In the spring of 2009, we had an opportunity to again explore the rallying potential of the concept of *sarraudeuses* with the help of Majo Hansotte, a Belgian trainer. Her approach matched our wishes perfectly. The essence of her interventions with community groups is to help them to recognize, develop and express their "civic intelligence" and bring it to the public sphere, using artistic and creative expression. We worked together doing what she calls "potentiating the participants' stories: constructing a collective expression and an action through the creation of a collective, making a strong critique of injustices suffered and formulating demands for the future."

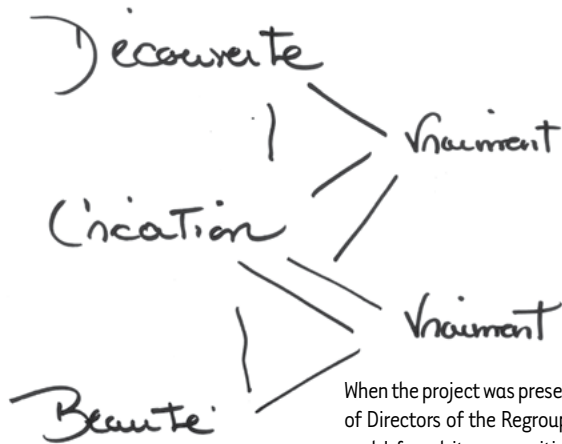
This support helped us bring together what we got out of the *Opération: À nous les sarraus* event and the objectives of the RNR: to create a new committed activism using the creative expression of community art, which will resonate with women.

*Author, composer and interpreter of jazz tunes rooted in my experience and marked by my way of looking at the world; feminist and community organizer in the battle for women's rights and the humanization of birthing; mother of four children and grandmother of two: these are the sources of energy I have drawn on for this community art project.*

*The dream of Les Sarraudeuses was born of a fervent belief in collective action, in the importance of listening to women and their concerns, and respect for their choices in the profoundly human experience of pregnancy, birth and motherhood.*  
— Lorraine Fontaine



## Manon Cantin



When the project was presented to us, I was a member of the Board of Directors of the Regroupement Naissance Renaissance (RNR), and I found it very exciting, but I can tell you that the artistic aspect was of less interest to me, because I didn't really consider myself a person with artistic talents.

*I am interested in life's transitions and I work in the area of pregnancy and birth. I strive to recover and restore the full meaning of birth. Through my contact with women and babies, I broaden my knowledge and refine my sensitivity, I listen to my intuition and make contact with human strength. I develop myself and in turn pass this on to others. I feel connected to my community, and it's only logical that I participate in it. On this simple journey in our shared time and space, my heart opens to others.*  
— Manon Cantin

Nevertheless, I found the idea interesting. I recall that Lorraine Fontaine was thrilled by the whole project because of its artistic aspect—making the smocks. I observed that she put a lot of time into the artistic side, the decoration and transformation of the smocks. I couldn't imagine myself spending so much time cutting, painting, regluing, resewing—in short, creating a new smock. So Lorraine reduced the time allotted to the smocks. I realize now that it was really my ignorance of the artistic process that led me to make that comment.

On the day of the 25th anniversary of the RNR, at the workshop, I teamed up with somebody who inspired me a lot. And then... surprise! The artistic process made complete sense to me. I still feel the power of that moment. Really, we were inspired, and everything we did was meaningful. Not a single gesture was ordinary as we made the smocks our own.

Our perceptions of maternity began to take on meaning through the smocks. To us, maternity couldn't be represented by a smock, because in our collective unconscious we associated the smock with the medical environment. Birth, to us, was not a medical process. So we decided to take the smocks apart. We didn't tear them, because we didn't want to ruin them, but we took out the stitching until they lost the shape of smocks.

And we started to add colour. We painted a graduated wash from royal blue to almost white from the top to the middle. In the middle, we left a blank space to represent the transitional area, to situate the point of birth. Our work smock became a birthing robe. Yes, it was really a splendid robe!

I see the transitional area as a bridge that takes us from one place to another. At the beginning of our conception of the birthing robe, this area was attributed mainly to the child, but in retrospect, I realize that it also belongs to the mother. It's meaningful to her too, because at that precise moment, a woman is changed forever.



To illustrate the arrival of the new being in the world, we used a graduated wash of green from the palest to the darkest, starting from the end of the white part and going down to the bottom edge of the robe. And since we wanted to add a little lightness to our lives, we made some lacy cut-outs at the bottom.

This workshop was an experience of creation in the present moment, without any anticipation. I threw myself into it body and soul. I can still see us sitting on the floor working, taking all the space we needed, using what we had at hand. We lost all sense of time. I can still hear Lorraine saying to me: "Everybody's finished except you." Several hours had gone by, and we could have taken even longer. Remember that I was the one who had asked to reduce the time allotted to the art workshop!

That experience was a springboard for me in many ways, including getting in touch with my artistic side, which had been foreign to me. There was a really concrete experiment with a result, and through it, I discovered an artistic talent that was not what I imagined or saw in others. It then became my own.

Creating the birthing robe was a process of materializing what is often confined in our heads or in words. It was a strong, evocative experience that went beyond verbal or intellectual forms, and it speaks to me of our real creative power. I feel that this is one more door that has opened in me, and not only artistically. It's the transformation of thoughts and reflection into something concrete.

And I understood that I was capable of creating beauty. Doing the interview today takes me right back to that process that enabled me to observe that I could totally transpose what I have in my head and my heart. That is beauty!





# Des familles hautes en couleur [Colourful families]

Montréal

October 2006

La Confédération des  
organismes familiaux  
du Québec (COFAQ)  
[Confederation of family  
organizations in Québec]  
Paul Bégin

Facilitating Artists  
Mise au jeu:<sup>1</sup>  
Luc Malette  
Nancy Roberge

*Participatory interventionist theatre in the context of a forum about the implementation of family-positive policies*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- Professional theatre facilitators have a host of skills with which to animate community gatherings and invite creative exploration of complex socio-political issues. While community members benefit from the experience with alternative communication strategies such as participatory theatre, what tools are left within the community after such a punctual event?
- How can lessons learnt, experience shared and questions raised during community theatre events or other creative interventions aimed at facilitating dialogue about challenging socio-political issues be diffused beyond the directly implicated community so that the knowledge and critical analysis be distributed to the benefit of a broad audience? In other words, what are the conditions that would favour an exchange amongst community activists and the public at large?

Founded in 1972, the Confédération des organismes familiaux du Québec (COFAQ) [Confederation of family organizations in Québec], brings together various federations and associations across Québec. Its mandate is to speak on behalf of a social project focused on finding better living conditions adapted to the multiple realities of families and advocate for the establishment of a comprehensive family policy.



Mise au jeu is a theatre interventionist group that does Forum theatre. It creates “made to measure” theatrical works based on problematics submitted to them by support or advocacy groups that call upon their services.<sup>2</sup> Since 1991, Mise au jeu has created more than 400 original theatrical interventions presented in Montréal and the outlying regions of Québec. They work as often with adults as with groups of youth.



On stage: Nancy Roberge and  
Luc Malette. Photo: COFAQ.

By the time COFAQ applied to LEVER for short-term project funding, the organization had already collaborated with Mise au jeu during the six regional forums that were held during the year in anticipation of the *États généraux sur la famille*<sup>3</sup> that took place on October 27 and 28, 2006. The support given by LEVER contributed to the development of *Des familles hautes en couleur* [Colourful families], the theatrical intervention created with data collected by COFAQ from a survey they conducted called *Portrait de famille* [Family portrait]<sup>4</sup>. Respondents to this survey described their experiences; many were highly creative in the way that they did so — using allegory to illustrate their family life. In the end, several characters were presented in the theatrical production played by only two actors, evoking the challenges associated with being a family member that people mentioned in the survey.

Following the presentation of *Des familles hautes en couleur*, Mise au jeu initiated a debate by inviting the audience to express what they felt and thought about what they had witnessed in the play. Individuals were encouraged to state their concerns and propose possible solutions. This intervention was rather uncommon within the context of an “official” event. Perhaps most significant is the fact that the families themselves spoke up about what their own needs were.

Whenever Mise au jeu is invited to participate in a collective reflection, what touches me is that our encounter creates a space where participants speak out and go beyond their feelings of powerlessness.  
— Nancy Roberge

## NOTES

1. See Mise au jeu’s participation in an event organized by the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec, as described by Vivian Labrie in her text *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty — A Degree of Freedom*, pp. 293 and 297.
2. This use of the theatre was born from community needs to develop educational tools; it is particularly useful for testing out attitude changes in a relatively safe laboratory-like environment.
3. The General Director of COFAQ, Ms. Denise Campeau-Blanchette, supervised the event. COFAQ’s Coordinator, Marise Elisabeth Pérez, organized it.
4. The material was written up and analyzed by sociologist Jocelyne Valois.



# Tuganire: parlons-en, discutons!

[Let's talk about it, let's discuss!]<sup>1</sup>

Montréal

January 2004 —  
August 2008

(All project members listed below also co-created the documentary *Tuganire*, as part of the video compilation *Documenting Collaboration*.<sup>2</sup>)

## Facilitating Artists

Lisa Ndejuru\*<sup>3</sup>

and other Isangano members:

Jeanne T. Ndejuru,  
Gilbert Rwirangira,  
Solange Gasana,  
Sylvie Gasana,  
Gildas Rwirangira,  
Patrick Kalisa, Herve Kagabo,  
Christian Kagabo,  
Jeanne d'Arc Kayigamba,  
Sandra Sezirahiga,  
Annita Mukundwa,  
Yvette Ishimwe,  
Shema Muterahejuru,  
Yannick Ndazaro,  
Shadia Uwanje, Asta Uwase,  
Hadyia Sezirahiga,  
David Gakwerere,  
Nelly Gakwerere,  
Fiacre Rwirangira,  
Deborah Gatima,  
Odile Sanabaso,  
Frederick Mugwaneza,  
Anne Lise Gakwerere,  
Jeannette Gakwerere,  
Jacques Rwirangira,  
Pascal Nkongoli,  
Fabien Ngo, Stella Rwirangira,  
Diane Rudakenga,  
Catherine Kabega Nkongoli,  
Kevin Gasasira,  
Romeo Gasasira,  
Winnie Kayigamba,  
Laura Murigande,  
Christian Mpakaniye,  
Leila Butoyi, Gloria Irakoze,  
Liliane Bwiza, Emile Kwizera,  
Julia Ndejuru, Safari Bushayija.

It is almost impossible to list all the community members who participated over the years in one capacity or another, but without their support and contribution *Tuganire* would not have been

as meaningful:

Pauline Ngirumpatse,  
Rodrigue Mugisha,  
Josette Mugyambere,  
Abbe Calixte Kabayiza,  
the Kayigamba family,  
the Dongier family,  
the Rushemeza family,  
Jonathan Houle,  
Flavien Bizimana,  
Freya DeClerc,  
Makeba and Denise Bayingana,  
the Gakwerere family,  
Jean Paul Gahunde,  
the Ndejuru family,  
Jean Paul Nylinkwaya,  
Monique Mukabalisa,  
Cesar Gashabizi,  
Papa Seminari,  
Perpetue Mukarugwiza,  
Alain Patrick Ndegera,  
Antoinette Mukanzaramba,  
the Gahima family,  
Marie Kayitesi,  
Rose Karambizi,  
Donatila Karambizi,  
Maman Lili wa Paulin,  
Berthilde Mururonkwere,  
the Rwirangira family,  
the Musafiri family,  
the Mpambara family, Eric  
Kayihura, Che Rupali, Patrick  
Sharangabo, Emmanuelle  
Kayiganwa, Kamoso,  
Bernadette Hakiba,  
the Nteziryayo family,  
the Twagiramundu family  
and others.

Associated Community  
Organizations  
Urumuri (Montréal's Rwandan  
women's group)  
CRM (Montréal's Rwandan  
community)  
Page-Rwanda (Families and  
friends of the victims of the  
Tutsi genocide in Rwanda)  
The Forum of Rwandan profes-  
sionals (a group of Rwandan  
professionals in Montréal)  
Rwanda Sport Club (Montréal's  
Rwandan soccer team)  
Amitié Canada-Rwanda  
(group of Rwandans and  
friends of Rwanda)  
as well as the Rwandan  
community organizations in  
Quebec city, Ottawa and  
Toronto

*Project to establish a space for dialogue within the Montréal Rwandan community, which led to the creation of a community cultural center*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- How can contemporary art practice be successfully merged with cultural traditions that go way back? In other words, what are the considerations necessary to integrate customs within innovative creative explorations in order to respond to the specific challenges of our times?
- What kind of individual and communal support is necessary when a community art project goes horribly wrong?

More than ten years in the making, *Tuganire: Parlons-en, discutons!* [Let's talk about it, let's discuss!], was born from the inability for some within the Rwandan diaspora to understand and accept the reality of the 1994 Tutsi genocide. *Tuganire* means "let's talk" in Kinyarwanda — one of the three official languages of Rwanda (the other two being French and English). This project was framed as a means for developing personal and communal empowerment.

Lisa Ndejuru and Jacques Rwirangira initiated *Tuganire* after Lisa had the idea to juxtapose the free-form exploration inherent in dialogue with the ritualized negotiations that accompany traditional Rwandan pre-marital agreements wherein the families of the prospective bride and groom get together to debate the merits of the union — sometimes leading to hilariously funny exchanges. During this *gusaba* process, which aims at creating the conditions for a viable new family unit, keen intellect is prized, as is the capacity for sharp and witty repartee. For Lisa, the strategy was simple: remain open and receptive to what might emerge during the formal negotiations, but also in the informal dialogue, where everyone would have a chance to speak out and express themselves. LEVIER's funding was stretched to cover the rather lengthy period during which the project unfolded. The humanist activist grant that was awarded to Lisa on behalf of the project provided the means for the members to focus more intensely on achieving their goals.

Both Lisa and Jacques are long-time members of the Isangano cultural group, which brings together young people from the Montréal Rwandan community to practice and perform traditional dance and music (including drumming). Having adopted the *Tuganire* project as a tool for dialogue, decision-making, and conflict resolution amongst the different groups and individuals that make up the Montréal Rwandan community, Isangano hosted a series of intergenerational dialogues within the Rwandan communities in Quebec City, Ottawa and Montréal. The main questions that were discussed were: Who are we? Where we come from? Where are we going?

Throughout the project, the dialogue required great care, respect, commitment and listening; it served to nurture a healthy exchange of experiences and culture amongst the different generations of people involved and, for the youth particularly, to appropriate their history. More concretely, the dialogue resulted in the decision to address the shared challenges facing the Montréal Rwandan community by opening a community cultural centre — named Umurage, which means "heritage" in Kinyarwanda — to host creative activities, workshops, mutual aid programs, etc.



During the first screening for members of the Rwandan community of the *Tuganire* video on July 26, 2008.  
All photos: Frederic Mugwaneza.



While the intergenerational encounters were well attended and greatly appreciated for the most part, there was some contention about the dialogue form: some individuals found the collaborative talking process too challenging and would have preferred to have a set of guidelines to be followed. Others complained that the dialogue was not all that productive or found it exhausting to have to take into account all the points of views expressed, which on occasion seemed endless. Nevertheless, over time, everyone came to recognize how grounded the process was and how it resulted in a greater impetus to speak out and take action, including the concretization and implementation of an idea to establish a Rwandan community cultural centre in Montréal. Some project members accepted the invitation to participate in the LEVIER video initiative entitled *Documenting Collaboration*. The video documentary *Tuganire* recounts the entire project up until the opening celebrations, which inaugurated the Umurage centre.

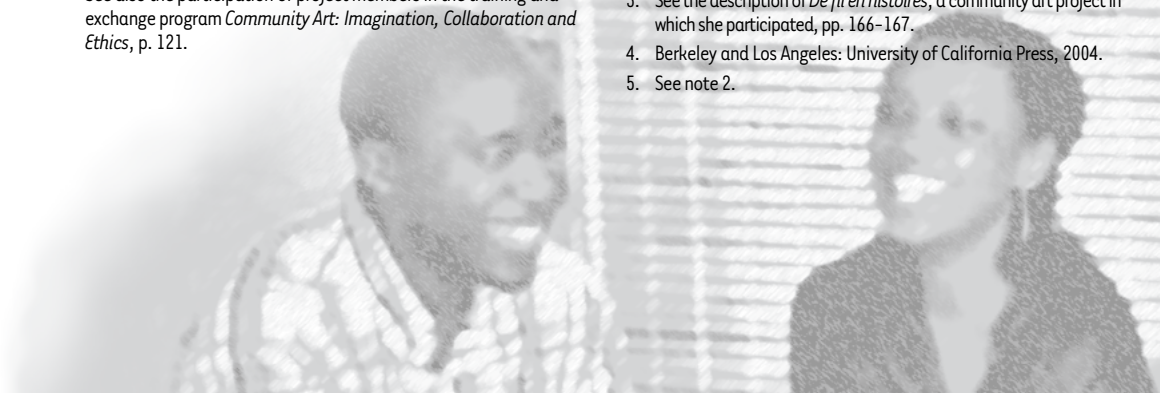
Because the project was based on, and characterized by, a deliberate openness to dialogue, active listening and intersubjective vulnerability without involving any other tangible result for quite some time — that is, until the opening of Umurage — the question: “Is this art?”. The Western history of art projects which have been shaped with an emphasis on establishing dialogue is relatively recent. Grant H. Kester, in his book entitled *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art*<sup>4</sup> dwells at length on artists’ work at the intersection of art and cultural activism, that is, projects that have as their goal to develop new forms of collaboration within and between diverse communities. Tracing the origins of these works in conceptual art and feminist performance of the 1960s and 1970s, Kester explores the ways that these artists challenge several of the key principles of avant-garde art and theory of art in general.

After having worked for years to get to a place of celebration, the opening of the Umurage centre was marred by a tragic event: on July 26, 2008, after having screened the *Tuganire* video<sup>5</sup> for the first time for all the community to see, one of the youth was killed in a street fight. Other calamities soon followed: in December 2008, the centre’s activities were forced to an abrupt halt when the electricity in the building in which the centre was housed was cut off on account of the owner having gone bankrupt. Not long after, the water pipes — which had been frozen on account of the lack of heat in the building — burst, resulting in water damage effecting most of Umurage’s furniture and documents. The building was condemned soon after by the city and the centre had to close. For a long while after the closure, Isangano stopped dancing.

Despite these dire events, everyone involved in the *Tuganire* project sees it as a success: it is credited for having created the conditions to hold the community together during these catastrophes. Even though they are no longer active in the group, Isangano members have refused to disband it. Concordia University has offered Umurage an office space and the Montréal Rwandan community was finally able to elect a Chair, after seven years of not having one. Beyond what happens with the centre in the coming years, the art of *Tuganire* was to open the channels of communication and invite individuals to shake off their feelings of apathy and powerlessness.

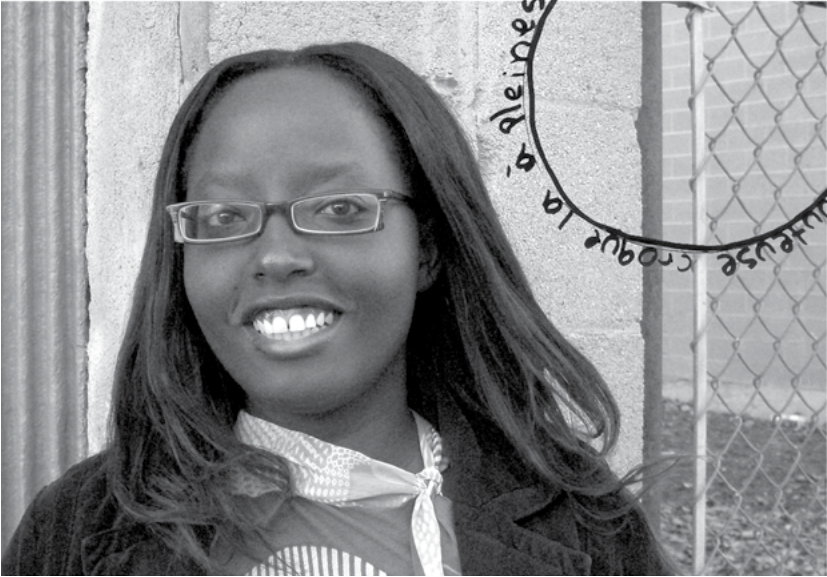
#### NOTES

1. See the participation of project members in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 111, 118 and 119. See also the participation of project members in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 121.
2. For more information, see the presentation of this project (and the DVD) in the centre of this publication, and also in the introduction of the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, pp. 100–101.
3. See the description of *De fil en histoires*, a community art project in which she participated, pp. 166–167.
4. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004.
5. See note 2.





Annita Mukundwa



*As a Rwandan woman who has grown up in Montreal, I base my inspiration on the youth of tomorrow. I'm very interested in the place of young people in our society, and I like to work with them and talk with them about the issues that concern them and their implications. What we are is a gift from God, and what we become is our gift to God.*  
— Annita Mukundwa

*Tuganire* was a very interesting project that came at the right time for the community, because it enabled us to talk and discuss. I found it especially enriching because it was an intergenerational project. I was enthusiastic from the start, because I felt we were definitely going to learn to give, share and receive together.

When Lisa came to us with this idea, we were especially interested in the result. It was a project that involved expressing ourselves, and Rwandans tend to be rather reserved people who don't open up easily about their emotions and their experience.

I personally took part in the project to observe, provide support and help as needed. I got involved very quickly because of the community's needs. We felt a climate of trust, so cooperation within the community was possible, and that motivated me to commit myself totally to the project. Lisa was available. She went to see people to explain the project, and they finally had a sense of having a place where they could speak and be listened to. That stimulated me and showed me it was possible to contribute to the success of the project, to find something of quality in the community once trust was established, and beyond the project, to listen to what other people had experienced.

From then on, the committee members tried to become more representative by contacting the various groups that already existed in the community: religious groups, sports groups, dance groups, women's groups and other groups in the Rwandan community in Montréal. A sense of belonging was awakened in me, a Rwandan woman who had grown up mostly outside Rwanda. I felt that I could really be part of Rwandan history.

In 2005, the first year, we created the *Discutons* event. It took place in Quebec City as part of *Rencontres-nous*, organized by Isangano. This event brought together a lot of people — young people, adults and seniors. We talked and the sensitive issue of identity came up. Most of the young adolescents who had grown up in Canada did not identify as Rwandans and were critical of their parents for not taking the time to teach them and talk to them about Rwandan culture: the language, the food, the values. It was very hard to hear this!

Ironically, when I think about it, the majority of us, myself most of all, found ourselves with the same sense of incongruity between belonging and ignorance of who we are. Many parents, who were genocide survivors, still found it too painful to express and explain to their children what they had experienced, so they concentrated on their problems as immigrants and the challenges of integration. In addition to this lack of communication, the parents were spending less and less time at home, which led to a gap in the transmission of their heritage.

I was concerned about the dangers of not being able to have a community discussion on the identity crisis and the existential crisis we felt as young people reaching adulthood. We had to take immediate action. To meet this urgent need, *Tuganire* created a space for discussion between parents and children. In spite of our efforts to maintain this structure, there were fewer and fewer participants, and that dampened my enthusiasm. But I didn't completely lose interest. I wanted to find other young people in the community to take part in sports and social activities or outings, so as to create a sense of belonging among young Rwandans growing up in Montréal. In order for the activities to be representative and attractive to them, they had to be neutral, in other words not "too Rwandan," but cool and trendy.

*Tuganire* is a project that speaks to me personally, even though I did not experience the genocide myself. I still felt its effects, since many members of my family went through it. My father lost almost his entire family. In 1995, he went back alone to bury his father and mourn for him. When he returned to Montréal, he spared us the details because the pain was still intense. In 2005, when we discussed the *Tuganire* project at home, he opened up and expressed what he'd felt ten years earlier. That was when I realized how terrible that experience was for him, and I was able to identify the real cause of the distance we young people felt. Since I was involved in the project, I stayed strong for the others, telling myself that it was helping them — but it was only to protect myself from my feelings. There was a war, an existential crisis, within me, but I wasn't able to express it.

We have to talk about our emotions without feeling guilty, even though we did not all experience the events in the same way, because that's part of the healing process, individual first and then collective.

Here and now, this is the first time I've talked about my feelings about the Rwandan genocide.

Photos of the interviewees: Devora Neumark (unless otherwise mentioned).

## Gilbert Rwirangira

*As a member of the Rwandan community of Montréal, knowing that I live in a country whose population is extremely varied, I'm involved in cultural activities with youth in order to advance our community. I feel it's important for their development here that the young people take pride in their Rwandan identity!*  
— Gilbert Rwirangira

Everything is related, it's all part of a whole, but I'm going to begin with the Isangano project, because that's where it all started. In 1999, there were a lot of young Rwandans coming to Montréal. They were everywhere. They'd had time after the genocide, and even before and during it, to leave the country and come here. They didn't all come from Rwanda; some were from the neighbouring countries.

My parents, my brothers and my sisters are an example: they were in Burundi, where things were going very badly; it was exactly the same climate of hatred as between the Hutus and the Tutsis. When I left, in 1988, I had just turned 16. My parents left at the end of May 1994, during the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda. I knew what their lives must have been like during that difficult time. People felt powerless and vulnerable. We could sense death approaching, we were being watched, we were seen. Everyone knew where you lived, how many people there were in the household, what you did, etc. They knew everything about you and your family, down to the slightest details of your habits.

It was once they were here in Montréal that my parents realized the scale of the genocide, because here they had some distance and they weren't under threat, and they had free access to television and newspapers. They could talk about it without being afraid of someone overhearing them. And it was then, too, that they understood the danger they had escaped. You only realize afterwards what a close call you had!

When we were there, we could imagine the scale of the thing, but there was no information on what was happening. When my parents arrived here and saw on TV the bodies floating in the water, people hacked to pieces, it was unspeakable! It confirmed the worst they could imagine. You realize that the people you're seeing on TV are the same people you lived with and that those things are happening to them. Now imagine the Rwandans who are in Montréal and who were in Rwanda during the genocide. They didn't see it on TV or read about it in newspapers, they saw it live on the ground. They lived through it, and I even have friends who still carry scars because they didn't die. We call them genocide survivors, but they're not survivors, they are victims, because they don't live as you and I do.

That only made the vision I had of a Rwandan community that had to live together more real for me.

I chose to get more involved with the young people because the parents have so many scars that it was very difficult to work or speak with them without touching on politics. With the young people, it's easier. We opted for cultural and social activities — my friends and I didn't need to get into politics. When we founded the *Isangano* group, we stressed that it would be apolitical. That enabled us to work only on the social, community and cultural aspects of ourselves. And in *Isangano*, we share everything.



We had to regain our positive identity and reject the label "people of the machete," despite what we read in newspapers and saw on TV. We tried to show our cultural side because Rwandans have a great culture. When I speak of culture, I don't just mean songs and dances, I also mean the knowledge of how to live well in a community, with respect and sharing.

It's difficult! Because there are all sorts of distractions here for young people, and in order to show them the importance of transmitting Rwandan culture, you also need the parents. We've tried to work with the parents to guide those young people and give them an identity so that they'll be proud to be Rwandan, so that they won't be embarrassed to say they're Rwandan.

The Umurage cultural centre enables young people work with their parents and grandparents. Now we're trying to get better organized so that *Isangano* and the cultural centre work in tandem, because I think both are essential to the survival of our Rwandan community in Montréal. I don't want to be a hero, I'd rather I and the others be seen as big brothers and sisters, because that involves that other nucleus, the one we call our second family.

You can't see and experience all that without feeling that you have to respond. We need to play a role in the development of our community. We have to get involved, it's essential. I don't want to live through all that again. I want to be part of a possible solution, to feel I'm moving toward a solution. Sometimes I doubt myself. I question everything I do. It's crucial to do this because it enables you to listen to others, which is something we should have done a long time ago. What I take from all this is a kind of peace of mind; it helps me to smile, because life is beautiful.

*Il faut sourire  
la vie est belle!*





## Lisa Ndejuru

*I work with listening, acting, speech and writing. I practice psychotherapy and conflict resolution and draw on my activities in community art to think about and push beyond understanding toward the resolution of fears and individual as well as collective wounds, stories and contexts that prevent us from getting along together or fulfilling ourselves.*  
— Lisa Ndejuru

After the launch of the *Tuganire* video on August 26, 2008 at Umurage, one of the children fell down the stairs and cut his forehead open. There was a lot of blood: he had to have stitches.

When the ambulance left, the older youth went elsewhere to party into the dawn. In the early morning hours, there was a fight: one young man stabbed another to death.

The centre was conceived as a space for individuals and disparate groups within the Montréal Rwandan community to come together. All of us who had worked for years on the project felt terrible that bringing people together resulted in murder, especially considering our history. The event had nothing to do with what outsiders — and even insiders — read as factors related to the obvious fault lines of ethnic, economic, and social divide. Rather it was a tragic convergence of alcohol, hormones, and the fear of getting involved.

One young man ended up dead, another injured, and a third in prison. Many of the youth who were present to the killing, especially those who had experienced similar violence in the past, were traumatized — in part because of what they witnessed and in part because of being blamed, or feeling guilty, for letting it happen. Allegiances amongst families and fear of retribution threatened to destroy connections within the community.

The centre served as a meeting place for the intergenerational debriefing team that came together immediately after the killing. There were many efforts made to stabilize the crisis and limit the damage.

I believe that this project had some influence on people finding their own voices and paths. I believe that the questions we asked as individuals, the efforts we made to name and claim what we wanted as a community, and the experience we gained as we became who we set out to be, are all part of a very demanding process. As each person explored the questions and reached for the answers that made sense to them, there was a choice to make: does the energy return to the collective or do the benefits of this process get harnessed for personal development?

For me, initially, what didn't make sense living in the west was that I could watch the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda in real time on television and was supposed to believe that no one could stop it. I had grown up with and carried around a feeling of senselessness, and to have the senselessness validated in the outside world was just too much — that was my breaking point. It was also my healing point because I was now finally able to express the outrage and sense of injustice I had carried on the inside. My yearning at the root of this project was to get closer to something that was more 'authentically' me. I needed to establish my identity out of the many torn and scattered pieces of my racialized diasporic experience and colonial history. In asking for dialogue, I opened up. Dialogue builds relationships. Now, I am not sure if I can honour the relationships that have developed and that continue to grow in ever widening circles, as I feel compelled to create more intimate ones of marriage and family.

The tension within echoes the larger Rwandan experience, manifests in relationships, and is defined as *you or me* — are your needs going to be met, or mine? And this is where I am stuck because I don't know another way than either/or, and wonder about co-existence, resource allocation and the seeming impossibility of sharing.

I wanted to step out of the dichotomy between *my needs and yours* through dialogue. I thought that I had done so by anchoring the project in bell hooks' ideas about love as action. I had not anticipated that love hurts and that by picking up the pieces of my story and becoming enmeshed in the fabric of my community, I would in turn, colour and texture it. Did I cause damage with the project: how responsible am I for the death of my cousin Max or, for that matter, the gesture of the one who killed; for the temporary halting of the dancing and the drumming; for the future of the centre and the community?

The 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the commemoration of the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda has come and gone, different voices in the community are making themselves be heard, and the timing is right to start having the more challenging conversations we had envisioned at the start. This time of reflection and mourning hopefully leaves us wiser and stronger, and we now have partners and allies to support our work. I burnt out and have had to come back to centre (my own) and re-start the process by building within first. I don't feel quite ready to re-engage yet, but at least there is light at the end of my tunnel.



*Love is ....*

## Rosalie Ndejuru

*I've been married for 40 years and I'm the mother of three daughters and grandmother of a little boy and a little girl. I've been involved in the community, participating in various local and international coordinating committees.*

*With what I have learned, I've been a sincere, enthusiastic and faithful activist in the Rwandan community in Montreal. My values are solidarity, mutual aid, memory, honour and success.*

— Rosalie Ndejuru



*C'était un bon prétexte pour que les gens se parlent*

responsibility individually and collectively; one of the words used was *empowerment*. The answers came gradually, and people were allowed to contradict each other or add to each other's answers.

I took part in three meetings, one with just mothers, one with mothers and fathers, and then one with everybody, and I found the role plays and facilitation techniques interesting. The musical chairs game was fun. The facilitators wanted us to express our inner feelings and ways of dealing with them. For example, when someone tries to take your chair, how do you react? And then, when the anger and rage came out, there might be a possibility for dialogue and compromise. The young people did their role plays apart from us; maybe they already knew what to expect, while we did them spontaneously. It was quite extraordinary to see all the pent-up rage in the older people. There was a huge amount of anger that had never been expressed, but thanks to the role plays, it came out. It took us two or three years to achieve what we wanted with the *Tuganire* project, to get to the desire, the mobilization and the ability to create a cultural centre.

The fact that it was my daughter who initiated the project didn't influence my involvement. I respond to all projects and invitations from the community without exception, other than certain specific events. Because my daughter and I were also living together, I was obviously better informed than anybody else. I attended more meetings than other women my age — but I wasn't the only one.

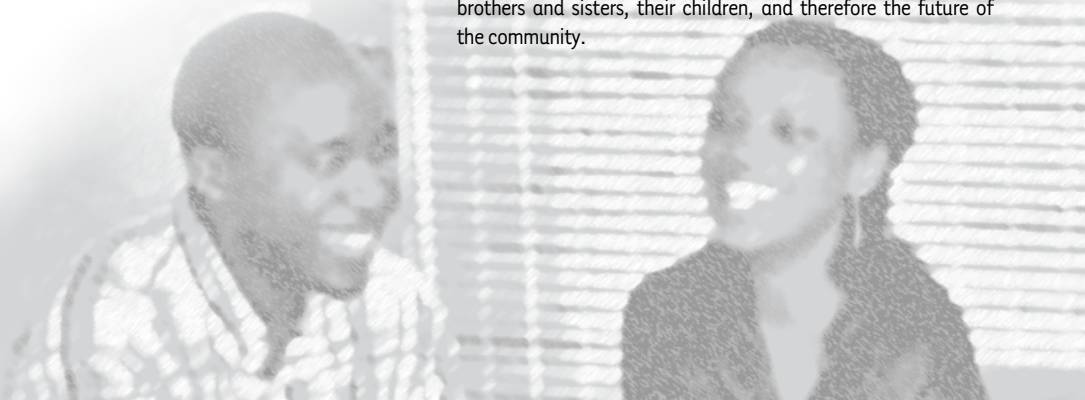
To me, it was more than a revelation, it was a rescue operation, because it was young adults in the community who were taking charge. The survival of the community no longer rested solely on the shoulders of the older people, because our children now had the maturity to look after things.

I took part in the founding of the Communauté rwandaise de Montréal and I'm still a member, and I found it reassuring to see young people who've grown up here taking responsibility in the community, because it means more solid support. It no longer depends on the older people and the past, but exists in the present and the future. We couldn't have asked for anything better! It's important for immigrants to know where they come from and to speak to the community here with the values from elsewhere. Our children who've grown up in Québec, in Canada, who are more Québeckers and Canadians than Rwandans, are a new generation, articulate, educated, very respectful and less filled with hate. They'll take care of us, the old people, but also of their younger brothers and sisters, their children, and therefore the future of the community.

The genocide we experienced in 1994 created silences and divisions between members of the community. This was manifested in comparisons between those who had lost many people and those who had lost fewer, those who had lost members of their immediate families and those who had lost more distant relatives. So there was an unhealthy, stifling atmosphere. *Tuganire* enabled us to work on those silences, to repair the divisions. The young people took charge of the meetings, which provided the pretext needed for the members of the community to talk to each other. The first time, *Tuganire* was part of Dusangane, a three-day conference held in Quebec City. The second time, the activities took place in Montréal, and then they were in Ottawa, Montréal, Toronto and Montréal again. I participated only in the Montreal meetings.

The fact that the young people spent a long time talking to each other allowed them to distance themselves emotionally, at least a little, in order to bring out the most powerful rallying points and leave space for other people; it was very mature of them. The discussions were led by several people and involved role plays. We were provided with food and drink, and someone took care of us and helped us to talk. When we didn't answer right away, they would ask us again. We couldn't really evade issues. One time, a new Rwandan bar was chosen as an example to show that young people were taking responsibility for themselves. They also took us to a restaurant run by young people from West Africa. The young people came up with all kinds of strategies to bring us together. There were twenty to sixty people at the meetings and everyone was encouraged to speak.

Although the community had a problem because of the genocide, the meetings with the young people never focused on that, but rather on the community's needs, its development, its future, its growth. There were a lot of questions about taking



# Mémoire de grève [The strike history]

Montréal

*A collective work intended to recall the positive aspects of a challenging student strike*

May 2005

Facilitating Artists  
Vichama Collectif:<sup>1</sup>  
Frédéric Emond – Anctil<sup>2</sup>  
Mélanie Riverin<sup>3</sup>  
Olivier de Gaspé Asselin<sup>4</sup>  
Rachel Heap-Lalonde<sup>5</sup>

Other Artists and Project  
Members  
Students from the  
Saint-Laurent CEGEP:  
Alice Tougas  
Anaïs-Aïrelle Dupin  
Charles Brousseau  
Ève Léger  
Jean-Philippe Marchand  
Dégare  
Jo-Anne Fraser  
Julie Bergeron  
Julie Marchessault  
Marc-Henri Bouchard  
Mathieu Cousineau  
Mejdi Michel Faleh  
Vincent Laurin-Pratt  
Simon Van Vliet

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- What are the benefits and harms associated with seeking out testimony from people who are in the midst of a difficult situation and who may be experiencing very strong emotions?
- Collective art projects tend to take a lot of time to develop. What happens if external deadlines or events impacting the project result in the project being rushed? What are the conditions favourable to the production of collective art projects that respond to punctual events in an urgent fashion?

In 2005, Québec experienced the largest student strike in its history. For seven weeks, the strike sparked an unprecedented student mobilization in colleges and universities mainly in response to 103 million dollar cut in the financial assistance for education programs. A red square of fabric was adopted as the official symbol of the protest and it was worn even outside of the student movement by strike supporters. The students themselves were especially creative in its utilization.<sup>6</sup>

Public opinion was, for the most part, favourable to the students despite a propaganda blitz in the media aimed at presenting the strikers as “out of control vandals.” The level of unpopularity with the Québec government, already quite high at the time, soared. Yet, in the end, the strike fell flat with a tentative agreement reached with the Ministry of Education — despite the fact that more students voted against the deal than in favour of it (likely due to the divisions between the various federations and associations representing the student community).

Members of Vichama Collectif — who did not want this strike to sink into oblivion because of its meager political gains — initiated the *Mémoire de grève* [The strike history] project, which was also intended to affirm the students’ social commitment and bolster their moral so that they would not feel demoralized on account of the general failure of their efforts. Vichama members were especially interested in the lingering emotional charge within the students and the hope that was engendered in the strike. They invited them to collaborate in a two-part project: the first phase consisted of designing a “totem pole” upon which red squares containing written messages detailing the positive achievements of the strike would be hung; phase two involved making a video documentary with students involved with the strike as a way to further their reflection of what happened and counter the negative images that were projected about the strike within the mainstream media.



The project however was not completed as initially planned: students who showed up had a need to talk and reflect but were not interested in writing. Artistically, the “totem pole” was underwhelming and seemed to reflect the sentiment of being “only half there” that was common amongst the strikers. Vichama Collectif considered whether they should complete the work so that it would be aesthetically satisfying. Because the objective was to encourage the students to take the lead in this project, it was decided to leave it, as it was — a tangible record of the incomplete process and the unfinished state of the activists’ attempts to get the government to reinstate the funds that were cut.



In the end, it was the video *J'm'en souviendrai...* [I will remember] that became the main artistic achievement of this project and the really active site for student expression: the students themselves decided on the form, the focus, the questions and the images that ended up being included. It was their choice as well to interview people with a variety of opinions about the strike in order to create a more "objective" document.

It is safe to say that this project was rushed as Vichama was responding to the urgency of the moment and to a specific situation that seemed to require an immediate reply. Unlike in their previous community art projects, Vichama decided not to take the role of coordinating everything themselves and to prioritize instead a team approach: they invited the students to share in the process. This could have been a powerful organizational strategy. However, because of the lack of time and the intensity of the situation, it likely would have been more advantageous for Vichama to centralize the leadership in this case. And while additional time might have made it more likely that the students would have positively responded to this invitation, Vichama found that, on the whole, the student community was not available to this collaborative process. Especially missing were the "informal" moments, moments that would have eased the way for students to take ownership of the project. The conditions were simply not conducive to sharing authority: only two of the students who were present during the preparatory stages of the project participated until the end.

Much of the project did not unfold as planned, the aesthetic results were mixed and more questions were raised than were answered. Nevertheless, according to Rachel Heap-Lalonde, the project was an important learning experience for the artists involved and a significant outlet for the students to express themselves. Months after the completion of the project, when students got together to view the video, they were reminded of their considerable efforts during the strike. Outside of the Saint Laurent CEGEP's student community, the impact of the documentary was even greater; the video circulated across Québec amongst the student population and the voices that were silenced or ignored during the strike could now be heard and appreciated.

#### NOTES

1. See the descriptions of the other projects that this group took part in: *Manipuler avec soin*, pp. 159–160, and *Caravane solidaire*, pp. 256–257.
2. See his participation in the *Manipuler avec soin* community art project, pp. 159–160.
3. See her participation in the *Manipuler avec soin* community art project, pp. 159–160, and in the *Caravane solidaire* humanist activist project, pp. 256–257.
4. See his participation in the *Manipuler avec soin* community art project, pp. 159–160.
5. See her participation in the *Manipuler avec soin* community art project, pp. 159–160, and in the *Caravane solidaire* humanist activist project, pp. 256–257. See also her texts *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86, and *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 108–120.
6. For more about the "red square," see Vivian Labrie's text *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty—A Degree of Freedom*, p. 297.



Photographic documentation: Images from the video *J'm'en souviendrai...*





# Meeting in the Middle

August 2005 —  
May 2006

Montréal

## Facilitating Artists

Helga Schlee  
Joanne Kielo  
Mona Rutenberg  
Munira Judith Avinger

## Other Artists and Project Members

Montreal Dialogue Group:  
Anne Lewis  
Ehab Lotayef  
Eugene  
Fataha  
Holly Klein  
Iman  
Joanne Rosten  
Kita Kahane  
Laurie  
Lesley Levy  
Mira Kroll  
Miriam Maayan  
Munir  
Rob Thibeault  
Ronit  
Serene Farraj  
Shulamit Lechtman  
Tali Goodfriend

*Exploration of visual symbols associated with unity by Israeli and Palestinian expatriates together along with other Christian, Muslim and Jewish Québecers concerned with the violence in the Middle East*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- When transposing symbols from their indigenous cultural contexts, they may take on meanings that are significantly different from, or at least less nuanced than those they originally held. Under what circumstances is it possible to work with cultural symbols that are not from one's own heritage without appropriating them? In other words, how is it possible to avoid these negative effects when doing cross-cultural exchanges?
- When working towards intercultural dialogue with a group of people — some of whom have suffered enormously and may feel like they are facing the "enemy" — how is it possible to avoid bringing up old wounds and move towards healing instead? Alternately, if it is not possible to avoid dealing with the trauma, what are the conditions necessary to be able to work through it safely enough for everyone involved?

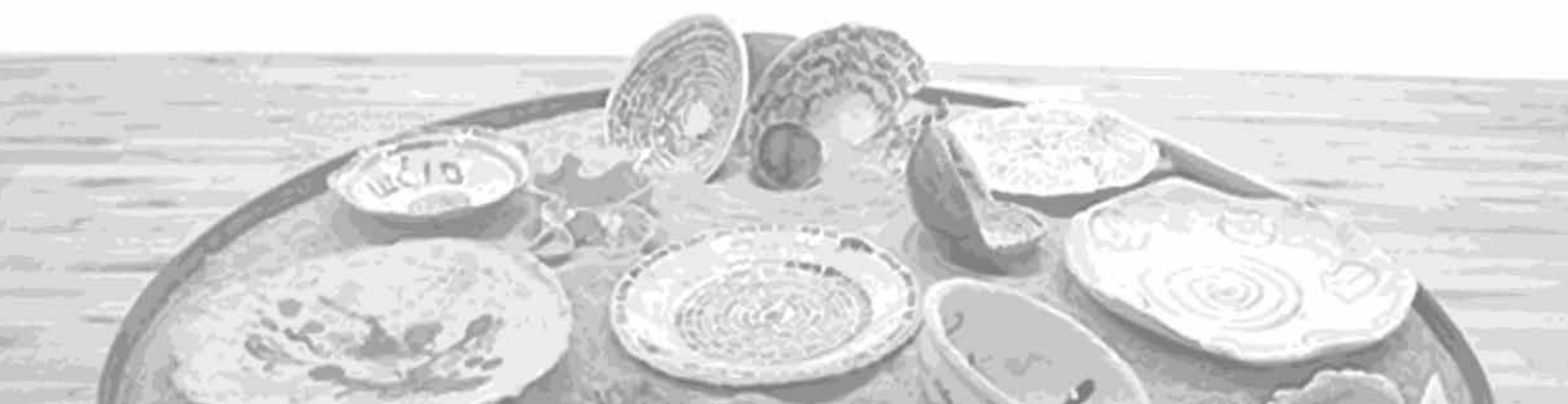
Founded in 2003, the Montreal Dialogue Group (MDG) brings Canadians of Palestinian, Israeli, Arab, Muslim, Christian and Jewish identities together around a common concern over the Middle East conflict and "a fierce commitment to ensure that the ensuing mistrust and divisiveness is not replicated in Canada."<sup>1</sup> By focusing on active listening, members strive for understanding and empathy within and between the different communities.

Wanting to include to their regular activities some kind of creative exploration in line with their organization's goals — amongst which are: the promotion of cultural understanding, alleviating fear, and building trust — members of the Montreal Dialogue Group teamed up with Helga Schlee to explore the theme of unity in a variety of ways.

Three other art professionals were also involved in this project: papermaker Joanne Kielo worked with the group to create sculptures out of paper pulp — made from cut up Israeli and Palestinian newspapers — to which they then added elements from their own personal histories, including photographs, journal entries and mementos. In collaboration with writer Munira Judith Avinger, members wrote out their individual stories in timed sequences and then shared them with each other. Subsequently, they made clay and plaster molds of their hands and faces to express the gestures touched upon in the stories they wrote. Finally, Mona Rutenberg, an art therapist, gave a workshop using the dentist's material alginate to make exact molds of members' hands.

After almost ten months of workshops and planning, the project culminated in a public exhibition at the McClure Gallery in Westmount, Québec. The use of the mandala form, found in many cultures around the world, permitted members to explore the ways in which people could come together in unity. The outside layer of the installation, consisting of the masks and writings, highlighted the personal investigations as well as the issue of land rights. The inside circle included lit sculptures made from the project members' handmade paper with embedded personal messages. At the centre of the mandala was a cushion, placed as an invitation to enter the sacred place in order to view the entire installation from a standpoint of unity.

Theatrical and musical performances aimed at nurturing compassionate understanding were also integrated into the exhibition. An Israeli expatriate who lost her brother to a suicide bomber traded places with a Palestinian woman in one of these



performances—the Israeli played the part of the suicide bomber, and the Palestinian played the part of the murdered brother. Musicians sang songs, and a slideshow of the many stages of the creative process was presented.

While *Meeting in the Middle* did not continue as a collaborative project after the McClure Gallery exhibition,<sup>2</sup> many of the individuals involved in this project experienced meaningful personal breakthroughs. When LEVIER asked why the collaboration between the MDG and Helga did not continue, Lesley Levy—a MDG member who participated in the project from beginning to end—explained “the MDG had other areas to focus on, and it was too time-consuming.” Another community group member noted that there were not enough resources (financial and human) to sustain the project.

This project was not without its challenges. According to Lesley Levy: “There were many struggles during the process of planning and creating the exhibition.” However, the determination to work through the conflicts was one of the elements that marked this project throughout, as Lesley affirms: “There was a sincere desire from all parties to work through the difficulties, and I believe we moved to a place of mutual understanding. It was a very dynamic and creative time. The vernissage and exhibition were just about the best things the MDG ever did.”



Artwork by Serene Farraj.



View of the exhibition at the McClure Gallery



Artwork by Miriam Maayan.

#### NOTES

1. According to the Montreal Dialogue Group website: [www.dialogue-group.org/](http://www.dialogue-group.org/).
2. Helga Schlee brought some of the work down to the United Nations in New York on two occasions after the McClure Gallery exhibition,

and, as stated in her final report to LEVIER on the use of the grant, she “talked to many delegates about peace because of it.”

Photographic documentation: Andrea Szilasi and Helga Schlee.



# On a Moving Path

Montréal and the  
surrounding areas

*Creative video production exploring the impact of breast cancer on the lives of  
various women*

2005 — 2007

*Facilitating Artist*  
Myriam Fougère

*Other Artists and Project  
Members*

Anna Capobianco Skipworth  
Deena Dlusy-Apel  
Diane Brais  
Elene St-Hilaire  
Guylaine Beaudry  
Hélène Asselin  
Hélène Richard  
Judith Ferlatte  
Linda Carré  
Lisette L. Boyer  
Louise Boulet  
Lucie Bleau  
Nicole Bilodeau  
Manon Gaudreault  
Marlene Lallo  
Martine Giguère  
Pascale Archambault  
Rachel Landry  
Sand Northrup  
Sara Susan Raphals  
Sharlene Olscamp  
Sylvie Pluot  
Valérie Drolet  
Verena Stefan

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- What role does creative practice play in establishing and maintaining individual and communal wellness?
- If, as this film suggests, society is sick and it is this social dis-ease that is making so many individuals ill; and if, as this film also suggests, creativity is powerfully therapeutic: when art is pressed into the service of healing, what are the pros and cons of individual versus collaborative creative practices?

*On a Moving Path*<sup>1</sup> is a creative exploration of several personal healing journeys relative to breast cancer. Women of all ages were invited to reflect on the emergence of this disease in their lives and the emotional and spiritual repercussions associated with it: What thoughts did they have associated with the cancer, its causes and its cure? What part of the cure did they think could be sought through medical care and what personal contributions did each woman feel it is necessary to make towards each her own wellness?

Myriam Fougère's motivation to embark on this exploration was, not surprisingly, linked to her own experience: the diagnosis of breast cancer initially impelled her to question what caused her to develop such a serious disease; but along the way, as she studied the statistics of women diagnosed with breast cancer in North America and compared these figures with those that she found of women in Asia, other issues surfaced. Myriam came to think that cancer was not an illness in and of itself, but rather a particular dis-ease associated with being a woman at a particular time and place. "People speak of the collective unconscious, have we not also a collective body? Is it the collective body of women in this century, on this continent, which is suffering?" she asks. Furthermore, Myriam came to think that in the sociopolitical context in which our desire for comfort creates massive amounts of pollution, cancer is an inevitable consequence of our lifestyle and thus can be regarded as a socioenvironmental disease.

Seeing this dis-ease as a collective, rather than only an individual challenge, also opened many questions for the artist about the methods of healing that are most advantageous — especially in light of the dominance of the pharmaceutical industry (at the expense of more natural therapies). Furthermore, Myriam explored what she sees as the link between several cancer screening mechanisms and treatments (such as chemotherapy and radiology) and the military industry. She also makes mention of how the pre-dominant treatments are themselves carcinogenic.



To make *On a Moving Path*, Myriam sought out women in the Montréal region who were willing to share their experiences about having followed the routine medically recommended treatments as well as women who chose so-called "alternative" cures. She was interested in the diversity of choices that women have made especially amongst those who did not perceive the



cancer simply as a disease, but rather, as an event that triggered a profound and holistic exploration of their life and a questioning of their values, and which prompted changes in their lifestyle or their understanding of the world.

One important element that became obvious to Myriam as she researched long-term survival rates for women diagnosed with breast cancer was the importance of belonging to a support group. For Myriam, this “solidarity” factor became an significant element in deciding how to proceed with the video project: choosing to break the isolation and share her insights with others, she opened a space for individual and collective reflection on, and expression about, the transformative power of illness. *On a Moving Path* is therefore in many ways a video about art. Rather than chronicle the chemotherapy and radiation treatments — with their often-devastating toxic aftereffects — Myriam chose to explore the internal changes the women participants considered important, including the role of creativity in healing.

The challenge was to voice the concerns of a collective body (of which she herself is a part) with all the competing truths, different obsessions and assortment of beliefs. While it may be considered unfortunate that Myriam did not assert more of her own experience, particularly about the importance of alternative therapies and artistic practice in her life,<sup>2</sup> the camera does bear intimate witness to female bodies swimming, washing, painting and sculpting. The symbolism of water is present throughout this document; underwater

images taken in a marsh invoke “a voyage in troubled waters.” Without singling out any individual — much like the anonymous voices we hear interwoven throughout the video — the emphasis is on a collective body in search for wellbeing and celebrating creativity.

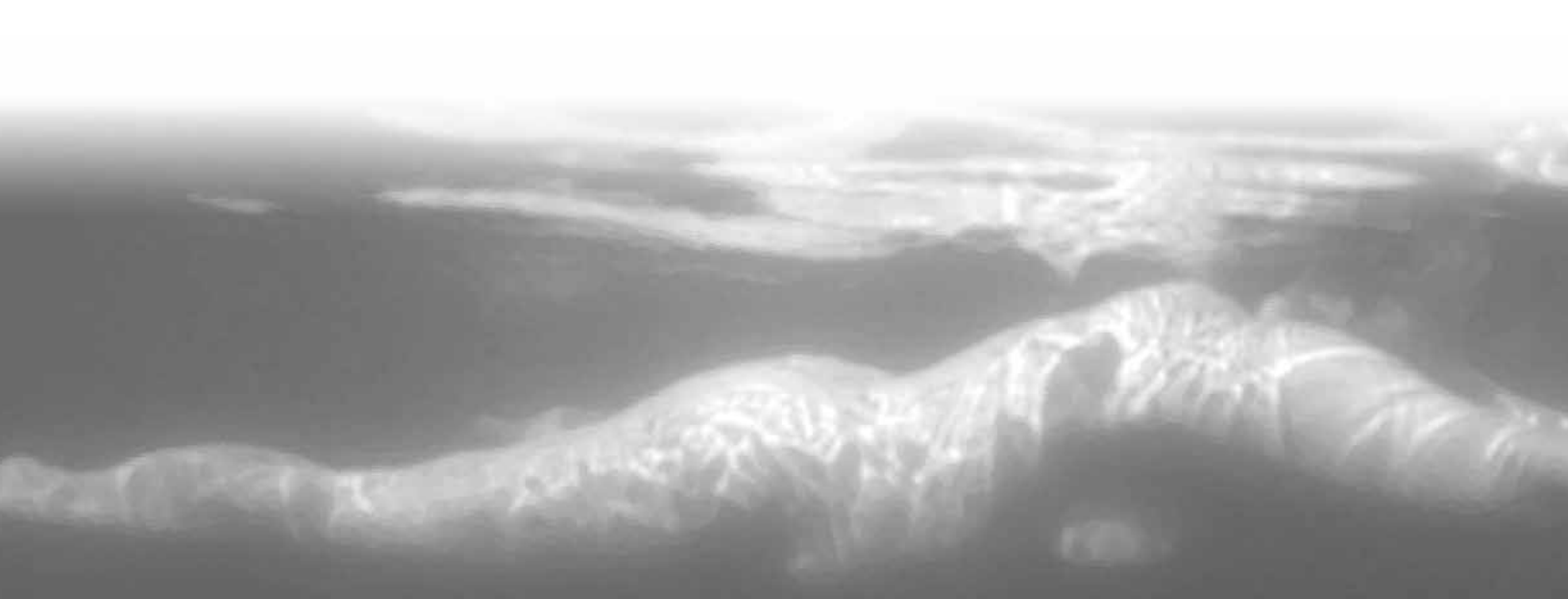
#### NOTES

1. In addition to the funding that Myriam Fougère received from LEVIER, Devora Neumark acted as an “external eye” on a number of occasions during the development of this project. The project also received financial backing from Vidéo Femmes and Groupe Intervention Vidéo (GIV). The majority of the funding came from the Canadian Independent Film and Video Fund, which was effectively eliminated by the Harper government in 2008. The video has been

screened on a number of occasions in Montréal and the United States (Arkansas, Tennessee and Baltimore) as well as in Liege, Belgium.

2. Although Myriam had been a practicing sculptor for 20 years, during the five years prior to being diagnosed with cancer she had stopped making art almost entirely.

Photographic documentation: Olivier Léger (underwater cameraman).





# Un festival perpétuel [A perpetual festival]

Montréal

2004

Facilitating Artist  
Marc-Antoine Vermette

Other Artists and Project  
Members<sup>1</sup>

(partial list — those marked  
with an \* also assisted in the  
coordination of the project):

Alice  
Amélie  
André  
Cathy  
Charles-Alexandre \*  
Danny  
Debbora  
Diane  
Élian  
Frédéric Lemire\*  
Jean-Michel \*  
Jean-Sébastien  
K  
Kelli Ann \*  
Lori Palano\*  
Maxime \*  
Nadia  
Olivier  
Précilla  
Samuel \*  
Stéphanie  
Sylvain  
Veronica  
Wen  
Yann

*Supporting a network of individuals who occasionally offered activities in their homes as a way to explore alternate means of participating in the social sphere*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- How can art be used to encourage citizens (who may not already be activists) to counter the cultural fear of the Other?
- Under what conditions is a barter network viable?

Well before LEVIER became involved, Marc-Antoine Vermette had initiated *Un festival perpétuel* [A perpetual festival] as a way to explore how quickly and easily it would be possible to create locally rooted interest groups that could be publicly accessible — in effect, creating a widespread network — with limited resources. *Un festival perpétuel* was formed from a network of Montréalers who decided to open their homes so as to freely partake in activities of their choice.

This “revival” of the “private” sphere was deliberately political; the aim was to promote personal agency and the reclamation of economic power through collective action. Another objective was to strengthen social connections and create the conditions under which strangers could encounter a group of people with shared interests. For some of the individuals who got involved, this network was a response to corporate monopolies and the sense of powerlessness that often accompanies poverty in all its forms. No licensing fees or rental agreements were necessary, and all the activities were legal. Furthermore, since each host determined the parameters of their own activity, they knew first hand what technical equipment they could access and how large a group they could accommodate. The multiplicity of activities was remarkable and the services/recreation opportunities that were offered were quite diverse.

Areas of artistic expression included singing, music, performance, theater, improvisation, painting, projection, video, dress-making, knitting, bookbinding and journalism. There were also workshops inviting an exchange of knowledge and techniques, for example on seed and plant germination, yoga and meditation. Dialogue and sharing circles sprouted up as well as philosophical discussions and community dinners. Some people demonstrated how to repair clothing and small household items. These are just a few examples of the network events, which were programmed to take place within approximately 30 spaces from September 2003 until 2006, when the project ended.

*Un festival perpétuel* responds to cynicism, defeatism, pessimism, claims of impossibility and scapegoats of all kinds and illustrates practical solutions that are first and foremost are within us. With this project, this “within us” expands to a larger collective scale.  
— Marc-Antoine Vermette (2004)

The criteria for inclusion were threefold: the workshop had to be offered free; all activities had to be legal; and they could not be offered as a commercial for-profit venture. Additionally, there were some basic ethical guidelines: while each home owner/tenant retained a veto right over what could and could not be done in her or his space, they also had to agree to never exclude anyone because of race, age, gender and sexual orientation, language, religion, etc.

While the network was equipped with a website, which facilitated the diffusion of information (e.g. workshop schedules), for the most part, people came to know about the project through word of mouth. Mailing lists and meetings between involved individuals sent out through the website were also used as a way of inviting citizens to propose new activities and participate in already scheduled ones. All individuals who were interested in attending a workshop were requested to notify the host in advance via email or telephone.

The alternatives are often represented by a different set of consumption choices (e.g. fair trade, organic, recycled, local). Without denigrating these, it seems that they are most often aimed at maintaining the market dynamics and keeping people tied to their role of non-creative consumers.  
— Marc-Antoine Vermette (2004)



It is not obvious in this day and age to open one's doors to strangers, even if they profess to share similar interests. The support that was extended to potential hosts played a big part in fueling this confidence. And as much as there was a certain resistance to welcoming people at home that needed to be tamed, there was resistance to going towards others to attend workshops in strangers' homes. It is likely due to these hesitations that the first set of workshops were rather sparsely attended. Amongst the benefits of *Un festival perpétuel* was the climate of trust that was built and maintained; over time, attendance in the activities increased.

One of the dilemmas that Marc-Antoine faced was the choice between starting the project himself and working to make it grow into an autonomous self-regulating network, or take more time and develop the partnership that could assume joint responsibility for the project from the start. In the end, he opted to begin the project on his own and not take a salary in order to maintain the independence of the network and encourage some of the people with whom he was in contact to become part of the coordinating committee. This decision had an impact on the amount of work that he had to do on his own. In 2004, realizing the magnitude of the task, Marc-Antoine asked LEVIER to cover his honorarium as a temporary measure until such time that a coordinating committee could be established. Paradoxically, the fact that Marc-Antoine had an income ended up negatively impacting the efforts to decentralize the coordination of the project as he quickly realized that being paid to do the work necessary to keep the network thriving would likely result in less work being delegated to others who were not being remunerated. This realization brought him to inform LEVIER that he no longer wanted to receive funding after the first six months.

The progressive sociopolitical activism of this project was based more on the interpersonal dynamics that were encouraged rather than any specific activity or workshop that occurred during the three-year span. Rather than theorize about the need to develop more decentralized forms of power sharing and more equitable economic distribution, *Un festival perpétuel* proposed a practical experimentation – albeit temporary – with the reorganization of social structures.

*Un festival perpétuel* transcends the dogmatic or fragmented discourses that so often accompany activist and political movements so as to allow each participant to explore the widest possible horizon within her or his own territory and preferred field of action.

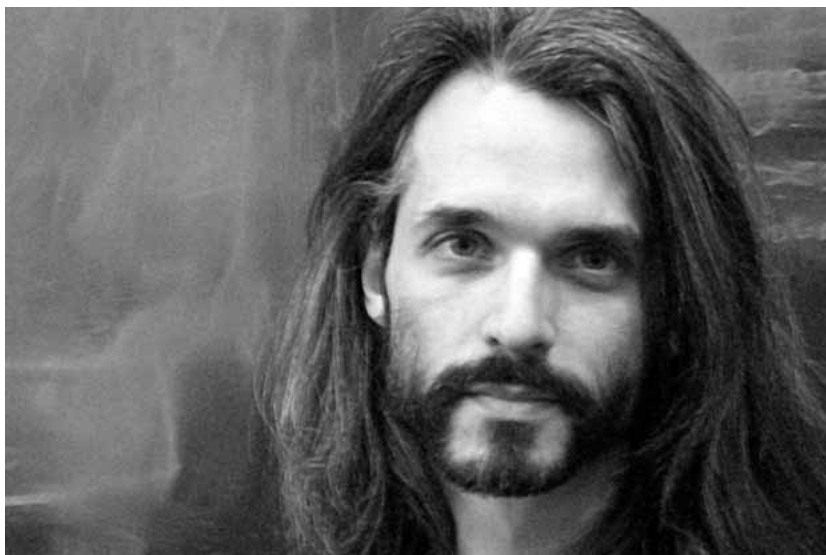
— Marc-Antoine Vermette (2004)

The decision to bring an end to the project in May 2006 was taken after a period of greatly reduced activity.<sup>2</sup> According to Marc-Antoine, a more prolonged facilitation would have been necessary to get the project to a point of sustainability. In retrospect, Marc-Antoine thinks that the project would have likely been more sustainable if he would have taken the necessary time to establish a strong collective base right at the beginning. What this social experiment confirmed however was that a different kind of citizenship is indeed possible and it doesn't have to be all that complicated.

#### NOTES

1. See the participation of some of this project members in the humanist activist project *Urbaine urbanité III*, pp. 241–242.
2. The website was kept active for some time after the end of the project, although at the time of this writing it is no longer accessible.

## Fred Lemire



*I've found a really rich community life at get-togethers of the Rainbow Family and events like RoCoCo, and I think it would be possible and desirable to bring this to other people. It's mainly in the transparency, the dialogue, the fluidity of participation and the combined colours of the people involved.*  
— Fred Lemire

I took part in all the coordination meetings for the *Festival perpétuel* project. What most motivated me in the festival was working and doing things together. In fact, the activity I presented every Wednesday for nearly six months in my little one-and-a-half-room apartment was talking about my plans, because I want to work in a group. I made a lot of contacts through the whole *Festival perpétuel* process, and at least one significant one, with a person who came to a meeting at my place.

Another thing that's been important to me in this experience is that the project fit in with my thoughts about the question of communication. I feel that by concretely universalizing the power of communication, *communicating beings* will be able to more easily define and create societies that truly reflect them.

The problem is always the same: where can we begin physically to enable these new societies to emerge spontaneously? Everything is measured, recorded, compartmentalized, nailed down in a timetable. For example, if a group wanted to build a village of huts off in the forest, they would have a problem with the law. The *Festival perpétuel* project suggested a possible solution to these problems. It is clear that the question of the sharing and acquisition of space is a crucial priority if we want to really have the capacity to fulfill our wishes.

To get back to my own motivations, the type of society I would like to live in — and I know this from experience — is a small society of 60 to 200 people, who would make decisions together after they had all expressed their points of view. Where there would be a search for consensus; also where — this is very important — we could move freely without being assigned one job; where we could meet more spontaneously. As I see it, in most societies today, you have to make an appointment to see your friends and people hardly speak to each other on the street. Our ideas and thoughts don't lead quickly to achievements but get lost in discussions of events and reports that just pile up.

## Émergence

My idea is to ask people what are their wishes, their plans, their resources, their talents and their visions, and then to use computer tools to determine the correspondences, affinities and complementarities among them. For example, if my wish was to live near a lake in a small community that likes to make decisions in a participatory way and where there are horses, I could use a computer tool to meet people who have a similar dream or who have the resources to carry it out.

There are a lot of people now working on the question of intelligent communication. From a technical point of view, the closest thing to this that exists is called the semantic Web. But we also have to be prepared to use this type of tool, to be ready to work together.

If the *Festival Perpétuel* project slowed down to the point where we decided to suspend it, it was because, although a lot of people presented activities in their homes, too few went to them. People who announced activities ended up getting discouraged. It was easy for me to open up my space, but it often happened that I didn't go to activities that interested me. Sometimes because of the distance; perhaps also because at certain times, I had the sad impression that in Montréal, we were still far from the community life I dreamed of and that it was pointless to struggle to try to get there.

I would have liked the *Festival perpétuel* project to last in spite of everything, because, from conversations I've had, I have the impression that it met a need that many people feel. I feel it so strongly myself that I've decided to risk everything and go set up or join a kind of ecovillage, a place on a human scale where the principles that I hold dear can be applied. In such a place, we could move around freely. People could always choose the jobs they did, so that they could meet both the collective needs and their own. With that kind of fluidity, relationships form more naturally, because by living together day after day, people have time to get to know each other.

In today's societies, there are community events, but they are limited in time and most often only lead to superficial encounters. For me, the depth of relationships is important.

The *Festival perpétuel* project was an open door to greater closeness, and in the context of today's social disintegration, to more intentional human communities.

Lori Palano

# Culture d'ouverture et participation



The *Festival perpétuel* project was a great opportunity to make new connections in a simple way, without complicated planning. The group involved in the project arose out of people's desire to be part of a community, although we often use the word *community* to speak of some specialization or shared characteristics that are already established.

The different activities gave me a chance to meet people who didn't all share the same values. This aspect of our relationship allowed me to develop my ability to mix and work with all kinds of people. It's important to me to have opportunities to be with people who aren't exactly like those I already know.

To me, what was really important wasn't that I invited people to my place, but rather what I learned from the organization of the project itself. The big challenge was to find a balance between too much and not enough structure and control, so that people were able to act. At one point, there were about six of us meeting about the organization of the project. We paid a lot of attention to process, because we wanted to reach a consensus, to define a form of self-management that was open and inviting.

It was important to us to maintain collective principles and values based on trust. In order to encourage this type of approach, we had a lot of discussion about the balance between rules, structures and procedures and the open attitude we wanted to maintain. For example, if someone offered their space for the *Festival perpétuel*, what type of supervision did we need to provide?

If we want to encourage self-management, openness and process, how can we do so while applying rules and procedures? This question was central to our discussions, because there was a tendency to feel that any rules or structures were contrary to the basic attitude of openness we wanted to establish and share.

What remains of that discussion today is the desire to find a balance and to uphold and transmit the basic principle of openness. In the project, the real difficulty was in accepting new people while ensuring a certain sharing of values, yet not wanting to form a closed homogeneous community.

The way of being that was essential to the project involved sharing resources, openness and acceptance of everyone who wanted to take part in the activities. This practice of cooperation had to be shared by the people who were offering their space for activities. It was a real challenge to establish this, because people don't automatically become open just because someone has explained what openness means. There has to be a deeper sharing, and it takes time and dialogue for there to be a real change.

I work as a facilitator using participatory processes, and openness has always been part of my way of doing and being. I always find it hard to explain participatory process in words, although it's an integral part of my work. I'll give you an example. This week at the 2009 *Montreal Millennium Summit*, there was a youth forum. In 2007, the forum consisted of three or four hours of adults speaking to a room full of young people. This year I got involved, and it was the young people themselves who expressed their ideas, interests and concerns. There were times when the young people discussed things among themselves. They didn't only listen; they really participated. And the first thing that was obvious was that their involvement was more concrete. There was a much greater mobilization, and the forum affected their lives, because they were the ones who found solutions. If someone else had proposed the same solutions, they wouldn't have had the same resonance.

Every group or project that I'm involved in deepens my way of experiencing these different types of participation. To me, discussing questions around a table and facilitating a group of 400 young people are opportunities to go further in spreading this culture of openness.





## Marc-Antoine Vermette

# une tentative d'ouverture, du foyer au visage...

*How does my way of opening up to the Other with my hopes and my fears already say something on a small scale about our sociopolitical context? How can we together discover new ways of opening ourselves up by reinventing our relationship to private space, to identity and even to faces?*

— Marc-Antoine Vermette

The *Festival perpétuel* project made me realize that collective action initiatives were possible in a city like Montréal, and could be organized quite quickly, once I dared — once we dared — to open up.

Basically, if you're prepared to open up your residential space, you have a site for action that's autonomous and decentralized. Sharing tools and knowledge provides resources, and the Internet offers a lot of visibility at very little cost, making it possible to network with people who share your interests but are beyond your circle of acquaintances.

In the beginning, I sensed in myself and some other people fears of possible abuse, vandalism, theft or being invaded, but I was delighted to find that the project helped me come to terms with those fears. Out of dozens of activities, there were no major incidents, just some friction between people. Today, projects like couchsurfing.com, an international free lodging network, show that opening your door to strangers is viable.

Having come to terms with those fears, I might eventually want to start the project up again, with more participants from the outset. I would also have it operate more flexibly so as to make self-coordination by the participants easier. I have a feeling I withdrew before that objective was reached.

Although lack of resources, isolation and fear of the unknown were no longer obstacles to collective action for me, I continued to sense more subtle resistances in myself and others. They were not unpleasant in themselves, but they did raise questions for me. Although the people who rang my doorbell shared my interest in the activity proposed, the relationships that ensued, as respectful and enriching as they were, did not always have the fluidity and ease you have with friends you've known for a long time.

So in spite of its promising beginnings, I decided to quit coordinating the project, and proposed that task to other participants. I wanted to think more deeply about how to create, in a short period of time, a fluid, reciprocal relationship that was satisfactory for everyone in a group of people who, in another context, would not necessarily have come together.

How to relate to aspects of others that often awaken sensitive feelings in me? Since I'm affected by these resistances, I'd just as soon expand my understanding of how they work. On a small scale, the project showed me the huge challenge involved in establishing a real participatory democracy. Once we take back control of our resources and regain responsibility for ourselves, how do we live together without fighting and without having external targets to ensure our cohesiveness and the acceptance of our differences?



Personally, I asked myself how my way of articulating my thoughts and the polarized language I learned in the early years of my life have affected my ability to be open to other people's differences and therefore to aspects of myself that I'm less accepting of. How does my habit of judging and categorizing influence my relationships? How does idealizing a result limit co-creation and dialogue?

These questions have led me to gradually restructure my thinking from a perspective that I think is similar to Marshall Rosenberg's non-violent communication and David Bohm's dialogue. This includes focusing on expressing facts, emotions, needs and wants instead of making judgments, and at the same time trying to apply common sense more broadly, rather than persisting in the confrontation of individual positions.

To my great surprise, this more introspective approach was accompanied by the discovery of a much more visceral and corporal way of being in relation with myself and others. With friends, strangers and even my own reflection in the mirror, I observed how our facial tensions carry traces of the emotions and events of our history, affecting on a nonverbal level our ability to really relate in the present. Facing these deep tensions without judging them and without reacting to them sometimes allows us to completely release them, which gives rise to extraordinary intensity. Paying attention to this nonverbal language also lets you detect the power dynamics beyond discourse. Observing these power dynamics without getting involved in them often has the effect of defusing them at the source, making it easier for people to get along.

So the exploration of the boundaries of my home was transposed into an exploration of the boundaries of my body, with the hope that one day I'll go back, in a different way, to opening up my home, that other special space of freedom.

# Urbaine urbanité III [Urban urbanity III]

Montréal

*The creation of a makeshift public and community art zone in a Montréal neighborhood*

June 6—9, 2005

Galerie FMR [FMR gallery]

Guest Curator  
Guy Sioui Durand<sup>1</sup>

*Groups and Organizations*  
Groupe de recherche urbaine  
Hochelaga-Maisonneuve  
[Hochelaga-Maisonneuve  
Urban Research Group]:  
Philippe Côté<sup>2</sup>  
Collectif d'artistes DIA  
[DIA artists collective]  
Groupe Isangano du projet  
*Tuganire* [The Isangano group  
from the *Tuganire* project]<sup>3</sup>  
Le CARRÉ (and the members  
from *Ouvrez votre coffre  
à trésors* [Open your  
treasure chest])<sup>4</sup>  
Members from *Oxy-jeunes'*  
*Et si j'y étais...* [And if I was  
there...] project<sup>5</sup>  
Folie-Culture<sup>6</sup>  
Collectif pour un Québec sans  
pauvreté [Collective for a  
Poverty-Free Québec] (Vivian  
Labrie)<sup>7</sup>  
Vichama Collectif<sup>8</sup>  
*Un festival perpétuel*  
[A perpetual festival]<sup>9</sup>

*Balcony Art Gallery Artists*  
Annie Baillargeon  
Annie Brunette  
Aude Moreau  
Catherine Plaisance  
Christine St-Maur  
Johanne Chagnon<sup>10</sup>  
Gilles Bissonnet  
Mélie Charest  
Sylvette Babin  
Sylvie Cotton

*Other Artists and Project  
Members*  
Sonia Robertson<sup>11</sup>  
People living around the  
Saint-Aloysus Park in the  
Hochelaga-Maisonneuve  
neighbourhood

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- Some art projects aim to create linkages amongst people. What are the ways in which art can encourage exchanges and a sharing of experience between residents of a clearly demarcated neighbourhood who don't necessarily know each other?
- The interpersonal relationships that emerge from neighbourhood art events are an integral part of their "success." Yet given the intimacy of such exchanges, it is often difficult to get a sense of the overall impact of such projects or even what unfolds between people. In such conditions, how is it possible to document both the intimate and the event itself—is this documentation even desirable?

Initiated by Gilles Bissonette and Pierre Crépô, the Galerie FMR [FMR Gallery]<sup>12</sup> has been nurturing critical thinking about public art and its impact on civic society since 1995.<sup>13</sup> With its flexible structure the gallery is well organized to respond to a variety of provocations including the gentrification of the East-end Montréal neighbourhood of Hochelaga-Maisonneuve. In 2002, the gallery hosted a project highlighting the planned condo construction and implantation of upscale shops: *Urbaine urbanité I* [Urban urbanity I] was held at the Place Valois, a popular cultural space under threat of development. In 2003, *Urbaine urbanité II* took place; this time in front of the Place Valois — on the very spot where the Maison de la culture Hochelaga-Maisonneuve was to be built. Organizers set up a mock "construction site" and invited artists to perform in a construction trailer and four shipping containers they had temporarily installed.<sup>14</sup>

By the time the third event was to take place in 2005, Place Valois was already under development — and therefore unavailable as a site for public art. It should be noted that at around the same time, the Maison de la Culture building project had been scrapped. It was therefore decided to move *Urbaine urbanité III* further south to the Saint-Aloysus Park. Guy Sioui Durand, a critical sociologist, independent curator and art critic from the Huron-Wendat First Nation was invited by the Galerie FMR to curate the project keeping in mind the changing urban landscape.

Despite living in Quebec City, Guy was already familiar with Hochelaga-Maisonneuve having organized several previous cultural events in the area. Guy planned the event as a series of socioartistic activities with a festive flair — an "urban community art zone." Rather than address the need to mourn the transformation of the Place Valois (*Urbaine urbanité I*) or push forward an agenda of revendication (*Urbaine urbanité II*), *Urbaine urbanité III* proposed concrete alternatives with an emphasis on integrating a quotidian cultural vibrancy with and amongst local citizens. Instead of a physical building, the entire neighbourhood would become the Maison de la culture — albeit, one without walls. The timing of this initiative was linked to the release of the Ville de Montréal's cultural policy with the aim of inviting the local population to engage in a critical dialogue about public and community art.

Given the large number of grassroots organizations located within Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, Guy imagined a number of encounters between artists, community groups and residents within a clearly demarcated perimeter surrounding the Saint-Aloysus Park as a way of paying tribute to the community, based on the interconnections between visiting neighbours.

Neighbourhood walks and informal visits were scheduled to take advantage of all available local resources, including the Buanderie Spin Café [Spin cafe laundromat], whose cultural mission made this business a key ally in the project.



Participation of Folie-Culture.  
Photo: Guy Sioui Durand.





Participation of Isangano.  
Photo: Pierre Crépô.

Programming for *Urbaine urbanité III* went on for 13 days and involved over 50 artists (some of whom lived in the immediate area). More than a dozen community groups and organizations were involved. There was a symposium focused on the Situationist International group, whose radical agenda in the 1960s and 70s was a mixture of politics and art. Temporary sculptures were placed around the park; a literary café was set up in the laundry facilities; open-air, free, nightly film screenings were organized in the private yard of film-makers living in the perimeter; there were street performances and a picture story using video technology was created with the local population.

LEVIÉ's financial contribution was applied to two specific activities: the meetings amongst the artists, community groups and organizations, which took place in the Park Saint-Aloysius chalet and the installation of 10 "art galleries" on different balconies overlooking the park. The project was highly publicized in order to favor an exchange between the professional art milieu and the community organizations and as a way to highlight the potential of art for increasing socio-political awareness. Almost every one of the organizations and community

groups who participated in this activity presented some kind of artistic intervention and demonstrated the ways in which they integrate art within their regular programming cycles. The link between many of the presentations and LEVIÉ was not accidental since Guy had appealed to LEVIÉ's network of collaborators to reinforce the significant grassroots efforts relative to creativity amongst community groups and organizations.

The balcony art galleries were developed in close collaboration between the artists and the residents whose balconies were appropriated for the duration of the event as a refutation of the "official" art world. Windows, flowerbeds and trees were also used. In one case, an office window became the site of an installation that blocked off the daylight — something that the employees of the company were willing to put up with in the name of art. Residents shared personal narratives or agreed to being filmed going about their everyday lives. The footage was then projected in the windows of participating households. The residents were also awarded medals, provided they explained why they deserved them. Additionally, they had the chance to participate in an electoral campaign.

*Urbaine urbanité III* invited a very lively exchange, which was often discrete due to the nature of the projects, thus making it difficult to get an overall sense of all that was going on. It would have quite interesting to find a (festive) way to open a space for all the many project members — residents as well as artists and community group members — to speak about their experiences of the project. Since this did not happen, it is difficult to draw conclusions based on the project members' own observations and reflections about the success or failure of this particular approach to integrating art and activism.

#### NOTES

1. See his participation in *LEVIÉ's First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24.
2. See his participation in *LEVIÉ's First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24. See also his participation in the humanist activist projects *AbriBec — suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, and *Carte.compétence*, pp. 261–262.
3. See the description of this humanist activist project, pp. 224–225. See also the participation of project members in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 111, 118 and 119. See as well the participation of project members in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 121. See also the *Tuganire* video made by the members of this project, in the *Documenting Collaboration* compilation inserted in the centre of this publication.
4. See the description of this community art project, pp. 154–158. See the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 67, in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, and in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122. See also the reference to this activity in the critical summaries by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 77, and *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 115, and in Bob W. White's text *The Power of Collaboration*, p. 321. See the video *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors* made by the members of this project, in the *Documenting Collaboration* compilation inserted in the centre of this publication.
5. See the description of this community art project, pp. 139–141. See the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 69, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 75.
6. See the participation of this organization in the *Presentation of Three Community Art Experiences* event, p. 40.
7. See Vivian Labrie's text *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty — A Degree of Freedom*, pp. 291–298.
8. See the descriptions of the projects in which this collective took part: *Manipuler avec soin*, pp. 159–160; *Mémoire de grève*, pp. 230–231, and *Caravane solidaire*, pp. 256–257.
9. See the description of this humanist activist project, pp. 236–237.
10. See her participation in the community art project *Ouvrez votre coffre aux trésors*, pp. 154–158, and in the humanist activist projects *AbriBec — suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, *Carte.compétence*, pp. 261–262, and *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265. See also Vivian Labrie's text, *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty — A Degree of Freedom*, pp. 294–295 and 297.
11. See her participation in the humanist activist project *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265.
12. When pronounced out loud, the three letters in the gallery's name (Galerie FMR) sound like the French word for "ephemeral."
13. One of the Galerie FMR's achievements was the *Parc éphémère* during the 1995 referendum on the sovereignty of Québec, a very popular daily event during which people discussed the issues of the day, and which was later the subject of a publication, *Le pays en mots dits*, edited by Gilles Bissonnet, Pierre Crépô, Mélanie Desmarais-Sénécal and Pierre Landry (Trois Pistoles: Éditions Trois-Pistoles, 2005).
14. Members of the community art project associated with LE CARRÉ (see note 4) presented the photographic intervention entitled *Culture des richesses du quartier*.



Participation of Sylvette Babin. Photo: Pierre Crépô.



Participation of Sonia Robertson. Photo: Pierre Crépô.

*The following text, written by Guy Sioui Durand, was sent to LEVIER in response to a call for active participation in this publication.<sup>1</sup> Taking advantage of his experience in curating the Urbaine urbanité III project, Guy replied to a set of questions that had been proposed by LEVIER relative to the practice of community and humanist activist art.<sup>2</sup>*

## Personal Investment and Social Impact

Guy Sioui Durand

On a personal level, two words sum up the contribution of my collaboration with LEVIER: authenticity and civic complicity. Authenticity, because for one of the few times in my professional life, as an intellectual engaged with life and art in society, I had, and I could, really introduce and give importance to people, to groups using or approaching art without it being first of all a discourse or a style that presupposes an ideological and formal construction of an organized and subsidized art world. In short, an importance not for so-called “engaged” professional artists, but rather support for community and social groups using, amongst other things, art to change their fate and the fate of others. This sense of lived authenticity has greatly contributed to evolve my critical thinking about the actual status and roles that professional artists play.

The other element important to me is the awareness of civic complicity. Since 1982, some of us — and here I think of my friend the sociologist Jean-Jacques Simard and also of Pierre Monat — have maintained a spirit of critical distance from what I have called the “quiet censorship” introduced by artists and other social actors through their adherence to government subsidy programs which they aim to comply with in order to be successful in their applications. Having been at one of the early Engrenage Noir / LEVIER meetings,<sup>3</sup> I had the privilege of participating in getting the organization off the ground and collaborating with LEVIER in a non-bureaucratic way — which I think is important. It is this that I call civic complicity.

This experience proved to be crucial later on as my comprehension of the evolution of engagement through art between the macro-political events and the micro-political grew (for example between my understanding of the “red square” and the role of the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec<sup>4</sup> as well as the implication of Johanne Chagnon as engaged artist and the photography used by Herstreet<sup>5</sup> or the Cagibi International collective).<sup>6</sup>

Urbaine urbanité III, with its “Situationist” event zones, which I thought of and set up, in one way or another played out the socioartistic tensions that LEVIER paired up and offered for consideration. Here are some brief responses to these tensions:





## Aesthetics and Ethics

Opting for an in situ live art daily relationship with the people from Place Valois — outside the “white cube” — was in itself, a choice that highlights how the word aesthetic includes ethics. Just as the sculptors in the park had to deal with the park users at the expense of their works’ safety, artists and art galleries had to negotiate with families living in homes on streets off the square around Parc Saint-Aloysius. For the speakers in the park or at Spin Café, performers, conference participants or artists like the Gagné Brothers (with their backyard cinema, which welcomed everyone), each instance was a moment of potential compromise, an accommodation between the ethics of living together and the aesthetics of art in process was present and came to life.

## Individual and Collective

The visual arts are mostly tinged with hyper-individualism. The system is complicit. OK. Civilizations, societies, communities, collectives and groups, as concepts, however spread social and engaged art. Since 2001, it is on the same continuum of engagement that macro-political manifestations and micro-political gestures and moments can be addressed “glocally” (think globally, act locally).

## Healing and Activism

We cannot be against the virtue of doing good, improving one’s lot and/or that of others. Art, as we know, is practically the same as ritual and the irrational world of religion and therapy. I understand this very well with Native art. In contrast, activism for activism’s sake, anti, negative or “branding” often camouflages narcissism or a badly assumed un-wellness. Many analyses of certain past forms of engaged art — what Christopher Lasch has called the new narcissistic sensitivity — or alternately, the regimented and sometimes totalitarian ideological causes that are kept alive especially as one ages and which we use to take stock of our commitments, speak to the tension between healing and activism.

## Here and Elsewhere

Let’s say that the phenomenon of globalization and the debates about identity and accommodation of the Other now includes this awareness of here and elsewhere that are no longer only the domains of armed conflict, media, tourism or humanitarian aid. I retranslated this tension in terms of the exoticism of misery in an affluent society like our own. My personal “here” is the new reality of Natives in the city and my “elsewhere,” the spiritual and material miseries on the reserves. I was therefore proud of the cohabitation, during the Urbaine urbanité III event, between the Innu tent set up by Sonia Robertson and her workshop recalling the fate of the rivers and the Isangano troupe<sup>7</sup> — as well as the familial visit to First Nations Garden of the Montréal Botanical Garden, located in the same neighbourhood.

## Institution and Grassroots Organization

Instead of the qualifiers institutional and grassroots, I prefer : context or situation. Here the bureaucratization of categories has a head start.

## Resistance and Celebration

These two words are beautiful. They articulate the roles and functions of art and the artist in society. Resistance implies a reading of what exists, what must be preserved and what lays ahead, the bias and the assertion against all systems of control and confinement. It is the ethics in the aesthetics that appeal to reflections, concepts, theory, criticism and inventions. The celebration is the aesthetic, the exhibition, the manifestation, the experience, the Utopia and the form, the artistic style in which art is (amongst others) a social LEVIER [lever].

## NOTES

1. Dominique Malacort also replied to this call for participation. Her response took the form of the text found elsewhere in this publication: *Away and Here in Community Theatre or the Power of Paradox*, pp. 303–312.
2. We can read the questions on p. 303.
3. See the review of the LEVIER’s *First Orientation meeting*, pp. 22–24, in which Guy participated.
4. See more about this in Vivian Labrie’s text, *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty—A Degree of Freedom*, p. 297.
5. See the *Rentrer chez soi* community art project description, which this organization hosted, pp. 184–185.
6. See the description of this Collective’s humanist activist projects, *AbriBec—suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, and *Carte.compétence*, pp. 261–262.
7. See the description of the *Tuganire* humanist activist project in which this group participated, pp. 224–225.

# Rap des hommes rapaillés [Patched-up men's rap]

Montréal

*Creating a collection of rap songs composed and sung by Québec jail inmates*

2005 — 2006

*Facilitating Artist*  
Mohamed Lotfi<sup>1</sup>

*Others Artists and Project Members*  
L'Établissement de Détention de Montréal [Montréal detention facility] inmates:  
Ben Soussan  
Campos  
Juss  
Nicodème Camarda  
Mc Parisien  
Mohammed Sako  
Zakarie Bouffard  
And around 200 inmates

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- Under what conditions can changes to the prison system be initiated and sustained through a humanist activist art project?
- Following an experience of artistic creation on the inside, what are the possibilities for people with a criminal record to continue developing their creative potential once they are released from prison?

*Rap des hommes rapaillés* [Patched-up men's rap] follows from work that Mohamed Lotfi has been doing with inmates from l'Établissement de Détention de Montréal — more commonly known as the Bordeaux jail — which houses approximately 1,000 men who are sentenced to two years minus-a-day or less, and defendants awaiting sentencing. Since 1989, Mohamed has been producing and directing the radio program *Souverains anonymes* [Sovereign Anonymous], an open mike project for men "passing through on the inside" and invited guests (including artists, politicians, trade union members and media types, etc.).<sup>2</sup>

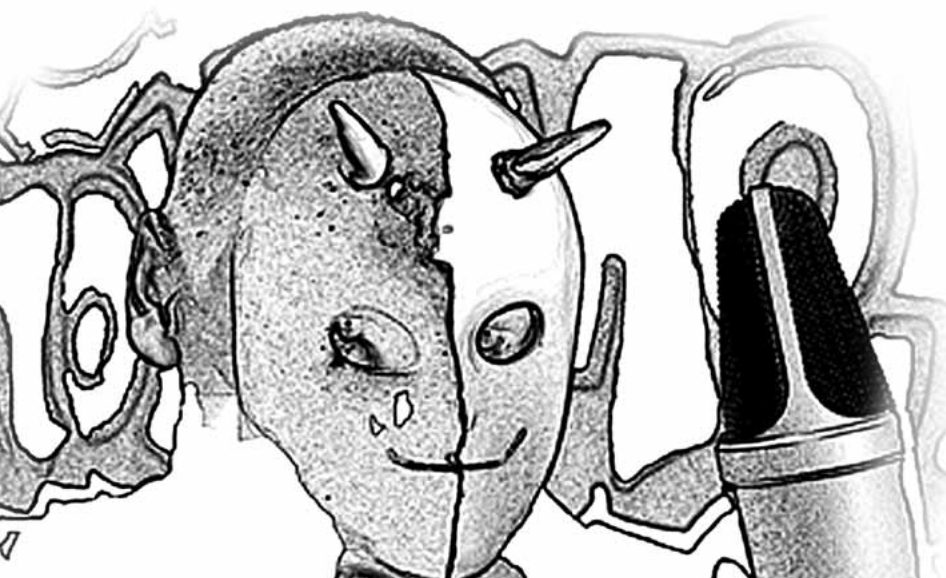
Together with Mohamed, the community of prisoners reaches out beyond the bars to communicate with the public-at-large. According to Mohamed, what happens in our prisons is everyone's responsibility. By bridging the gap between the inmates and the citizens — despite the many obstacles and prejudices — the radio program demonstrates the feasibility of entering into the world of the prisoners and sharing with them a moment of pleasure; making the prison, however briefly, more humane. Shaped in large part by a media campaign driven by the discourse of fear, the perceptions largely conveyed about our prison system cause unexpected damage to the inmates: once tried and convicted, they become forgotten, which according to most, is the worst punishment of all.

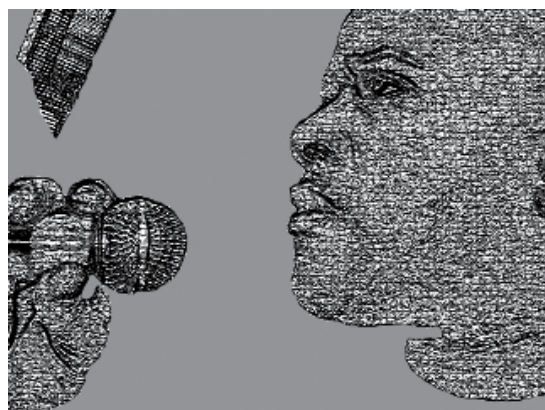
Before creating this radio program, Mohamed had a multidisciplinary career as a painter, filmmaker, journalist, dancer, actor and radio producer. His choice to apply his creative energy to this project was not driven by a belief that art can change the conditions of poverty which affect so many of the incarcerated men in the Québec jail — at least not in the short term — but rather, by the conviction that for those who embrace creativity, art can change at least their own experiences of, and in, the world.

Every day in our prisons, word riots break out in rap, words explode into verse and prose; they hit, besiege, skid, surprise and detonate. These are activist words that are written and shouted; they are angry words, words of repentance, words that do good, words that are just waiting to be heard.

— Mohamed Lotfi

*Rap des hommes rapaillés*<sup>3</sup> enlisted the rapping talents of some of the men doing time in Bordeaux, most of who were members of street gangs. While the concept of "street gang" is currently demonized in the media, it is an important element of interconnection (like all sub-cultures), perhaps especially for the young men of colour who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and who are incarcerated at an increasingly disproportionate rate in comparison with other segments of the population.





Prior to *Rap des hommes rapaillés*, three music projects had already been carried out by Mohamed in collaboration with Bordeaux inmates including the recording and release of the 1997 album entitled *Libre à vous* [As you wish],<sup>4</sup> in which several well-known Québec artists interpreted and sung the lyrics that were written by the men involved in the *Souverains anonymes* project. Unlike this earlier album, *Rap des hommes rapaillés* was entirely produced by the detainees; they authored the texts, composed the music and performed their own creations. Work for this album was selected according to the following four criteria: the originality and rigour of the written texts; the authenticity and humanity expressed within the songs; the inherent criticality and self-reflection; and the absence of misogyny and racism. All emotions including anger, rage and humour were welcome provided that the lyrics met these criteria. The rap songs deal with a range of experiences linked to the prison environment and the systemic forces influencing the prisoners' criminal behaviour. The recording was done "in house" — a sound studio was set up in the detention centre — with the assistance of sound engineer Steve Roy, a *Souverains anonymes* collaborator since 1995.

The final version of *Rap des hommes rapaillés*<sup>5</sup> includes a series of images — photographs that were taken initially during the recording sessions and which were subsequently reworked by Mohamed to ensure the anonymity of the project members. The masks that are worn by the men were made by them as part of the creative process and serve also to maintain their privacy.





THE FOLLOWING ARE TWO OF THE TEXTS THAT WERE WRITTEN AND RECORDED AS PART OF THE RAP DES HOMMES RAPAILLÉS PROJECT:

*Rapaillé* [Patched up]  
My heart, my blood,  
My flesh, my bones,  
Of straw, I am not made  
Patched up, my soul transcends  
The truth of one reality.  
Reality shattered, broken.  
To you, my dear straw scarecrow.  
You pray Oh Grand Wizard of Oz.  
I wish that my world,  
Would be patched up by you.  
—Zakarie Bouffard

I am the darkness  
A bitterness in the universe  
Troubled in the face of all that is immense  
Caught by such hatred.  
When I look for a marker on the road to oblivion,  
My vision becomes blurred and partial.  
I breathe, because hope is no more.  
My heart is in hell, my head in the shade.  
In the shade, but not for long.  
Lower your arm; there are no questions.  
Today, I am touched by your light,  
I feel a gentleness emerging in me.  
I open my arms to the one who sings *Les bras ouverts* [The open arms],  
I feel peace reviving deep within me  
Defying wind and lightning  
I receive and I am ready to give.  
— Mohammed Sako

#### NOTES

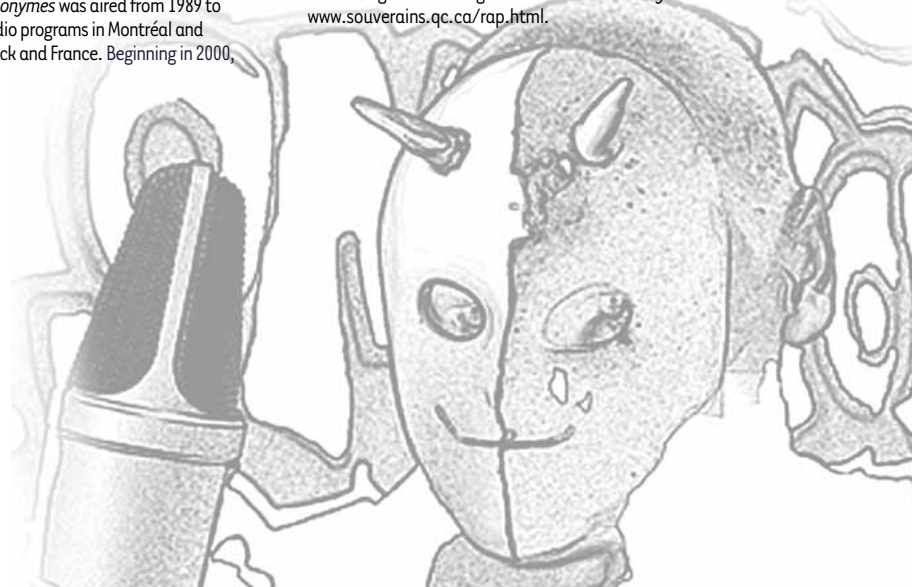
1. See his participation, as well as the participation of two former prisoners, in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, and also the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 117. Since 1997, Mohamed Lotfi has also been a regular contributor to the French CBC radio show *Macadam tribus*, creating approximately 200 programs, many of which deal with the question of incarceration from the point of view of the people on the inside.
2. In the last 20 years, 15,000 inmates and 500 guest presenters participated in this project—3000 hours were recorded and 1000 were edited and broadcast. *Souverains anonymes* was aired from 1989 to 2000 on more than 20 community radio programs in Montréal and across Québec, Ontario, New Brunswick and France. Beginning in 2000,



the *Souverains anonymes* website has widened its broadcasting, giving it another window on the outside world.

3. This title was inspired from the well-known book of poetry *L'Homme rapaillé* by Gaston Miron first published in 1970 by the Presses de l'Université de Montréal. Gaston Miron appeared as a guest on *Souverains anonymes* in January 1992.
4. In French, the title of the album *Libre à vous* is a word play. While the phrase "libre à vous" is most commonly used to mean: "as you wish," it can also be translated literally to mean: "you are free."
5. The songs and images from *Rap des hommes rapaillés* are available for viewing and listening on the *Souverains anonymes*' website: [www.souverains.qc.ca/rap.html](http://www.souverains.qc.ca/rap.html).

Images taken from an A/V slide show created by Mohamed Lotfi based on creative sessions with members of the *Souverains anonymes* who were both the photographers and the originators of the musical content.





# Les Jarnigoineux [Those who have the smarts]

Montréal

*Improvisational theatre with people developing literacy skills*

2007

La Jarnigoine [The smarts]  
Clode Lamarre

*Facilitating Artist*  
Stéphane Théoret

*Other Artists and Project Members*

José Villagomez  
Maria Bautista  
Yony Ordonez  
Maria-Elena Monge  
Liliane Richer  
Jean-Marc St-Pierre  
Annie Dumais  
Marie-Lourdes Romelus

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- In what ways are illiteracy and poverty linked?
- How can the public contribute to creating a climate more conducive for people who are coping with illiteracy to feel less ashamed, which after all is perhaps the most powerful deterrent to learning?

The problem of illiteracy is huge in Québec: 57% of the adult population does not have the reading and writing skills necessary to adequately deal with the demands of everyday life in the city, let alone meet the expectations of an average work environment. For the past 20 years, La Jarnigoine, a literacy centre in the Villeray-Parc Extension and Saint-Michel neighbourhood, has been offering workshops to local adults who participate in developing the programs and take part in making decisions impacting the organization. The participants also are actively involved in educating the general public about the causes and consequences of illiteracy.<sup>1</sup>

In order to invite a more active dialogue with the public, Stéphane Théoret — a professional actor and long-time literacy trainer with La Jarnigoine — proposed to collaborate with literacy workshop participants to give basic theatre training and create a series of improvisational theatre events aimed at raising awareness about illiteracy based on their personal experiences.

The first foray into the public sphere was in the Jean-Talon metro station. The group did an intervention based on the process of Invisible theatre,<sup>2</sup> which proved to be somewhat challenging on account of the high level of ambient noise. The intervention managed however to educate a small number of people. While imperfect, it was in many ways a great achievement: for the first time ever, project members shed their anonymity and spoke out about the reality of their situation — a reality very deeply hidden in our society. Jean-Marc stated: "For the longest time I did not ask anyone for help; I was too embarrassed by the fact that I cannot read and write very well." To this Marie-Lourdes added that for the first time in her life she admitted experiencing difficulties in reading to someone she did not know. The second time around, the group endeavored to intervene in a local grocery store. They first wrote a letter explaining their project and proposing some simple and inexpensive solutions that would make it easier for people who are dealing with a lack of literacy skills to shop. Two members from the group were chosen to hand deliver the letter to the owner of the grocery. To their great surprise, the owner refused to meet with them. There were no other attempts to engage with the public.

Nevertheless, the project initiated a significant process within the group. There was a lot mutual learning involved as everyone discussed how to equitably share the responsibility for the different tasks — within keeping with each person's capacities. Personal responsibility was also an issue; it became clear to everyone that each person's engagement was key to the success of the entire group's effort. Not showing up for example, meant a delay in the planning process or the lack of technical practice that everyone benefited from. This project proved to be as challenging to Stéphane: he came to recognize just how vulnerable he felt as a theatre practitioner and how, in the past, he imagined that he had to prove himself — as much to others as to himself. Working so closely with a strong collective made him realize that he had to revise his vision and his approach to collaboration in order to trust the rhythm of the group.



Maria-Elena Monge, one of the project members.

## NOTES

1. In 2005, La Jarnigoine was awarded the prix Roma-Lavoie in recognition of their unique initiative to promote greater social justice through a campaign with the Comité urbain de lutte. The project, which came to be known as *tarif alpha*, was to demand a reduced public transit fee for participants of literacy groups on the basis of their status as "students."
2. Developed by Brazilian Augusto Boal in the 1970s in response to government oppression and pressing social issues, invisible theatre is enacted in public space in such a way as to conceal the fact that what is occurring is a performance. The idea behind this is to get unsuspecting passersby involved in a conversation and create a public dialogue.

# Tournée « enquête-action » en Belgique et au Burkina Faso [“Investigation-action” tour in Belgium and Burkina Faso]

Belgium and  
Burkina Faso

*Alliance-building between theatre practitioners driven by a shared thirst for social justice in Belgium, West Africa and Québec*

2004

Facilitating Artist  
Dominique Malacort<sup>1</sup>

Other Artists and Project  
Members

In Belgium:  
Centre de théâtre-action de  
la Communauté française de  
Belgique (La Hestre)  
Paul Biot  
Collectif 1984 (Brussels)  
Dominique Rathmes and team  
Compagnie du Campus  
(La Hestre)  
Tina Di Prima  
Compagnie Maritime  
(Brussels)  
Daniel Adam  
Théâtre Croquemitaine  
(Tournai)  
Rita Cobut and Marcel  
Solbreux  
Théâtre de la Communauté  
(Liège)  
Pierre Dorzée  
Théâtre de la Renaissance  
(Seraing)  
Francis d'Ostuni  
Théâtre du Public  
(Écaussinnes)  
Philippe Dumoulin  
Théâtre des rues (Cuesmes)  
Jean Delaval and team

In Burkina Faso:  
Aguibou Dembele  
Martial Bohui Marboni

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- Major urban centres are privy to the resources necessary to sustain organized cultural practice; how do rural areas compensate for the lack of such resources – which all too often are not extended to remote locations?
- What are the necessary resources (e.g. time, money, personnel, etc.) to adequately address the specific needs that arise in the context of intercultural collaboration both during the creative process and when presenting the work in public?

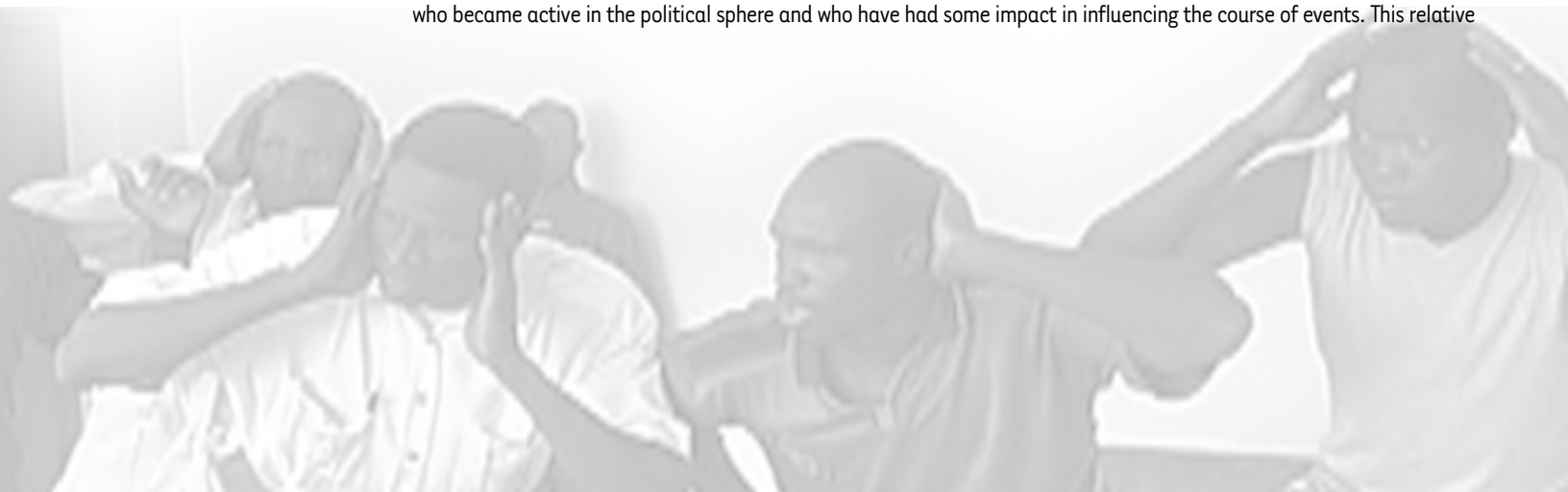
Dominique Malacort's engagement with the Québec-based *théâtre d'intervention*<sup>2</sup> network had brought her in touch with many of the practitioners involved in this research project even . In undertaking this cross-Atlantic tour, she wanted to strengthen the connections between the individuals who have been at the front lines of the cultural struggle for social and political change, both locally and on the international stage.

Why Belgium and Mali? One year prior to the trip — in November 2003 — Dominique attended the *Rencontres internationales de théâtre d'intervention* [Intervention theatre international encounters] symposium held at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM) and the Université Laval à Québec in which Paul Biot, Director of the Centre de théâtre-action de la Communauté française de Belgique, was also present. It was during this symposium that Dominique found out about the development of theatre-action in Belgium. As for Mali, Dominique had already made two trips to this West African country — in 2000 and again in 2003 — where she conducted outreach theatre projects in collaboration with UQÀM and Aguibou Dembele, President of the Association Tamaro Ken.

In 2004, during the *Tournée « enquête-action »* [“Investigation-action” tour] project Dominique spent two weeks in Belgium, where she met with representatives of eight different action-theatre companies and participated in their organized activities. She was also in contact with Paul Biot. During this visit, Dominique witnessed a very active theater community: with a population smaller than Québec's, Belgium's French community is home to 17 action-theatre troupes — all of which are subsidized on a regular basis. It is however, somewhat difficult to compare the situation in Belgium with that of Québec. Action-theatre in Belgium began in the 1970s and was linked to the historically strong and combative labour movement. According to practitioners in Belgium, the strength of the movement would have been as uncertain if not for the practitioners who became active in the political sphere and who have had some impact in influencing the course of events. This relative



During a workshop in Burkina Faso. Photo: Dominique Malacort.





During a workshop in Burkina Faso. Image taken from Dominique Malacort's video.

institutionalization has made it possible for the theatre companies to develop strong communal roots: at the same time, it left little room for the younger generation.<sup>3</sup>

Following her trip to Belgium, Dominique went to Burkina Faso to attend the *Festival international de théâtre pour le développement* [International festival of theatre for development],<sup>4</sup> organized by the Atelier Theatre Burkinabe (ATB). Along with Aguibou Dembele and artist-facilitator Martial Bohui Marboni from the Ivory Coast, Dominique facilitated theatre workshops on the theme of AIDS. Participants — Nigerians and Burkinabès 18–60 years old — were actors and directors of village theatre troupes who had already been taught Forum theatre<sup>5</sup> by the ATB practitioners. Over the course of many conversations — as the trust between everyone had been established — many practitioners admitted that this form of drama does not work in their villages because it does not correspond to modes of communication inherent in their African traditions. By combining a bit from everyone's different experiences Aguibou, Martial and Dominique were able to teach other theatrical approaches including Koteba techniques from Mali<sup>6</sup> and those of the street squads developed by le groupe UTIL (Unité théâtrale d'interventions loufoques) [Theatre unit for zany interventions], of which Dominique is a member.

These meetings resulted in proposals for future action, including the start of the Kene Fere Collective — a "Collective for integrity in the arts" — established with West African partners. For Dominique, these meetings also strengthened her own personal commitment as a politically engaged theatre practitioner.<sup>7</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Read Dominique's text *Away and Here in Community Theatre, or the Power of Paradox*, pp. 303–312, in which she elaborates on her personal experience and the experience with the West African partnership. See also of the workshop *The Ups and Downs of Partnership*, which she co-facilitated, p. 87.
2. For more information on "théâtre d'intervention," see note 4 of Dominique's text *Away and Here in Community Theatre, or the Power of Paradox* p. 312.
3. Things have changes in recent years as the Centre de théâtre-action now offers two programs for up and coming practitioners: actor-facilitator training specializing in action-theatre and training in collective theatrical creation.
4. Since 1988, the festival has been positioned as an important Pan-African cultural event.
5. For more information, see the description of the *Des familles hautes en couleur* humanist activist project, p. 223.
6. For more information, see the text mentioned in note 1.
7. The year following this trip, Dominique began her doctoral research in which she compares her experience with those of Aguibou Dembele and Jean Delval of the Théâtre des rues in Belgium.





# Podval

Russia and Québec

2004 – 2006

*Facilitating Artists*  
Les Productions Inouïes:  
Anne-Élisabeth Côté  
Myriam Berthelet<sup>1</sup>

*Other Artists and Project Members*  
Ksenia Dragounskaia  
*Moscow Times*:  
John Freedman  
TEATP.DOC (Moscow):  
Elena Gremina  
Ivan Viripaev  
Maxime Kourotchikine  
Dramaturgy and staging centre (Moscow):  
Alexei Kazantsev  
Olga Soubbotina  
May readings festival (Togliatti):  
Vladimir Doroganov  
Loosers (St Petersburg)

## *Production of a documentary video on contemporary Russian theatre*

### QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- How can humanist activist art increase the general population's involvement in the public sphere relative to current political issues?
- What sociopolitical and economic conditions provoke the emergence of humanist activist art practices?

Anne-Élisabeth Côté and Myriam Berthelet developed the Podval [Underground] project as a way to concretize their political engagement. In making this documentary, the filmmakers wanted to generate debate about the widespread political disengagement in Québec and the withdrawal of the public-at-large into private life. Their aim was to provoke discussion about the current situation and the collective future of Québeckers.

The filmmakers maintain that the decrease in shared public space comes at the expense of freedom – as defined by the philosopher Hannah Arendt. Freedom, for Arendt is not defined as individual choice but rather the possibility to contribute to a common effort by way of one's actions. Defining freedom in this way highlights how much the individual needs the presence of others to live fully and thus emphasizes the intrinsic political link between "ordinary" citizens and communal organization. For Anne-Élisabeth and Myriam, it is unacceptable to abandon the public sphere. Feeling compelled to take a position, they invite others to do so as well: *Podval* is not meant to provide answers but rather create a space for dialogue about the political vacuum.

The choice to visit Russia was associated with the significant sociopolitical changes that have so marked the recent past in that country. The filmmakers thought that they could learn a lot about the situation in Québec by studying a culture in the process of radical change. What were Russian citizens experiencing in the post-communist era as neo-liberalism took increasingly hold of the social, economic and political machinations of government and society? More specifically, how have contemporary theatre practitioners responded to increase in social inequalities in the new Capitalist Russia?

Given the history of theatre as a form of social intervention in Russia, and the presence of a strong underground theatre – *Podval* in Russian – it is not surprising that the Québec-based filmmakers received a warm welcome and that their documentary project led to many rich encounters with the Russian theatre practitioners who have been reinventing the concept of community through their critically-engaged work. "During our stay, we found that amongst the Russian artists, the individual and the collective were not as differentiated as they are in Québec."<sup>2</sup>





Once back in Québec, Anne-Élisabeth and Myriam arranged multiple screenings of their documentary in order to invite discussion about the political situations in Québec and Russia; about theatre's political role; and about artists' social engagement. Using the same source material, the filmmakers first edited a short documentary, which they called *Podval* and a medium length film entitled *Liberté conditionnelle* [Conditional liberty], which they screened a number of times beginning in January 2005.<sup>3</sup> *Podval* was selected by the National Film Board of Canada and distributed through its Parole citoyenne website<sup>4</sup>; it was also aired in Belgium.<sup>5</sup>

Anne-Élisabeth and Myriam found that the Russian society was even more different from that of Québec's than they had original thought. They are satisfied with the reflections that their film *Podval* has elicited.

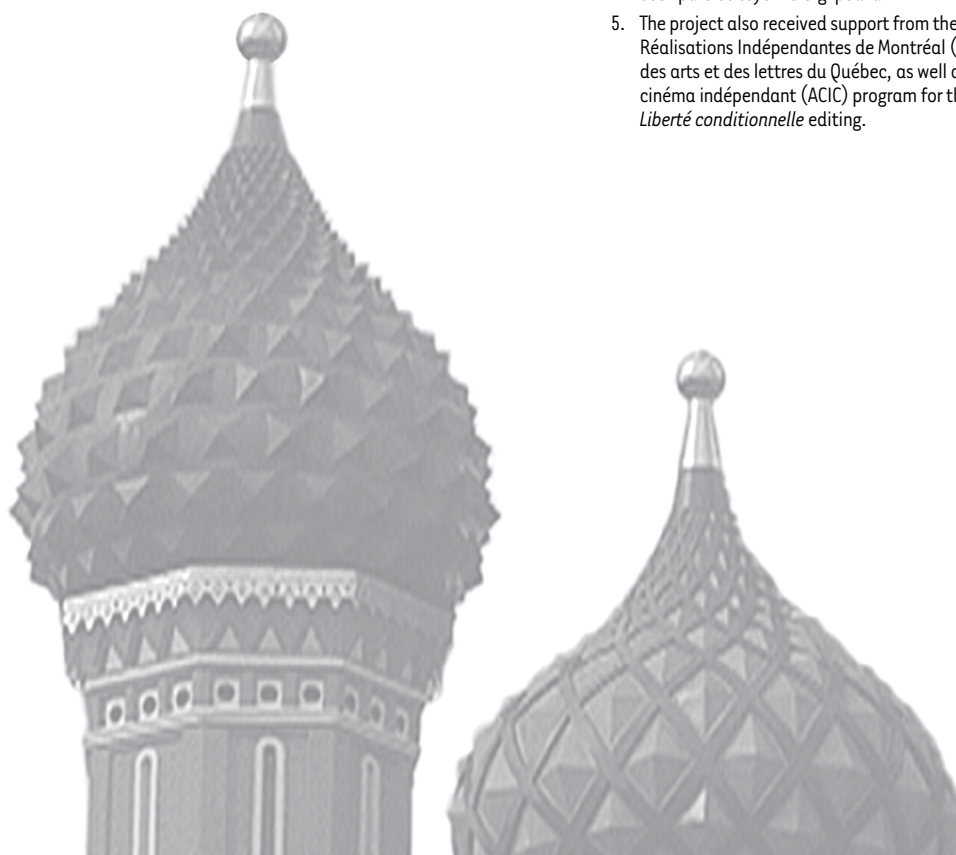


#### NOTES

1. Myriam was a close collaborator of LEVIER from 2002 through 2004 (inclusive). Her accounts of the following LEVIER events point to her involvement not only in the documentation of these encounters, they signal her considerable involvement in their planning and development: *Is Community Art Therapy? Is it Healing?*, pp. 41-43, *Aesthetics and Ethics in Community Art Projects*, p. 43, *Presentation of an Experience with Young Adults*, p. 44, and *Workshops on Conflict Resolution*, pp. 48-50. Myriam was also instrumental in organizing the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*,

p. 32-36, and in preparing the grant application to the Canada Council for the Arts – Interarts Office for the *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices* study day, pp. 51-52.

2. Myriam Berthelet, "Théâtre podval de Russie", in the *Cahiers de théâtre Jeu*, n° 113 (2004), special issue: "Théâtre d'intervention", p. 138.
3. This was especially the case during the launch of the journal *Cahiers de théâtre Jeu* (see note 2) at the Université du Québec à Montréal.
4. See : [parolecitoyenne.org/podval](http://parolecitoyenne.org/podval)
5. The project also received support from the Productions Réalisations Indépendantes de Montréal (PRIM) and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, as well as the NFB's Aide au cinéma indépendant (ACIC) program for the completion of the *Liberté conditionnelle* editing.



# Miscellanées [Mixtures]

Rouen, Dijon, Torcy  
(France)

May 2005

*Facilitating Artists*  
Le Théâtre des petites  
lanternes [Theater of the  
little lanterns]:<sup>1</sup>  
Angèle Séguin<sup>2</sup>  
Sylvia Rolfe<sup>3</sup>

Compagnie L'Artifice  
[The artifice company]:  
Christian Duchange

*Residence with a theatre company based in France*

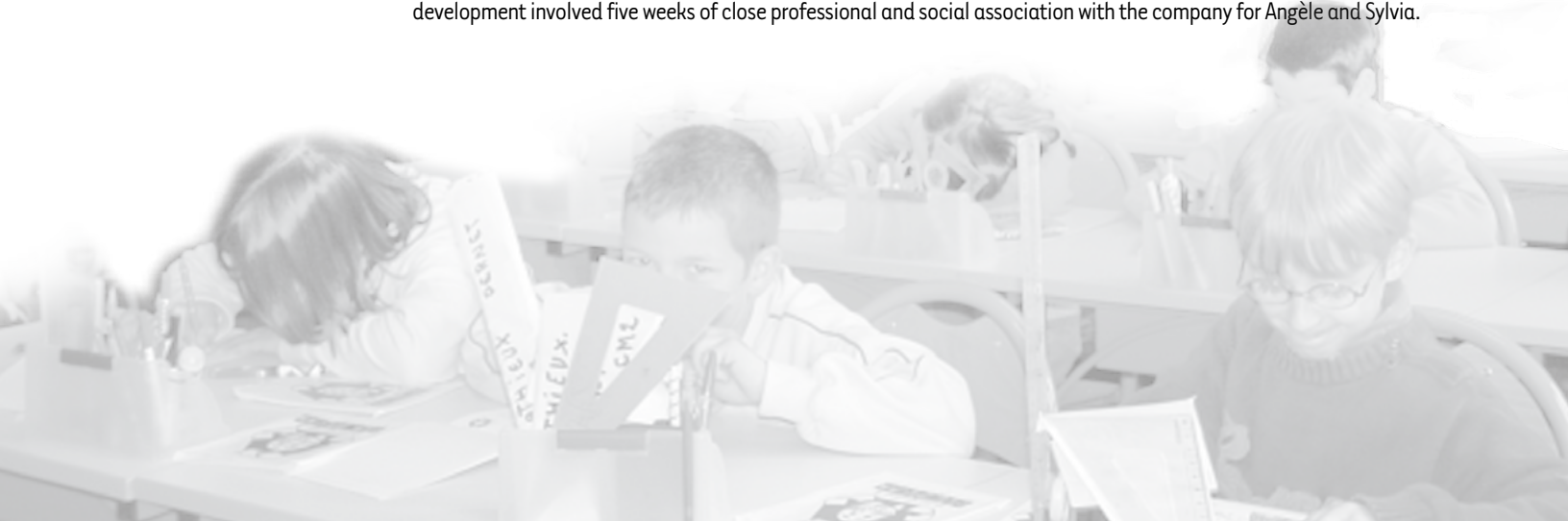
*QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:*

- What responsibilities are — or should be — associated with the work that artists do with community groups and the public at large that deliberately elicit strong emotions?
- How adaptable are activist art strategies developed in one part of the world with one particular set of participants to other communities elsewhere?



*Grand ramassage des peurs at the Lycée Jean Moulin in Torcy.*

In preparing for one of their many citizen's theatre project's — in which everyone is invited to participate in all stages of the theatrical creation and wherein each person is considered a co-author — the Théâtre des petites lanternes [Theater of the little lanterns] came to realize that their habitual methods of collecting information and written material were not sufficient to do what they wanted to do. This was especially the case as the project under the consideration was intended to address a wider population base and mobilize more people than in any of their previous ones. Having searched all over North America for a group whose approach was similar to their vision of the project they had in mind and not finding one, Angèle Seguin and Sylvia Rolfe turned to La Compagnie L'Artifice [The artifice company] in France on account of their creative work with community collaborations, which seemed to align with their own ideas. Accepting to share the experience of the Théâtre de l'Artifice's le Grand ramassage des peurs (GRDP) [The great collection of fears], project development involved five weeks of close professional and social association with the company for Angèle and Sylvia.



The GRDP project was a writing exercise involving the population of a city or specific location, during which the company proposed a way to have people get rid of their fears, anxieties, phobias and night terrors as one would dispose of unwanted bulky objects. The process was based on writing exercises contained in the *Manuel du froussard courageux* [Manual of the courageous coward], a booklet containing 13 writing proposals inciting individuals to express their fears. Copies of the booklet were distributed widely across each city or location in question. The booklets were intended to serve as notebooks. During this preparatory period, La Compagnie L'Artifice, along with Angèle and Sylvia, also held meetings in schools to support the authors-at-large in their writing work.



Rehearsals in Dijon.

"Recycling" bins were set up in public spaces to collect the booklets, once they were completed. The stories they contained were first sorted and then – based on the ones that were ultimately selected – a final version of the piece was presented as a stage reading. The public was invited to attend the reading/performance staging their own "demons."

As representatives of the Théâtre des petites lanternes, both Angèle and Sylvia were very satisfied with what they learned of the L'Artifice's methodology for information gathering and subsequently shaped their own theatre projects and vocabulary according to this consultation process. However they were uncomfortable with the approach taken by of the Compagnie de L'Artifice because of what they considered to be an ethical challenge: how to adequately address and respond to what is at stake in getting so many people involved in such a meaningful project given all the questions, needs and expectations that could arise for participants (amongst others) from writing exercises such as were associated with the GRDP project?

According to Angèle and Sylvia, the gathering of material did not seem to be aimed at creating a dialogue with the people – especially the youth – about their fears, but rather only to serve the artistic creative process. Similarly, other means of community mobilization and reconciliation were not implemented. In the end, the five-week residency led the Théâtre des petites lanternes to affirm the human dimension of its community collaborations even as they continue to address questions of power and authorship.

Following this residency, Le Théâtre des petites lanternes completed its citizen theatre project entitled *La Grande cueillette des mots* [The large collection of words] with the population of one specific neighborhood in Sherbrooke. The project developed over a two-year period (2006– 2007) and led to a presentation with public participation. Using the same methodology, Le Théâtre des petites lanternes then took on a more ambitious international project that tested once again the capacity for such an approach to do justice to the many participants who offer their thoughts and words. *La Grande Cueillette de L'Espoir* was presented in July 2010 at the International Festival of Theatre of the IDEA (International Drama/Theater and Education Association) World Congress in Belém, Brazil.

#### NOTES

1. See the participation of this group in the description of the *Presentation of Three Experiences in Community Art event*, p. 40. See also their participation in the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 34, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 73.
2. See her participation in the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 34, and in the *Presentation of Three Experiences in Community Art event*, p. 40.
3. See her participation in the *Presentation of Three Experiences in Community Art event*, p. 40.





# Rebel Music Americas Tour

Montréal,  
Saint-Rémi,  
Sherbrooke,  
Trois-Rivières,  
Sainte-Foy, Québec,  
Rimouski and  
Gatineau (Québec)

Ottawa, Guelph,  
Peterborough and  
Toronto (Ontario)

September 10 – 25,  
2005

## Facilitating Artists

Productions Multi-Monde:  
Malcolm Guy  
Marie Boti

## Other Artists and Project Members

Popular Indigenous Council of  
Oaxaca (Mexico):  
Raul Gatica  
Santa Revuelta (Buenos Aires,  
Argentina):  
Anibal Kohan  
Charly de Hoz  
The CAVIDA Collective –  
Community of Life, Dignity  
and Self-determination  
(Choco region, Colombia):  
Ali Orejuela  
Maria Ligia Chaverra

Numerous organizations of  
Québec and Ontario

Photographic documentation:  
Aysegul Koc.

*Promotional tour for a documentary film about politically engaged music groups in Latin America*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- It is well known that music was a key element in the US Civil Rights Movement; music has also played an important part in the struggle for sociopolitical justice in Latin America; in South Africa, songs of liberation were key in the struggle against Apartheid. At what point in the history of Québec, has music been as influential?
- According to Naomi Klein, carnival-style subversion and the appearance of disorder are anti-globalization's great strengths. How can the planning and implementation of well-organized activist events involving the arts, reinforce these strengths?

Productions Multi-Monde organized this *Tour* to promote their 2004 documentary *Rebel Music Americas* by Malcolm Guy and Marie Boti. The film introduces various social movements and problematics in Latin America by focusing on the musical production of four bands involved in activist causes, close to each their homes. It tackles the social and economic crisis in Argentina, which gave rise to the *piquetero* movement in the mid-1990s; the injustices suffered by indigenous Mexicans trying to cross the border into the United States to find work; the forced displacement by the military of the Afro-Colombian CAVIDA community of the Cacarica region (located south of the border with Panama); and the land claim movement led by the landless in Brazil.

One of Productions Multi-Monde's objectives was to promote the resistance movements in Latin America and increase the solidarity between activists in Latin America, Québec and Ontario. In order to do so effectively, members of the different bands were invited to participate in the tour and highlight the oppressive situations presented in the film.

For a period of 15 days, this politico-musical-educational expedition, which included activists from Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Québec, journeyed over 4,500 kilometers, visiting 12 cities across Québec and Ontario. Different activities were proposed by each of the cities' hosts who were free to decide the format that best suited their situation. Workshops, conferences and performances by the guest musicians were followed by discussions between the presenters and the filmmakers, Mari Boti and Malcolm Guy. More than 50 organizations together with LEVIER funded this project mobilizing their local resources to cover the costs associated with this *Tour* including honoraria for the members of the invited groups.

The projection of *Rebel Music Americas* in many towns of Québec and Ontario was an occasion to increase the network of organizations associated with Productions Multi-Monde especially in English Canada. Several connections were established leading to additional tours in Québec<sup>1</sup> and Latin America and a broader conversation about the role of activist music.



1.



In Guelph, Ontario.

## NOTE

1. See, for example, the description of the humanist activist project entitled *Caravane solidaire*, pp. 256–257.



# Caravane solidaire [Solidarity caravan]

Gatineau,  
Rouyn-Noranda,  
Chicoutimi,  
Baie-Comeau,  
Rimouski,  
Quebec City,  
Sherbrooke and  
Montréal

April 2006

Comité chrétien pour les  
droits humains en Amérique  
latine (CCDHAL) [Christian  
committee for human rights in  
Latin America]:  
Marie-Dominik Langlois  
Maude Chalvin

Projet Accompagnement  
Solidarité Colombie (PASC)  
[Accompaniment Colombia  
solidarity project]

*Facilitating Artists*  
Vichama Collectif:<sup>1</sup>  
Élodie Samuel-Leduc<sup>2</sup>  
Julie Champagne Grenier  
Laly Gutierrez  
Mélanie Riverin<sup>3</sup>  
Mélissa Pinsonault-Craig  
Mireille  
Miriam Heap-Lalonde<sup>4</sup>  
Patrick Cadorette  
Rachel Heap-Lalonde<sup>5</sup>  
Sophie Dubois Veilleux  
Stéphanie  
Véronique Bouliane  
Yanneck Olczyk

*Other Artists and Project  
Members*

Comisión Intereclesial  
Justicia y Paz [Inter-church  
commission on justice and  
peace], Columbia:  
Gloria Orcue  
Mouvement des Sans-Terre  
[Landless movement],  
Bolivia:  
Hilaria Serrano Alejandro  
Group Frente, Peru:  
Liliana del Socorro Alzamora  
Flores

*Solidarity tour across Québec in support of human rights in Latin America*

*QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:*

- When considering the necessity for redistributing wealth and resources more equitably, what scale of intervention is doable? In other words, is it advisable to act locally and/or tackle the international imbalances?
- Under what conditions can solidarity be created across the divide between the North and South without falling into the trap of the more "affluent North" trying to "help" the less "affluent South?"

The project *Caravane solidaire* [Solidarity caravan] took part in the *Argent du Nord, Terres du Sud* [Northern money, Southern lands] awareness campaign organized by the Comité chrétien pour les droits humains en Amérique latine (CCDHAL) [Christian committee for human rights in Latin America].<sup>6</sup> The campaign focused on the consequences of natural resources exploitation and supported the right to self-determination of Andean communities.<sup>7</sup> Along with members of the Vichama Collectif, a delegation of three Latin American women whose communities have been affected by mega-hydroelectric dam projects participated in the *Caravane solidaire* tour. The women spoke of the human rights violations that came along with the dam projects and invited the population of Québec to consider possible actions in solidarity with the affected communities in the South.

The tour, which lasted two weeks, was coordinated by members of CCDHAL in collaboration with other groups associated with the awareness campaign including PASC and Vichama Collectif, who requested financial support from LEVIER to cover the expenses of their members. This initiative included stopovers in eight Québec cities and involved more than 700 people and 30 organizations. In each city there were meetings between local groups and the members of the *Caravane solidaire*.

While the CCDHAL dealt with the general logistics of the tour, Vichama Collectif was responsible for the "festive" aspect, which included visual and performing arts. Within Vichama, various working committees were allocated different tasks: the design and printing of the promotional poster, banners and T-shirts; the creation of a number of large-scale birds with fabric feathers that would be inscribed with messages from people in each of the cities that were visited; and the writing and presentation of a play linked to the theme of the tour, which was followed by a session of Forum theatre.<sup>8</sup>

Vichama Collectif benefited on several levels from their involvement in this project: they were able to successfully integrate new individuals into their collective and they developed a new theatrical production, which proved to be an important addition to their repertoire. Furthermore, they gained experience with Forum theatre and in coordinating an evening conference, both of which contributed to the development of ideas for future projects – most notably a joint tour with Vichama Teatro, their Peruvian partners.

Rachel Heap-Lalonde, Maude Chalvin, Mélanie Riverin, Stéphanie, Hilaria Serrano Alejandro, Denis Pouliot, Liliana Alzamora Flores, Gloria Orcue, Guillaume Côté-Philibert, Patrick Cadorette, Julie Champagne, Marie-Josée Béliveau, Miriam Heap-Lalonde and Élodie Samuel-Leduc.





Liliana Alzamora Flores, Miriam Heap-Lalonde and Hilaria Serrano Alejandro.



Denis Pouliot and Rachel Heap-Lalonde.



Hilaria Serrano Alejandro.

Even though the lack of time ended up limiting the opportunities for establishing a solid basis for dialogue between the two groups, as the tour continued, the Vichama Collectif members began to share more than just the “festive” elements. They took greater part in the caravan itself. Simultaneously, the CCDHAL members showed increased interest in the artistic contributions. Vichama Collectif came away from the experience even more convinced that art can be powerful popular education tools for use in programs about contemporary political issues. The CCDHAL was satisfied to have reached its goal of creating new partnerships within its solidarity network and connect with more people across Québec.

#### NOTES

1. See the descriptions of the other projects in which this group took part: *Manipuler avec soin*, pp. 159–160, and *Mémoire de grève*, pp. 230–231.
2. See her participation in the *Manipuler avec soin* community art project, pp. 159–160.
3. See her participation in the *Manipuler avec soin* community art project, pp. 159–160, and in the *Mémoire de grève* humanist activist project, pp. 230–231.
4. See her participation in the *Manipuler avec soin* community art project, pp. 159–160.
5. See her participation in the *Manipuler avec soin* community art project, pp. 159–160, and in the *Mémoire de grève* humanist activist project, pp. 230–231. Rachel is the author of two texts in this publication: *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 71–86, and *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 108–120.
6. An organization founded in 1976 by four priests and pastors associated with Christian churches in Montréal following the overthrow of the governments in Argentina and Chile.
7. The awareness campaign included a two-day inter-university symposium in Montréal, a major media outreach and a closing event open to the public at large.
8. For more information about Forum theatre, see the description of the humanist activist project *Des familles hautes en couleur*, p. 223.

Photographic documentation: Marie-Josée Béliveau.



# AbriBec — suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale

[AbriBec — Henchman of the new fiscal humanity]

Montréal and  
Quebec City

2002 — 2003

Facilitating Artists  
Cagibi International<sup>1</sup>:  
Benjamin Muon<sup>2</sup>  
Johanne Chagnon<sup>3</sup>  
Marc Dutil<sup>4</sup>  
Nathalie Bergeron<sup>5</sup>  
Philippe Côté<sup>6</sup>  
Sli20<sup>7</sup>

*A variety of deliberately ironic artistic interventions meant to infiltrate the Capitalist system*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- Given the significant capacity of the political, corporate and media milieus, is it necessary for artists to have comparable financial resources to attract attention when intervening in the public sphere?
- Under what circumstances would deliberately ironic artistic interventions be taken seriously enough by the public, by the media and by those holding political power to contribute to disrupting the socioeconomic neoconservative/neoliberal status quo?

The Cagibi International collective was formed at an auspicious moment in the spring of 2002 by a mischievous group of sociopolitically engaged artists wishing to intervene in the public sphere through a deliberate use of irony and subversion. The collective's first action was to create AbriBec, a cultural jamming operation that operated under the guise of a seemingly real company, which specialized in the manufacturing of customized tax shelters for the general public.

With the creation of AbriBec, the Cagibi collective — in reaction to the Québec government's assertions about the necessity to cut public spending — focused on the fact that businesses, politicians and the media have tried to convince the public that individual tax payers are responsible for the growing financial deficit rather than the significant tax breaks given to large corporations. According to the available data, tax shelters drained many billion dollars of income from the Québec public purse.<sup>8</sup> AbriBec — created with a "concern for equity and social justice" — offered a variety of tax shelters suitable for different sectors of the population. The aim of this "company" was to extend the financial benefits of not paying taxes (such that are being enjoyed by companies that can afford to shirk their social responsibilities) to each and every citizen. The Cagibi International collective thus highlighted the issue of collective responsibility by asking the following questions: Can a responsible society tolerate the economic gaps that impede the development of the common good and undermine social cohesion? What hinders the government's capacity to implement equitable measures for everyone if not the numerous forms of discrimination and prejudice against people living in poverty?

Cagibi International opened the AbriBec operation on several fronts simultaneously in the public sphere and on the Internet. It began its activities with a media stunt in Quebec City involving a series of interventions, one of which was the doctoring of a poster originally produced by the Québec government for its *Agir* campaign (related to the government's promotion of the public works it was subsidizing at the time). The new poster retained some of the original graphics, but its meaning was significantly altered.

Working in collaboration with the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty,<sup>9</sup> Cagibi International transformed the content of the governmental poster to promote action against inequality and support "un Québec et un monde sans pauvreté" [a Québec and a world without poverty]. The new (French-only) text read: "We recognize a bias in that it hurts inside when we submit," which was based on what one participant said at a workshop organized by the Collective. The revised poster also stated: "Taxes



*Agir contre les inégalités pour un Québec et un monde sans pauvreté poster.*

were cut by the billions without improving the income of people who are themselves too poor to pay taxes. Business owners seeking tax shelters refuse to assign a minimum wage that will get people out of poverty.” And finally, amongst the text messages integrated into the poster was the following: “No more of these double standards,” and a question: “Is this the future that we want?”

The posters were installed in the advertising space of approximately forty bus shelters in Quebec City during the week of May 21, 2002 in support of the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty’s citizen’s forum, which was being held at the time. “It was a good idea to parody the Québec government’s *Agir* campaign to invite people to act in the right way instead of wasting all of our money on self-promotion.”<sup>10</sup>

A directive issued by the Québec Premier’s office demanded the withdrawal of all posters, citing misrepresentation, and accused the artists of hijacking the message. While members of Cagibi agreed to hijacking the message, they argued that they were not involved in any false representation. Indeed: would anyone dare to state that the choices our society is currently making do not benefit the richest fifth percent of the population? As Benjamin Muon said: “I think the reason is clear: the message disturbed. And if this message bothers them, [...] I find it deplorable and threatening, especially when we think we are just citizens who want to open an important debate about the public sphere.”<sup>11</sup>



The directive did not arrive until the end of the week set out in the contract between Cagibi and the advertisement display company and so there was no direct consequence: the poster was seen as planned. However, in response to the government’s attempt at censoring the work, the Cagibi collective printed more than 1000 paper copies of the poster — as well as making a postcard version available — and distributed them for free to anyone who requested a copy.<sup>12</sup>



Cagibi International completed the AbriBec “promotional campaign” by presenting a prototype of its tax-shelter-mobile to the people of Quebec City — also during the citizens’ forum organized by the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty. The structure was collapsible and had a set of wheels making it possible for the representatives of the AbriBec “company” to move it around to strategic places within the city, including the Caisse de dépôt et de placement<sup>13</sup> and the Québec Parliament buildings. The tax-shelter-mobile also included a radio station, Radio-Protection, which used a low-power radio transmitter. The reach of the radio program’s transmission was identified with a fictitious “tax-free zone” in which:

Every citizen could be freed from taxes imposed by the State — similar to those already enjoyed by the corporate tax shelters. Over an area of more than ten meters in each direction around the moving sculpture, the pirate radiobroadcast issued the following message, which was delivered in a neutral voice reminiscent of the airport duty free and public radio announcements interspersed with silence: “Cagibi International wishes to remind you that you are currently in a tax-free zone.”<sup>14</sup>



Intervention in Quebec City, may 2002 — coverage on AbriBec website.

The mobile shelter also accompanied the citizen’s forum participants on their march to the Québec National Assembly. Towards the end of the event, the AbriBec radio transmitter was offered to the Squat de la Chevrotière — squatters in the historic Saint-Jean-Baptiste neighbourhood — as a gesture of solidarity with their protest against condo development (which had been going on for four months by the time the transmitter changed hands). The squatters used the transmitter until the squat was shut down by Quebec City authorities, several months later.<sup>15</sup>

Meanwhile, as another infiltration maneuver, the Cagibi International collective uploaded the AbriBec website entitled *AbriBec — Suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale* [Henchman of the new fiscal humanity].<sup>16</sup> Amongst the tax shelters offered on the site were the Paradise model for individuals attracted by fiscal exoticism, the Deluxe wall-to-wall model and the Professional Worker model. Other models included the People’s version for low-income households and the Portable version tailored to homeless people’s needs.

It was possible to order these tax shelters online. With each “order” received, ten randomly selected Members of Parliament were sent an email informing them of the “transaction” on behalf of AbriBec. This sometimes resulted in rather comical formal acknowledgments such as: “The Deputy of X has received your emails about tax shelter models that you have developed to help the poor.”

A section of the AbriBec site, called *Abriyé du mois* [The sheltered of the month], highlighted the outstanding contribution of an enterprise that excelled in the practice of tax evasion. Quebecor and Canadian Steamship Lines were two companies that earned the title. The site promoted the possibility of benefiting from a tax haven here in Québec on the island of Qikiqtaaluk where the Inuit were deported to in the 1950s, or the Île-Dorval, near Montréal, which was bought cheaply by individuals. The site also proposed a *Banque d’Actions* [Actions bank] announcing a variety of ways to take part in tax shelter. AbriBec was indexed on the *La toile du Québec* [Québec web] Internet website in the section entitled *Services financiers* [Financial services].



Cagibi International made a foray into the world of politics more directly when, posing as a bona fide entrepreneur, its members sent a formal submission (based on the recommendations put forward by the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty) during the public hearings on Bill 112 — *Projet de loi visant à lutter contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale* [Act to combat against poverty and social exclusion]. Some time later, Cagibi International invited all the Deputies of each of the Provincial parties to discuss the issue of tax shelters in Québec. Only one Deputy from the Liberal Party responded. During the meeting, Cagibi members attempted to have her sign a document liberalizing the use of tax shelters for everyone and committing to discuss the issues publicly once a week for a minimum of one year. Other actions that were undertaken by Cagibi International include an intervention during the *Journée de l'air pur* [Clean air day] — that, paradoxically, was funded by the Québec Ministry of Transport — at Dorchester Square (June 5, 2002), during which *Campagne de salissage fiscal* [Mudslinging tax campaign] stickers were distributed; and an intervention during the *Montréal Summit* (June 6, 2002) in which the Collective handed out fiscal free-entry coupons.

This is why this production and dissemination of postcards and the information transmitted on the Internet — a true extension of street actions — have made AbriBec part of a larger strategy of media contamination on the very terrain of power (i.e. communicational propaganda, the political and economic tools of the power elite).<sup>17</sup>

Then, in February 2003, Cagibi International took part in the *Les coups de dés* [The role of the dice] community event, which was organized by Guy Durand Sioui<sup>18</sup> by proposing the *Festival deux poids deux mesures* [Double standards festival]. Amongst the activities carried out within this context were the distribution of the posters which had been installed in the Quebec City bus shelters; a survey of the local population; and some interventions by members of the *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors* [Open your treasure chest] community art project.<sup>19</sup> Cagibi invited members of the Table d'aménagement du quartier Hochelaga-Maisonneuve [The Hochelaga-Maisonneuve neighbourhood urban development committee] who were very active in dealing with the local issues related to the environmental impact associated with urban transport.<sup>20</sup>

With so many activities over a relatively short period of time, Cagibi International was steeming with ideas. However after weekly meetings throughout the year, its members came to realize that they were more interested in developing their own projects. Soon after the end of this year's reflections, the collective ceased its activities.<sup>21</sup>

#### NOTES

1. See also the description for the *Carte. Compétence* humanist activist project organized by the same collective, pp. 261–262.
2. See his participation in the humanist activist project *Carte. Compétence*, pp. 261–262.
3. See her participation in the community art project *Ouvrez votre coffre aux trésors*, pp. 154–158, and in the humanist activist projects *Urbaine urbanité III*, pp. 241–242, *Carte. Compétence*, pp. 261–262, and *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265. See also Vivian Labrie's text, *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty — A Degree of Freedom*, pp. 294–295 and 297.
4. See his participation in the humanist activist project *Carte. Compétence*, pp. 261–262.
5. See her participation in the humanist activist projects *Carte. compétence*, pp. 261–262, and *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265.
6. See his participation in LEVIER's *First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24, and in the humanist activist projects *Urbaine urbanité III*, pp. 241–242, and *Carte. compétence*, pp. 261–262.
7. See his participation in the humanist activist projects *Carte. compétence*, pp. 261–262, and *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265.
8. According to the data distributed by UQAM's Chaire d'études socio-économiques. ([www.cese.uqam.ca/pages/pub\\_recherche.php? sujet=pub\\_recherche](http://www.cese.uqam.ca/pages/pub_recherche.php? sujet=pub_recherche)).
9. The name of the Collective has since changed to the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec. For more information about the Collective, see Vivian Labrie's text, *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty — A Degree of Freedom*, pp. 291–298. See also the description of the *Urbaine urbanité III* project, in which the Collective participated, pp. 241–242. See also the descriptions of these other projects, which were, in part, done in collaboration with the Collective: *Carte. compétence*, pp. 261–262, and *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265.
10. Yvon D. Ranger, "La morale élastique — de Sesame Street à Playboy" in *Le Couac*, 5: 11 (August 2002), p. 3.
11. Tommy Chouinard, in "Tous aux abris... fiscaux !" in *Voir Montréal*, (week of 11 July 2002).
12. The poster was subsequently used by other groups such as Noyau Anti-Pub pour un Affichage Libre à Montréal (NAPALM) for their poster campaign in Montréal with the inclusion of their own manifesto. For more about this, see Yvon D. Ranger, "Actions anti-pub" in *Le Couac*, 6: 3 (December 2002), p. 7.
13. An institutional fund manager in Québec; the largest in Canada.
14. André Éric Létourneau, "Pirate Radio and Manoeuvre: Radical Artistic Practices in Québec" in *Islands of Resistance: Pirate Radio in Canada* edited by Andrea Langlois, Ron Sakolsky and Marian van der Zon. Vancouver: New Star Books, 2010.
15. See "Tranches radicales dans l'année d'art 2002 au Québec", written by Guy Sioui Durand in *Inter, art actuel* 84 (spring 2003), p. 16. The adventure of this squat, which emerged from the social housing struggle, is still commemorated yearly by various Quebec City citizens groups. See for example: "Hommage au 920 de la Chevrotière" at [www.neonyme.net/squat/cmaq/index.html](http://www.neonyme.net/squat/cmaq/index.html) (consulted July 12, 2010).
16. The AbriBec website, which has been maintained and archived is still accessible: [www.iso1000000000.ch/abribec/](http://www.iso1000000000.ch/abribec/).
17. Guy Sioui Durand (see note 15).
18. See the description of the *Urbaine urbanité III* humanist activist project, which he organized, pp. 241–242.
19. See the description of this community art project, pp. 154–158.
20. Cagibi members also produced competency cards during this event. See the description of the *Carte. Compétence* project, pp. 261–262.
21. Only the *Carte. Compétence* project is still ongoing — when the opportunity arises.

# Carte.compétence — votre immunité citoyenne

[Competency.card — your citizen's immunity]

Quebec City,  
Montréal, and  
elsewhere in Québec

*Production and distribution of "official accreditations" confirming a particular competency identified by the cardholder*

Ongoing since 2002

QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

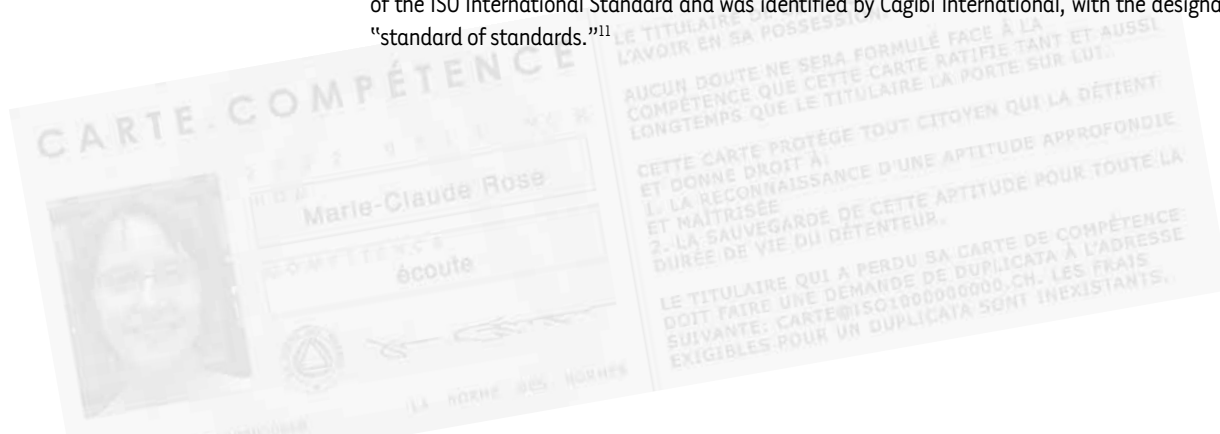
- Who has the "authority" to validate the value of an individual, if not the person her or himself? Is having a job the only way to be recognized competent in our society?
- What can be considered the artistic product: the object resulting from the creative process or the human relationships developed between the individual participants?

Facilitating Artists  
Cagibi International:<sup>1</sup>  
Benjamin Muon<sup>2</sup>  
Johanne Chagnon<sup>3</sup>  
Marc Dutil<sup>4</sup>  
Nathalie Bergeron<sup>5</sup>  
Philippe Côté<sup>6</sup>  
Sli20<sup>7</sup>



*Carte.compétence — votre immunité citoyenne* [Competency.card — your citizen's immunity] began as an initiative of the Cagibi International collective.<sup>8</sup> While the Cagibi International is no longer active, individual members of the collective — notably Johanne Chagnon and Sli20 — continue to keep this project alive. *Carte.compétence* has been activated in a number of different contexts beginning with the agora that was organized by the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty<sup>9</sup> in October 2002. Parallel to the formal hearings of the committee following the tabling of Bill 112 - *Loi visant à lutter contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale* [Act to combat against poverty and social exclusion], the *Agora pour un Québec sans pauvreté* [Agora for a poverty-free] — consisting in a heated tent and a trailer — was held during a week in the Parc de l'Esplanade, in front of the Québec Parliament.

The making of these cards is relatively simple: individuals are asked to identify a particular competency; their photograph is taken and a plasticized card is then issued on the spot. These formal accreditations, complete with a photo, "officially" validate a particular competency identified by the cardholder. "Thumbing one's nose to the multiple skills levels that sometimes hinder one's entry into the job market,"<sup>10</sup> these certifications guaranteed that their holders were entitled to a life-time "recognition for a mastered aptitude provided that they carried their card with them." This card was designed as a parody of the ISO International Standard and was identified by Cagibi International, with the designation ISO 1000000000, as the "standard of standards."<sup>11</sup>



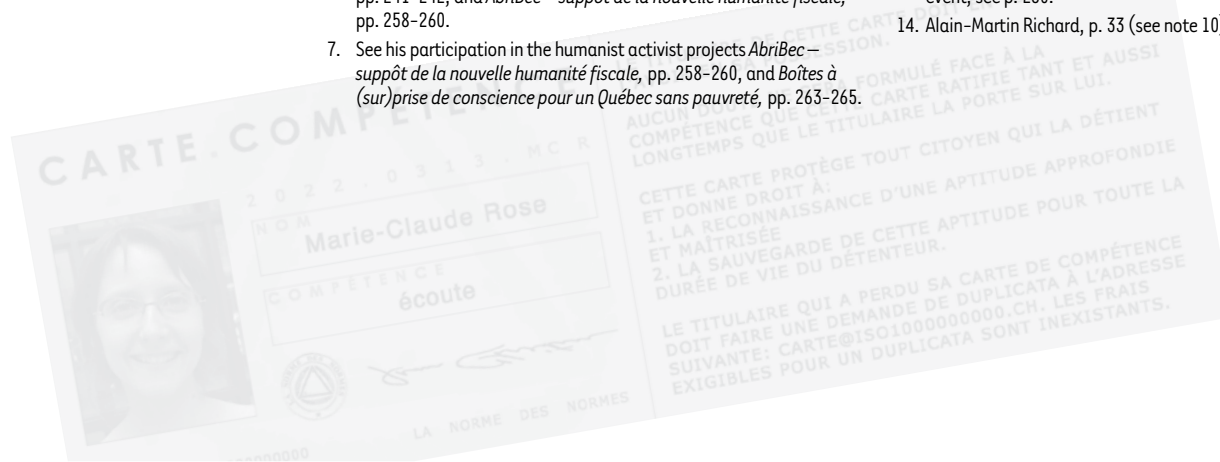


In February 2003, Cagibi International took part in the *Les coups de dés* [The role of the dice] community event, which was organized by Guy Sioui Durand.<sup>12</sup> Amongst the activities carried out within this context was the creation of more competency cards.<sup>13</sup> The activity was also taken up in 2007 and 2010 during the *Ensemble autrement!* [Together differently!] events organized by the same group (renamed) the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec. Each occasion gave rise to interesting exchanges between people who were seemingly just waiting to validate their competencies. “Paradoxically, the maneuver as an evanescent practice always relies on a concrete object. [...] With this object, I escape the isolation of the society of the spectacle and the consumption that capital wants to impose upon me.”<sup>14</sup>

All of the completed cards, unless otherwise specified by the cardholder, may be viewed on the site [www.iso1000000000.ch](http://www.iso1000000000.ch). A video of the process is also available at this URL as is an online form that could be filled out in order to receive one own’s competency card.

#### NOTES

1. See also the description for *AbriBec – suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, a project organized by the same collective, pp. 258–260.
2. See his participation in the humanist activist project *AbriBec – suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260.
3. See her participation in the community art project *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors*, pp. 154–158, and in the humanist activist projects *Urbaine urbanité III*, pp. 241–242, *AbriBec – suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, and *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265. See also Vivian Labrie’s text, *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty – A Degree of Freedom*, pp. 294–295 and 297.
4. See his participation in the humanist activist project *AbriBec – suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260.
5. See her participation in the humanist activist projects *AbriBec – suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, and *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265.
6. See his participation in the *LEVIER’s First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24, and in the humanist activist projects *Urbaine urbanité III*, pp. 241–242, and *AbriBec – suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260.
7. See his participation in the humanist activist projects *AbriBec – suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, and *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265.
8. For a description of the history of this collective, see pp. 258–260.
9. The name of the Collective has since changed to the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec. For more information about the Collective, see Vivian Labrie’s text, *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty – A Degree of Freedom*, pp. 291–298. See also the description of the *Urbaine Urbanité III* project, in which the Collective participated, pp. 241–242. See also the descriptions of these other projects, which were, in part, done in collaboration with the Collective: *AbriBec – suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, and *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265.
10. Alain-Martin Richard, “L’œuvre au noir,” *ESSE arts + opinions*, n° 48 (spring-summer 2003), p. 26.
11. For more about the competency cards project, see Vivian Labrie’s text, *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty – A Degree of Freedom*, p. 294.
12. See the description of the *Urbaine urbanité III* project that he organized, p. 241–242.
13. For the other activities organized by Cagibi International during this event, see p. 260.
14. Alain-Martin Richard, p. 33 (see note 10).



# Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté

[Awareness boxes for a poverty-free Québec]

Montréal and  
Chicoutimi

October 2002

Facilitating Artists  
Devora Neumark<sup>1</sup>  
Johanne Chagnon<sup>2</sup>

Other Artists and Project  
Members

In Montréal:  
André Galarneau<sup>3</sup>  
Catherine Proulx  
Garance Chagnon-Grégoire  
Geneviève Bérubé  
Léa Neumark-Gaudet  
Nadia Duguay  
Nathalie Bergeron<sup>4</sup>  
Pierre-Laurence Spino-Duquet  
Roz Neumark  
Sli20<sup>5</sup>  
Zev Neumark-Gaudet

In Chicoutimi:  
Christine Martel  
Claudine Cotton<sup>6</sup>  
Éric Bachand  
Gilles Bouchard  
Jean-François Spain  
Katherine Bouchard  
Marie-Ange Thériault  
Michèle Rhéaume  
Natacha Gagné  
Odette Bergeron  
Sonia Robertson<sup>7</sup>  
Sylvie Poisson

Le Lobe (Artist-run Centre)<sup>8</sup>

*Swarm maneuver project aimed at raising public awareness about poverty in Québec*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- In a society as abundant as ours, how is it possible to counter the multitude of prejudices that people living in poverty face, including the assumption that the poor are somehow at "fault" for their condition of poverty?
- What considerations do artists need to give to the increasing concern for "public safety" in the aftermath of 9/11 and other acts of violence when planning furtive art actions?

As Co-Directors of Engrenage Noir / LEVIER Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon are concerned with the issue of systemic poverty. In addition to the support that LEVIER makes available for community and humanist activist art projects. Devora and Johanne have also been moved to create their own punctual artistic projects that invite critical reflection about the choices that are being made in Québec and elsewhere relative to the socially constructed and maintained economic inequalities. One occasion that presented an opportunity for Devora and Johanne to collaborate on such a project came in October 2002, when the Québec government was holding public hearings about the Bill 112 project, *Loi visant à lutter contre la pauvreté et l'exclusion sociale* [Act to fight against poverty and social exclusion].

The Bill proposed a permanent anti-poverty strategy, accompanied by an action plan that would be periodically updated. It was intended to regulate institutional policies and responsabilize all citizens of Québec. While the Bill had been tabled in the National Assembly of Québec by the time *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté* [Awareness boxes for a poverty-free Québec] was first considered, what remained was to implement concrete measures that would lead to, and maintain, a poverty-free Québec. The holding of the public hearings was therefore an opportunity to flesh out and strengthen the Bill.

In association with the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty,<sup>9</sup> which had initiated Bill 112 following a massive grassroots mobilization effort, Devora and Johanne determined a strategy that would bring more media attention to the public hearings, since this important moment in the collective history of Québec was not getting much air time, if at all. Devora's idea about how to attract attention to the hearings was to place an object at the threshold of people's houses that would bring the issue of poverty home to citizens in various Montréal neighborhoods and elsewhere. The two artists agreed to use attractive cardboard gift boxes (12 × 12 × 6 inches), decorated with pretty ribbons as the vehicle to disseminate information about Bill 112 and the hearings that were about to take place. Four-fifths of the 5000 boxes that were distributed were silver in colour; the other one-fifth was copper-coloured. The colours were chosen to symbolize the Canadian currency wherein the smallest coin value – the penny – contains actual copper. The ratio refers to percentage of Québec's population that lives in poverty.



During the project in Chicoutimi. Image taken from the video made by Éric Bachand.







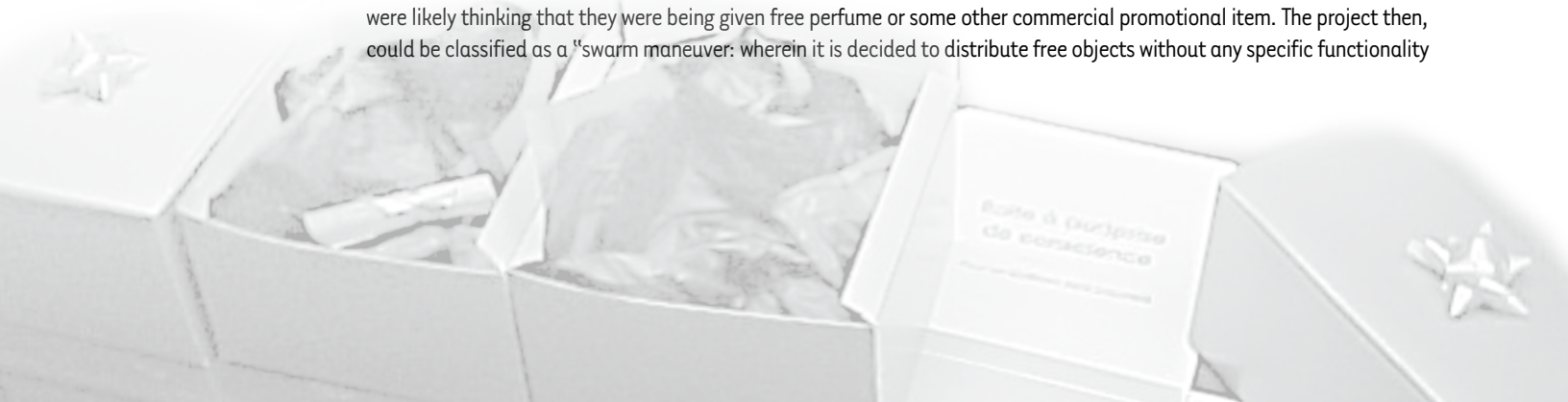
During the project in Montréal. Photos: Johanne Chagnon.

*Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté* was hand-stamped on the interior cover of each box. Rolled up inside the boxes were two pages tied with a coloured ribbon, wrapped in coloured tissue paper. The first scroll stated "La pauvreté concerne tout le monde [Poverty concerns everyone]" and presented material aimed at countering the prejudices that can be projected, consciously or not, onto people living in poverty. For example, one question read: "Que penseriez-vous de la société québécoise si vous faisiez partie du cinquième le plus pauvre de la population ? [What would you think of the Québec society if you were amongst the poorest 1/5 of the population?]" Another, linked more directly to the gift-boxes themselves, read: "Nous faisons-nous le cadeau de se donner une société la plus équitable possible ? [Will we give ourselves the gift of the most equitable society possible?]" Further along on the scroll was a text inviting people to pose a concrete gesture in favor of moving forward the improvements to Bill 112: by completing a coupon printed on the lower portion of the page, citizens could mail in their encouragement to the government for the work on the Bill. An email address was also provided for the Premier's office in case people preferred to get in touch electronically. Individuals were also asked to speak to at least one other person about poverty in Québec.

In order to inform the public-at-large — including the media — about the improvements to Bill 112 that were being proposed by the the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty, the second rolled up paper presented an extract of an article written by Vivian Labrie<sup>10</sup> who was the spokesperson of the Collective at the time. The article, entitled "Un Québec sans pauvreté : tout le monde y gagne !" [A Québec without poverty: everyone benefits!], was published in its entirety at the same time in the Québec City newspaper *Le Soleil*.

The project *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté* required two major simultaneous logistical operations to ensure that 4500 of these gift boxes were placed on the thresholds of so many doors across Montréal with another 500 of them were distributed in Chicoutimi. In Montréal, Johanne's own house served as the warehouse and assembly line "factory," while in Chicoutimi the artist-run centre, Le Lobe became the hub of activity. For more than a day, frenzied "workers" stamped the interior lids of the boxes, rolled and tied the two scrolls and wrapped them in the tissue paper. In Chicoutimi, the boxes were assembled, the scrolls were inserted into the boxes and the completed 'gifts' were all loaded into the vehicles reserved for the operation. In Montréal, because it was impossible to assemble all the boxes in advance on account of how much space they would take, the cube truck that was rented for the occasion was transformed into a mobile "factory" within which the "workers" completed the assembly of the boxes (including affixing the bow to the top of each one) as the team moved from one location to another. In both of the distribution sites, as one person drove, the other project members scooted in and out of the vehicles — sometimes carrying six or seven boxes piled high — placing each box carefully on the threshold of the houses in the designated neighborhoods.

Amongst the neighborhoods that were targeted in Montréal were the southwest corner of the Rosemont district (where a huge condo development was in the process of being built); around the Atwater Market; Côte Saint-Luc-Hampstead; and the perimeter around Lafontaine Park. In Chicoutimi, tree-lined streets were the sites of the early-morning distribution in a number of residential areas. Delivery of the boxes was also organized to the media with custom labels addressing individual journalists: dozens of these boxes were dropped off, for example, at the Canada Broadcasting Company headquarters. Additionally, boxes were handed out to eager passersby walking along Sainte-Catherine Street in downtown Montréal who were likely thinking that they were being given free perfume or some other commercial promotional item. The project then, could be classified as a "swarm maneuver: wherein it is decided to distribute free objects without any specific functionality



in order to infiltrate a given population. The aim is not to try and convince anyone but rather raise awareness about furtive artfulness and some alternative ways to make sense of things.”<sup>11</sup>

While it is somewhat difficult to know how this project affected specific individual’s thinking about poverty, one of the strongest and most frequent responses to *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté* criticized the waste of so many boxes and so much paper to highlight the issue of poverty. This comment was communicated to the artists by word of mouth, in emails sent to the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty, as well as was asserted within the media articles that followed the distribution of the boxes. And yet, after this first reaction, a journalist confessed: “Upon second thought, I can’t help but admit one thing: the boxes made us talk and speak!”<sup>12</sup>

Another reaction to the swarm manoeuvre was the expression of fear. Within the post-9/11 cultural and sociopolitical context, people were quick to consider the possibility that the boxes contained a mail bomb or chemical threat. There were formal complaints registered by some recipients, leaving the police in both Montréal and Chicoutimi to make inquiries about the project and issue a warning prescribing that the artists halt their activities. Given that the distribution had been completed by the time the complaints reached the artists, they didn’t have any negative impact on the ending of the project.

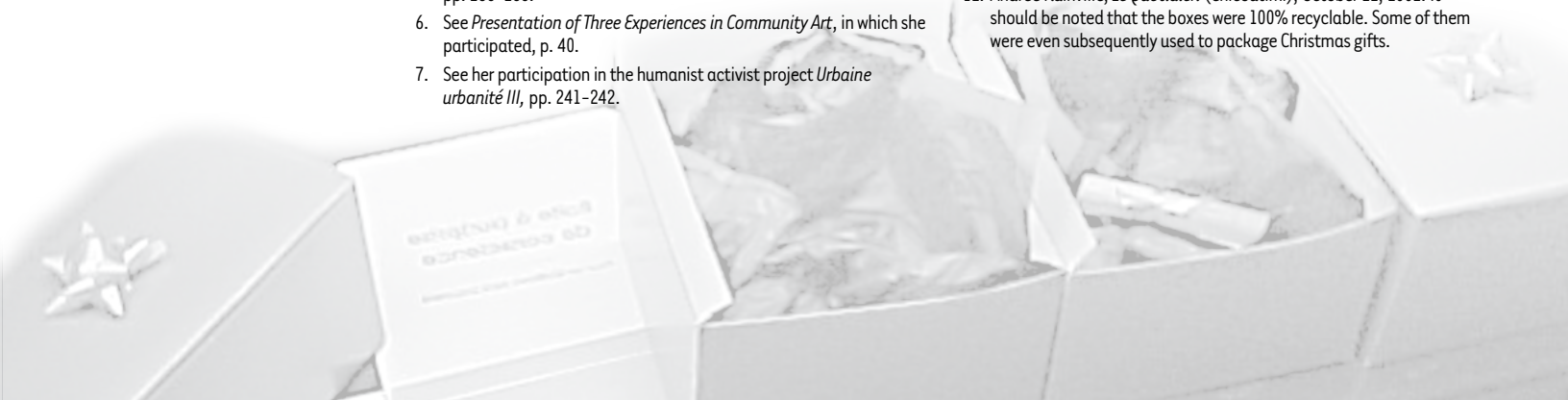
As for the impact of this project on the situation of poverty itself, let’s only say that Bill 112 was adopted unanimously in December of 2002, however without integrating the sought-after improvements. Since then, despite the vigilance of the (renamed) Collective for a Poverty-free Québec, the action plans that have been filed by the government have proved disappointing and very little has actually been done to narrow the gap between the rich and the impoverished in our society.



During the project in Montréal. Photo: Johanne Chagnon.

#### NOTES

1. See the analysis of the project *Entre nous*, in which she took part, in the text by Caroline Alexander Stevens, “How Shall I Live?”, pp. 285–289. See also Vivian Labrie’s text, *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty—A Degree of Freedom*, p. 295. See also the analysis of the workshop *When is Art?* that she co-wrote with Ève Lamoureux, pp. 93–99.
2. See her participation in the community art project *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors*, pp. 154–158, and in the humanist activist projects *Urbaine urbanité III*, pp. 241–242, *AbriBec—suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, and *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265. See also Vivian Labrie’s text, *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty—A Degree of Freedom*, pp. 294–295 and 297.
3. See his participation in *LEVIER’s First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24.
4. See her participation in the humanist activist projects *AbriBec—suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, and *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265.
5. See his participation in the humanist activist projects *AbriBec—suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, and *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265.
6. See *Presentation of Three Experiences in Community Art*, in which she participated, p. 40.
7. See her participation in the humanist activist project *Urbaine urbanité III*, pp. 241–242.
8. At the time, Devora was the artist-in-residence at Le Lobe: her project ended with a performance event *For Giving / pardonner pour donner*. As the project drew to a close, the artist run centre became a hub of activity when people rallied around to help out prepare the boxes that were to be distributed in Chicoutimi.
9. The name of the Collective has since changed to the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec. For more information about the Collective, see Vivian Labrie’s text, *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty—A Degree of Freedom*, pp. 291–298. See also the description of the *Urbaine urbanité III* humanist activist project, in which the Collective participated, pp. 241–242. See the Cagibi International humanist activist projects, which were, in part, done in collaboration with the Collective: *AbriBec—suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, and *Carte.compétence*, pp. 261–262.
10. See her text in this publication, *Art in the Struggle Against Poverty—A Degree of Freedom*, pp. 291–298. See also her participation in *LEVIER’s First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24, and *LEVIER’s Second Orientation Meeting*, pp. 25–27.
11. Alain-Martin Richard, “L’œuvre au noir”, *ESSE arts + opinions*, 48 (spring-summer 2003), p. 33.
12. Andrée Rainville, *Le Quotidien* (Chicoutimi), October 22, 2002. It should be noted that the boxes were 100% recyclable. Some of them were even subsequently used to package Christmas gifts.



# Standard II and III

Québec and in  
different countries

2004 — 2011

Facilitating Artist  
André Éric Létourneau<sup>1</sup>

Other Artists and Project  
Members  
Many people from around  
the world

*Suite of artistic maneuvers about memorial silence*

*QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:*

- Under what circumstances can silence be an effective artistic activist strategy?
- Under what cumstances — if any — can artistic projects influence government policy?

By the time André Éric Létourneau applied for LEVIER funding, he had already worked on Standard II for three years.<sup>2</sup> The idea for the project emerged following the initiative taken by the government of the United States, on September 14, 2001, asking the world's population to observe a memorial silence in memory of the victims of the September 11th attacks. André Éric decided to extend these "standard" three minutes of silence to the 198 countries officially recognized by the United Nations — state structures who, by virtue of their domestic and foreign policies, are sometimes responsible for the death or mistreatment of its people and individuals living beyond its borders.



Three minutes of silence observed for Israël, with Ardiyanto, May 9, 2004, 19:45 pm, under a waterfall in the Mont Merapi lava bed, Java Island, Indonesia. Photo: André Éric Létourneau.

Over the past years, as and when possible, André Éric invited citizens from around the world to observe three minutes of silence for one of the 198 countries on his list. In the course of this performance series André Éric proceeded to select the countries systematically, in alphabetical order by country name. The fact that the participants were not free to choose the country for which they would observe the silent commemoration meant that each person had to relate in some way to what was "offered." This, in effect, forced participants to confront their own historical baggage or lack of knowledge.

Each encounter unfolded in a similar way. The artist initiated a conversation with each participant, which focused on her experience. Individuals were asked about their opinions of the state of the world and invited to select a location for the three minutes of silence to be observed. After getting to the designated spot, a stopwatch measured the length of the silence; a

Broadcast on CBC's Radio-Canada program in 2004



Three minutes of silence observed for Iraq with Yulius Pranon Pratomo on May 5, 2004, 9:20 AM at the entrance hall of the Ministry of Education in Java Central, Indonesia. Photo: André Éric Létourneau.

blank book was opened to the page corresponding to the county being commemorated. A sound recording and photographic documentation of each event's location were made as traces of the activity. Participants were asked to reflect on the performance once the three minutes were over.

At the time of this publication, 151 performance-encounters had conducted with more than 151 people worldwide. There were for example, three minutes of silence for Cuba observed on the ferry between Staten Island and Manhattan in front of the Statue of Liberty. Another three minutes of silence were observed for South Korea face to face with Slobodan Milosevic during his trial International Criminal Tribunal for war crimes in the former Yugoslavia at The Hague, Netherlands.

*Standard III* involves the production of a CD and bilingual booklet documenting another one of André Éric's interventions, which included 198 open-mike periods of silence that were aired in 2004 on Radio-Canada. Each 30-second period was introduced as follows: "30 seconds of silence for victims of domestic and foreign policies of [name of country - in alphabetical order]." This audio piece, extending from *Standard II*, was intended to counter what the artist explained as the dominant trend in Canadian and U.S. radio broadcasting, "where silence is always mediated for the purpose of manipulation." While the production of the CD has been delayed for various technical and financial reasons, André Éric plans to distribute it through official diplomatic channels to every Head of State around the world once it is completed.

#### NOTES

1. See also the description of the *SEXÉ ! Art Action* roundtable that he organized, p. 90.
2. *Standard I* took place over several hours around a picnic table at the park of the Bagotville military base museum. Every three minutes, André Éric turned the pages of a book that he prepared and within which he had compiled statistical information about the

genocides perpetrated by Colonial powers. Negotiations between the authorities of the base and the artist only allowed a partial realization of the project. The following day, André Éric launched *Standard II* in the context of the Jonquière book fair with a book similar to the one he made for the earlier project.





# Des pas sur l'ombre [Footsteps on the shadow]<sup>1</sup>

Across Québec

2003 — 2004

Regroupement provincial des maisons d'hébergement et de transition pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale [Provincial coalition of shelters and transition houses for women victims of conjugal violence]<sup>2</sup>

Fédération des ressources d'hébergement pour femmes violentées et en difficulté du Québec [Federation of shelters for abused women and women in difficulty in Québec]

Facilitating Artist  
Diane Trépanière<sup>3</sup>

Other Artists and Project  
Members

More than 300 workers in  
shelters for women victims of  
domestic violence

*Writing workshops with domestic shelter workers across Québec followed by the publication of a book that emerged from the workshops*

## QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:

- *Workers in community service organizations are rarely, if ever, asked to speak about their personal motivations and experiences as the emphasis is placed on those of the people they serve. What is the significance of hearing from the workers about why they do what they do and what their experience is like?*
- *How can community service organizations be convinced to support creative exploration and integrate it as a significant part of their operations?*

Each year in Québec, more than 20,000 women and children victims of domestic violence rely on various services provided by shelters. The 1,500 workers in these safe houses are, however, responding to only 50% of the actual needs. In December 2002, they undertook a series of walkouts to achieve better working conditions. Feeling concerned about this situation and by the silence surrounding domestic violence, Diane Trépanière wondered what she could do as an artist to support the workers' claims and counter the general lack of information about these individuals who work on the front lines of the domestic shelter movement.

In the early planning stages for this project Diane approached two organizations proposing to facilitate writing workshops with shelter workers. The first of her contacts was the Regroupement provincial des maisons d'hébergement et de transition pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale [Provincial coalition of shelters and transition houses for women victims of conjugal violence], which was established in 1979 and which has about 50 associated members. This coalition takes a socio-political feminist approach in their advocacy work. Diane also contacted the Fédération des ressources d'hébergement pour femmes violentées et en difficulté du Québec [Federation of shelters for abused women and women in difficulty in Québec], which has about 40 associated members and which takes a more humanistic approach.





A total of 58 shelters enthusiastically responded to Diana's invitation to get involved in the writing workshops and subsequent publication. Over a five-month period, she traveled 9,700 kilometers across Québec and met with over 300 workers. By way of introduction, Diane began each meeting by presenting photographic work with a sound track playing in the background, which created a climate suitable for introspection. The workers were then asked to respond in writing to a couple of questions: What does it mean for you to be a shelter worker? How do you define a commitment to feminism in 2004? Finally, the workers shared the texts that they wrote. In addition to these texts, *Des pas sur l'ombre* [Footsteps on the shadow],<sup>4</sup> the publication that emerge from these workshops, also includes hundreds of photographs, on the one hand recalling certain contextual elements of Diane trip and, on the other, reflecting the inner process, which offers a view of writing as an act of celebration and self-recognition for this group of individuals dedicated to serving the needs of others.



The book, which was released in May 2004 during the conference organized in recognition of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Regroupement provincial des maisons d'hébergement et de transition pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale, received no funding from the two shelter coalitions involved in the project. The shelters in remote areas, however, provided accommodation for Diane and shared several meals with her. Aside from the financial contribution from LEVIER, Diane received funding from the City of Montréal's Service du développement social et communautaire, and some private donors. In addition, funding for the publication was provided by a grant from the Fondation du 6 décembre contre la violence [The december 6<sup>th</sup> foundation against violence] and pre-publication sales to the participating shelters.

*Des pas sur l'ombre* has contributed to reviving the debate about the increasing levels of violence against women and children. The first person testimonies seem to be more effective in educating the public-at-large than statistics or even descriptions of the conditions of violence that affect so many. This creative experience strengthened the sense of identification and belonging amongst the shelter workers; in the intervening years, some of the shelters workers have decided to facilitate writing workshops amongst shelter residents.

#### NOTES

1. See the presentation of this humanist activist project during the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004), p. 67, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 76-77.
2. The name of this organization was changed in 2009 to the Regroupement des maisons pour femmes victimes de violence conjugale.
3. See also the other projects in which she participated: *Rentrer chez soi*, pp. 184-185, and *Opération : À nous les sarraus*, pp. 218-219.
4. Published by the Éditions du Remue-ménages (Montréal).

Photographic documentation: Diane Trépanière.

# Solstice des thés [Summer solstice teas]

19 cities across  
Québec and Ontario

June — September  
2005

*Facilitating Artists*  
ÉcoSol Québec:  
Alexandre Jolicoeur  
Clotilde Paulin  
David Filion  
Geneviève Delage  
Jean-Baptiste Plouhinec  
Johanna Autin  
Kaven Joyal  
Virginie Guibert

*Festive public awareness project about responsible consumption*

*QUESTIONS RAISED BY THIS PROJECT:*

- *The continued use of fossil fuels is contributing to major environmental problems around the world. What kinds of efforts can be made in the first place by citizens (including artists) to modify individual and collective lifestyles in ways that would drastically reduce the rate of energy consumption?*
- *What artistic strategies are effective in creating intergenerational dialogue about—and practical alliances leading to—social change?*



Dialogue circle, Odanak.

Spontaneous artistic intervention, Kamouraska.







Kiosk for recycled camisoles.

Founded in 2003, ÉcoSol is a Franco-Québec initiative which is trying to invent lifestyle alternatives that are more equitable and environmentally sustainable, rather than passively criticize the social evils of overproduction and over-consumption. In an attempt to achieve concrete changes, ÉcoSol uses an interdisciplinary approach to popular education and integrates interactive media in its programming. All of the choices made by the collective are the result of the participatory management approach that has marked this group's process from the outset and which contributes to an individual and group empowerment. Each of the eight ÉcoSol Québec members are involved in the decision-making, despite the length of time that it takes and the patience it requires.

*Solstice des théés* [Summer solstice teas] consisted of a roving tearoom, which was toured amongst a variety of festivals in Québec during the summer of 2005. The objective of this project was to educate and raise awareness amongst the general public about responsible consumption while offering practical examples. The salon took the form of a tent made with recycled materials within which a comfortable and friendly atmosphere was created. The tent became a place for public exchanges and discussions including hands-on workshops, debates, lectures and activist film screenings.

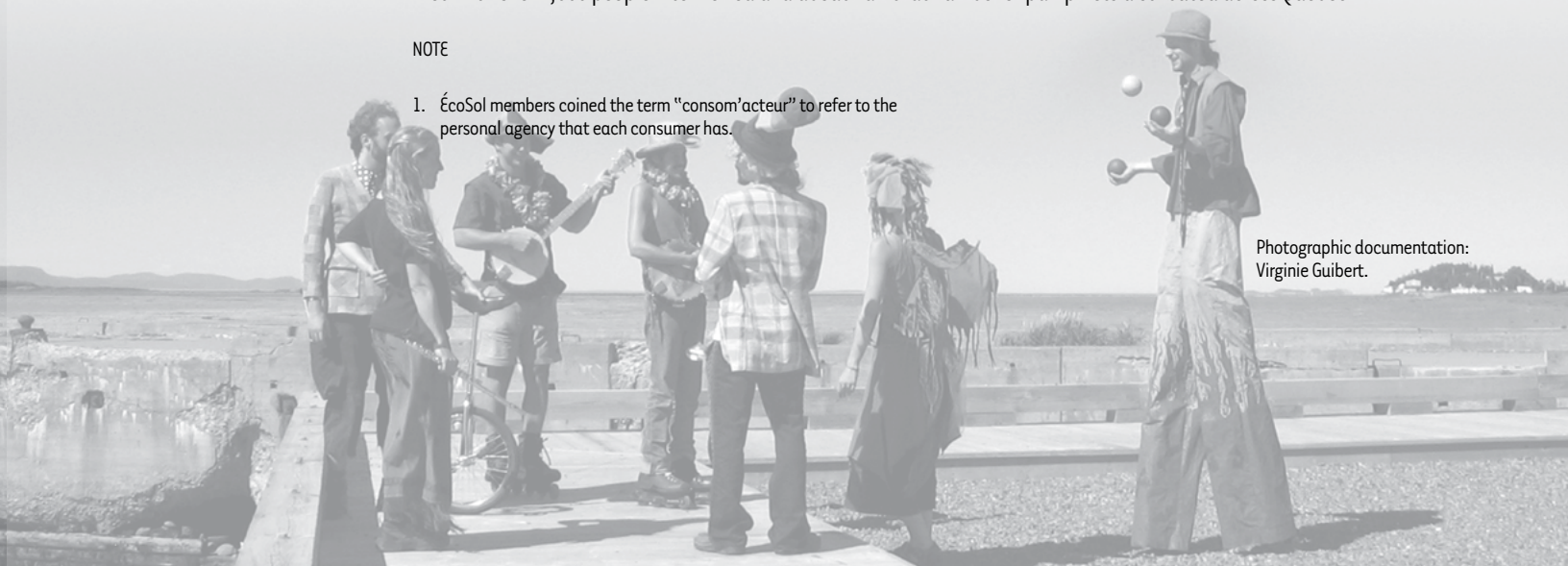
The outskirts of this temporary "housing" installation were set up to include a number of different artistic interventions that added a festive aspect to this project aimed at encouraging conversations about alter-globalization. About 15 people were invited to give lectures or present artistic projects. There was a tea tasting, as well as offerings of fair trade coffees and organic herbal teas produced in Québec.

One particularly important element of this project was the means of transportation used by the members of the ÉcoSol Québec collective to get around: a converted school bus was retrofitted to run on recycled vegetable oil in order for the tour to leave as small an ecological footprint as possible. The choice of such a vehicle provided a practical example of the possibility for environmentally friendly energy alternatives.

It is difficult to know what the long-term social results of such a project are. The members of the ÉcoSol collective who participated in this project were nevertheless able to make a first contact with eight different community organizations and associations, work cooperatives, eco-villages, alternative medical centres and organic farms. ÉcoSol was satisfied with its efforts and considers that its goal of raising awareness amongst the members of the public about their consumer power was met<sup>1</sup> with over 2,000 people interviewed and about half that number of pamphlets distributed across Québec.

#### NOTE

1. ÉcoSol members coined the term "consom'acteur" to refer to the personal agency that each consumer has.

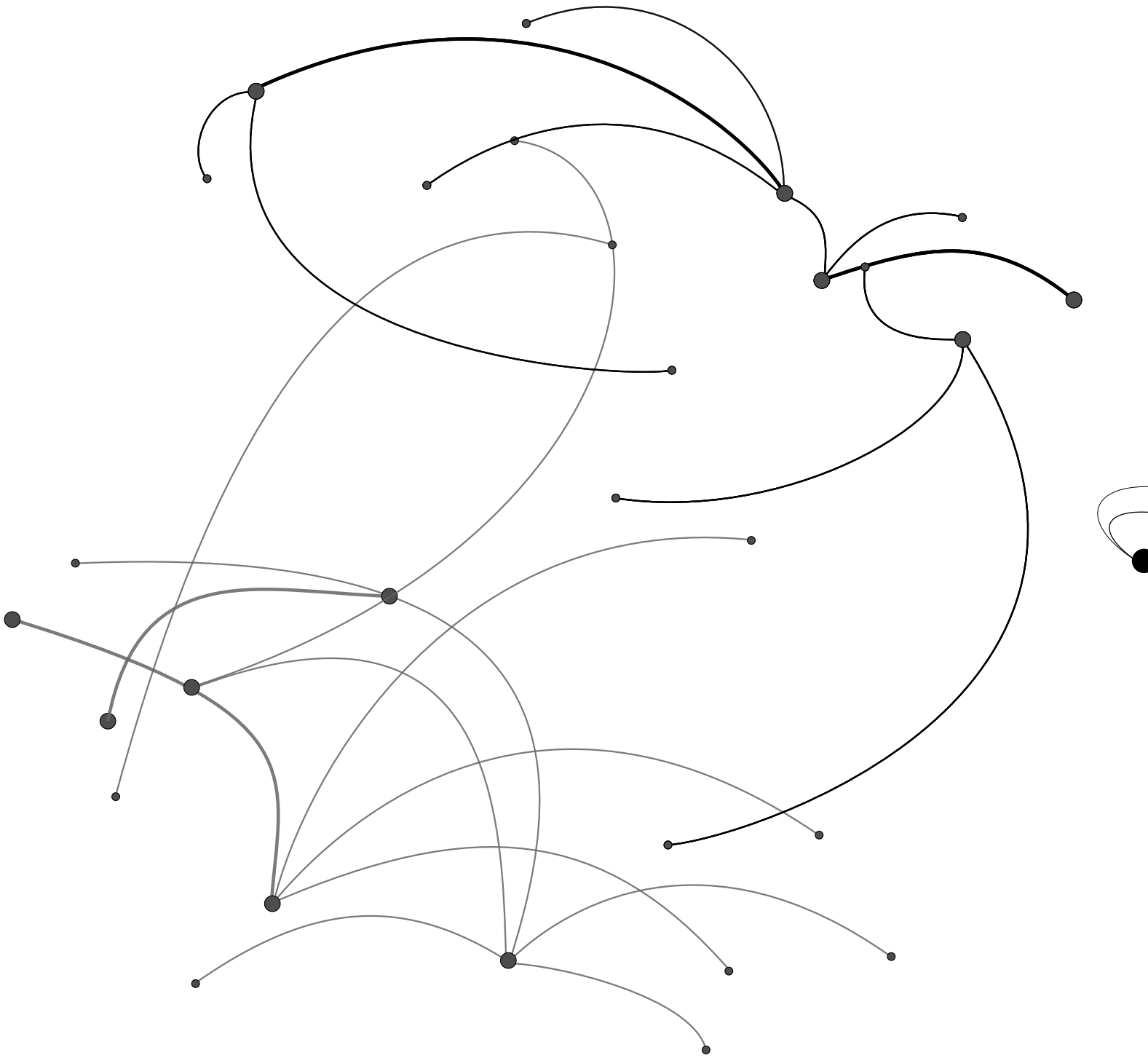


Photographic documentation:  
Virginie Guibert.





# Making Sense of it All





# Introduction

Developing a practice-led critical theoretical foundation linking the ethics and aesthetics of community and humanist activist art has been one of LEVIER's priorities since the beginning. Collaborative art is a process that unfolds within a context of values, ideas and experiences in dialogue with others. This dialogue becomes increasingly complex and ever more satisfying when reflexivity and criticality become an integral part of the process.

*Making Sense of It All* presents theory from the ground up — that is, thoughtful analysis based on a close reading of real-life situations encountered by community and humanist activist art practitioners and the people with whom they collaborate. Each of the nine texts that follow is accompanied by a specific introduction describing how these authors came to contribute to this publication. Overall, the idea for inviting such a diverse set of critical reflections is to link the co-creative and co-emergent reflexive process in such a way as to round out some of the lived experiences and have them continue to be integrative and generative.





In 2002, LEVIER commissioned Caroline Alexander Stevens<sup>1</sup> to research Québec-based community art projects in order to flesh out the local history of community art and contribute to the theoretical framework that LEVIER was aiming to develop. Caroline's preliminary research included the presentation and analysis of five projects, and the report she drafted was nearly 50 pages long.

The following text is an edited and updated version of Caroline's initial document, compiled by Devora Neumark with the author's consent. This revised version refers only to the projects that focused directly on the needs of the community members, an approach that has also been LEVIER's. It should be noted that Caroline conducted interviews only with the facilitating artists<sup>2</sup> and not with the other project members. Over the years, LEVIER has developed a collaborative approach to documentation, one that encourages a collective articulation of the project's history by the project members.

# "How shall I live?"

# "What kind of individuals would we have to become in order to open ourselves to new worlds?"

Collaborative Creative Practice as Social Activism:

Three Québec-based Projects (1997–2000)

Caroline Alexander Stevens

In her novel *Art and Lies*, author Jeanette Winterson repeatedly asks: "How shall I live?"<sup>3</sup> To me, her question is a crucial one. It evokes the poignancy of the ethical with the aesthetics of everyday, using the "language of becoming in which we become responsible for what sustains our being."<sup>4</sup> Coupled with it, I place feminist theorist Drucilla Cornell's query: "What kind of individuals would we have to become in order to open ourselves to new worlds?"<sup>5</sup> This question attests to two core beliefs that guide my thinking about community art. First, that there is a profound interdependence between the personal and the political, and second, that personal and social change is possible. From this position, I want to consider collaborative creative production as a form of social activism within three projects in Québec.

The term *community art* refers to a heterogeneous range of art practices that involve the collaboration of a self-identifying community and artist (or artists) who is either part of that community, or aligns herself with it for purposes of developing a community art project. While communities can be organized around a shared geographic location, traditions or common interest, and most often have an agreed-upon structure, in its current discursive and practical usage the term *community* has also come to stand for groups of individuals who share a social, economic, cultural, or political marginalization, or are dealing with socioeconomic and/or political inequality. Community art projects are often motivated by the desire to address social injustice using collective, creative production as a means toward personal transformation, healing and/or political activism.<sup>6</sup>

Arlene Goldbard remarks that community art seemed to demand constant definition, as if to anyone not directly involved in its practice it was always a novel phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> As Nayo Barbara Malcolm Watkins points out, while there are no neat boxes into which one can fit community art practice, it does have a history.<sup>8</sup> Richard Owen Geer attempts to situate community art practice historically in pre-industrial societies. His argument, although verging dangerously on nostalgia, claims that before the age of national, and later trans-national, telecommunications, communities provided their own forms of communications and entertainment.<sup>9</sup> For Geer, community art served as the social glue, a medium



*Entre nous*, CHSLD Saint-Laurent/Les Cèdres. Photo: Devora Neumark.

through which community autobiography, the teaching of children and defining ceremonies kept communities united through shared cultural meaning.<sup>10</sup> He describes community art practice as being created by the community itself, of or about its concerns, and with the community itself as its primary audience. Rather than creating art stars, as “distant individual points of light surrounded by darkness,” Geer explains that community art meets the expressive and communicative needs of communities.<sup>11</sup>

Writing in 1959, Raymond Williams provided an eloquent intellectual foundation for community art.

Culture is ordinary: That is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact and discovery, writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind.<sup>12</sup>

Community art includes several distinct tendencies – in rhetoric, if not always in practice. In addition to the belief that creativity and the opportunity to make art are already present in individuals and communities, there is an activist and/or pedagogical role for artists who, in

working collaboratively within the community, facilitate the expression of creativity and the articulation of shared social concerns. Whether they come from the community or outside it, such cultural agents must generate sufficient support within a community so as to work collectively, if the project is to come to matter to the participants. Further, the artists ideally do not attempt to speak for a given individual or community but rather supply them with the assistance they need to speak in their own voice.

### *Cultural democracy strives to make accessible the means of artistic production in order to allow individuals or groups to make their own culture*

By the early 1990s, post-colonial theorist Cornel West described one contemporary function of cultural workers, such as community artists, as radical organic catalysts. He portrayed this type of artist as a cultural freedom fighter, a committed and caring intellectual.<sup>13</sup> For West, the new cultural worker came into being simultaneously with a “cultural politics of difference.” A cultural politics of difference was understood as recognition of concrete, localized, and particular historical situations contextualized through a highlighting of their contingent, shifting and ever-changing nature. Inherent in this description is a rejection of abstract, totalizing narratives that in their monolithic, universal, and homogenizing manner have erased diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity. Through a cultural politics of difference, artists were thought to be able to provide creative responses to the precise circumstance of a given situation. They are able to use their skills to align themselves with disorganized, depoliticized and demoralized people in an attempt to empower and enable social action. If possible, they are also able, through their artistic practice, to generate collective insurgency for the growth of democracy.<sup>14</sup>

Largely unacknowledged in the general literature on community art practice is the role that feminist arts in the United States of the 1960s and 1970s had in developing the process and forms of community art activism.<sup>15</sup> The artistic collaborations and feminist communities that developed during this time, such as the performances of Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, the Women’s Action Coalition and Judith Baca’s collaborative murals, to name just a few, served to challenge traditional art practice and art criticism, and provided the ground and theoretical framework for community art activism throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Collaborative community art projects create a place to begin to theorize how, as processes, individual subjectivities and political change are integrally linked. I should like to argue that community art projects create the opportunity – spatial and social – for linking personal and political concerns, and the potential for social activism, through the practice of cultural democracy. This text describes three community art projects that took place in Montréal between 1997 and 2000: Norman Nawrocki<sup>16</sup> and Rhythm Activism's *Le Cirque en Ca\$h: ou rien n'est caché* [The money circus: where nothing is hidden] (1997), a multimedia cabaret that addressed the roots of poverty in urban Montréal and grassroots strategies of resistance used by local residents; *Judéo-Madrigal* [Judaic madrigal] (1997), a polyphonic vocal performance by five former residents of Auberge Shalom...pour femmes, a centre and transitional home for women who are victims of conjugal violence, working with French opera singer, musicologist and composer Hélène Engel,<sup>17</sup> in association with the *Once Upon Our Time* program of the (now defunct) Saidye Bronfman Centre's Youth Program, directed by Devora Neumark; and *Entre nous* [Between us] (1999–2000), comprising 112 seasonally-rotated images created by the residents of the CHSLD Saint-Laurent/Les Cèdres, a residential and long-term care centre for the elderly, and Devora Neumark.

Drawing upon interviews with each of the artists and their responses to a lengthy questionnaire, I argue that each project presents the possibility of affective experiences resulting in agency, thus answering, at least provisionally, two questions: "How shall I live?" and "What kind of individuals would we have to become in order to open ourselves to new worlds?" By privileging the process of collaborative creative production, I am contending that through such subjective transformations, the question "what if?" can set the stage for political activism and social change.

Key to my analysis is a certain premise about identity as theorized between cultural studies, critical pedagogy and feminist theory. In order to construct a framework for understanding community art as a space for activist pedagogy and cultural democracy, identity must be theorized as negotiated, shifting, becoming, and performative, rather than either essential and completely determined or interpolated by external social constructs. To draw upon Homi Bhabha's description of identity as intersubjective, the subject is neither formed completely by "outside" social experience, nor by the "inside" processes of the psyche.<sup>18</sup>

Instead, theorist Susan Stanford Friedman suggests a geography of identity as a historically-embedded site, a positionality, and a network of multiply-situated knowledges. A geography of identity thus has material reality, political urgency and metaphoric resonance – yet, appealing to post-structuralism, it complicates and displaces this material and political "self" and replaces it with multiple "selves," able to contain overlaid positions enveloped in various combinations depending upon location and situation. Thus, incongruity plagues phenomenological experiences of subjectivity, and identity is not only contradictory and multiple, but also relational and situational. Adopting a situational approach to identity enhances efforts to privilege collaborative creative processes. Geography provides a way of conceptualizing how situational identity might be shifted in relation to the environments of creative production as well as by the complexities of art-making processes themselves.

### *Making art can affect the development of a consciousness that questions the separation of production and consumption*

Community art projects, I would argue, indeed comprise a specific type of environment – or learning space – that can be theorized as creating "cultural democracy." Cultural democracy strives to make accessible the means of artistic production in order to allow individuals or groups to make their own culture.<sup>19</sup> This in contrast to the democratization of culture, where previously elite-sanctioned high arts are made accessible through educational programming to the "masses," who in turn, are persuaded, by watching, to gain an appreciation for the fine arts despite differences in class, race, gender, or sexual orientation.<sup>20</sup>

Understanding how cultural democracy can be part of an apparatus of political change necessarily involves a critique of both capitalism and the existing system of democracy, and in turn, these critiques themselves need to be part of the praxis of cultural democracy. Theorist Owen Kelly asserts that capitalism is not restricted to a form of economic organization, but hegemonically permeates consciousness, creating the "fragmented, bewildered, and defeated" subjectivity of consumers. Here, democracy is understood as the freedom to choose between a limited number of products produced elsewhere, and participation is limited to consumption. Making art can affect the development of a consciousness that questions the separation of production and consumption. David Trend likewise contends that the current state of public disaffection and the deterioration of political debate can be seen as resulting in the public's subjectivity as spectators rather than participants, and calls for multiple "publics," where individuals can become actors.<sup>21</sup>



*Le Cirque en Ca\$h.* Photos from a video of the performance in Montréal's Saint-Henri neighbourhood.

### *Le Cirque en Ca\$h: ou rien est caché*

Thus, community art projects aim to facilitate the becoming of individuals or citizens as active participants in their own lives. A dynamic example of creative collaboration is *Le Cirque en Ca\$h: ou rien est caché*, which was initiated by Rhythm Activism, a self-identified theatrical rock 'n' roll cabaret/rebel news orchestra of Sylvain Côté and Norman Nawrocki, along with an ever-changing cast of other musicians. Rhythm Activism, renowned for their high-energy shows and community cabarets dealing with pressing social issues, approached PROUD (People's Rights Over Urban Development) – a Québec-wide, anti-poverty, community coalition of over 125 welfare and tenants' rights groups – and offered to create a project with their co-operation. The show was conceived and created over a period of several months with the help of over 100 residents from the Montréal neighbourhoods of Villeray, Saint-Henri and Centre-Sud, and participating PROUD-member community groups, the Comité Social Centre-Sud [The South-centre social committee], the Comité Logement Centre-Sud [The South-centre housing committee], Alert Centre Saint-Henri [Saint-Henri alert centre], POPIR Saint-Henri, and the Association des locataires de Villeray [Villeray tenants' association]. The collaboration culminated in three public performances on November 27, December 3 and December 4, 1997. The shows received enthusiastic reviews in both the local and international press.

For Nawrocki, the motivation to create *Le Cirque en Ca\$h* through a collaborative community-based process stemmed from his desire to create an original, entertaining, relevant show that would stimulate people living with severely limited economic means to recognize and understand the larger social and political reasons for their poverty, so that they can empower themselves to take steps to fight back. From his own artistic experiences, and those with Rhythm Activism, Nawrocki felt the emotional experience of participating in a creative endeavour would provide community residents with the opportunity to contribute their energy, passion, and insight to the show as they developed a concrete sense of accomplishment, fantastic memories, and, potentially, some new ideas about what they could do both as creative individuals and political actors. Further, the performance would demonstrate to the larger public that an anti-poverty circus had something to contribute, politically and artistically, to an understanding of the issues.

The performance itself was a frenetic assemblage of original contemporary circus music provided by the Elephant Orchestra, audience sing-along songs (words were provided in the programs), acrobats, jugglers, clowns, actors, and choreographed dancers. Throughout, some two dozen scripted mini-narratives, monologues, and sketches with diverse political messages formed part of the spectacle on stage. For instance, at one point a woman – different local neighbourhood activists depending on the location – came onto the stage from the audience and began to talk about free-trade global shifts in manufacturing in Third World countries with little labour or environmental legislation. The woman kicked a bank machine for denying her deposit of a \$37 paycheque, which the machine deemed too small, and then recounted a long list of factories that were once the lifeblood of the neighbourhood but are now gone: Redpath, Robin Hood, Sherwin-Williams, Northern Telecom, etc. The list changed with each neighbourhood. Other acts included a tightly-choreographed number where dancers and their mops waltzed to the office-cleaning blues, and a dream sequence with menacingly large dancing Hydro and phone bills accompanied by an equally gigantic box of Kraft Dinner.

Nawrocki is careful to acknowledge that Rhythm Activism had no illusions that *Le Cirque en Ca\$h* as a performance, nor the communities' participation within its creative production (contributing at different stages to the texts, songs, storyline, costume design, visuals, staging, choreography, etc.), would change the actual economic or social conditions of the people involved. Rather, it was anticipated, based on past experience and familiarity with the creative process, that participants could conceivably feel inspired and possibly want to continue exploring ways to use the creativity and newly-acquired skills in their other work. "We don't need to teach our audiences about poverty because they live it... but what we're trying to do is to popularize radical ideas that people don't have access to in the mainstream media."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, for community art projects to function as cultural democracy, they need to be organized so that, in addition to specific affects and material results, the overall effect is one of increased competence for the participants, a conscious realization that this competence has been achieved, and a politicization of personal subjectivities. Working collectively with communities, even on humanitarian grounds with so-called marginalized communities, is not sufficient justification for the project of cultural democracy. A lack of political motivation results in a patronizing relationship where participants are treated as patients who can be helped to overcome their deficiencies through art-making, while nothing is done to challenge the hegemonic systems in which they are positioned and in which they position themselves.<sup>23</sup>





*Le Cirque en Ca\$h*: The Master of Ceremonies and "Money Man," Jean-Yves Joannette. Photo: Michel Laplante.

In describing the process of creating *Le Cirque en Ca\$h*, Nawrocki acknowledges that the project was made possible only through the hard work, clear sense of purpose and unbelievable support from the communities directly concerned. Finding groups who were interested in participating was a long and complex process that involved canvassing different groups, sending out letters, making phone calls and, more importantly, gaining the confidence and trust of the organizations themselves. Artists' involvement in community organizations is not easily negotiated. Despite the almost always best intentions of creative endeavours, community organizations with little time and resources are often hesitant to contribute either to artistic projects proposed by individuals, or to collectives from outside their community. Understandable as this situation may be, it creates the need for artists to demonstrate, from the outset, the usefulness of their contribution to the organization and its participants, and to work hard to make real and tangible links with the community. In the case of *Le Cirque en Ca\$h*, Rhythm Activism's long history of community-involved, radical cabarets in Québec, and the different groups' shared investment in defending and advocating tenants' rights and the rights of the people living in poverty, helped to create the solid base of commitment needed to get the process underway.

Once this support was secured, Rhythm Activism formed a consultative committee of interested group members from three different Montréal neighbourhoods – people who were mostly unemployed or on welfare – who outlined the issues they wanted addressed, the kind of stories to relate, and the range of solutions and alternatives to present on stage. Rhythm Activism met regularly with the consultative committee to determine the content and focus of the show, and to arrange interviews with community members in soup kitchens and drop-in centres in order to solicit stories and determine whom among them wanted to "join the circus." The proposed script was critiqued over and over and rewritten several times until everyone was satisfied with the final result. Rhythm Activism then put out a call to the general artistic community to ask for volunteers to participate in the circus. The entire group met and rehearsed, and everyone shared the workload as volunteers. It is important to note that although Rhythm Activism made funding applications to the federal, provincial, and municipal levels of government, they received no government funding for the production of *Le Cirque en Ca\$h*. Instead, minimal financing ended up being provided through the fundraising efforts of the community groups and participants themselves.

*Le Cirque en Ca\$h* was incredibly ambitious in scale, taking place in – and more importantly, with – three different communities. Working simultaneously with three different communities to create three separate shows was important to Nawrocki because of the scope and scale of poverty in Montréal. Addressing it as an isolated factor – either geographically or socially – would have been to misrecognize the pervasiveness and similarity of the problems communities faced, as well as a missed opportunity to build upon and share potential strategies of resistance. "We wanted to involve the people directly concerned to make the show more effective, and because we believe this crazy idea of involving this many people in the project would multiply the possibilities of producing a fabulous show."<sup>24</sup>

However, this enormous scale made ongoing relations between Rhythm Activism and all the other participants almost overwhelming. Nawrocki recounts the unending meetings, calls, rehearsals, discussions and organizing needed, calling the process a "very, very, demanding project."<sup>25</sup> Rhythm Activism's artistic and pedagogical approach to working collaboratively was to motivate and affirm individual participants and community groups, all the while assuring them that they could participate effectively in the process and the final staged productions. Given that the project was a circus creation, labour within the process was divided into logical, autonomous work groups: the Elephant Orchestra consisted of the musicians and the musical director Sylvain Côté; the dancers were organized by choreographer Sebastian Yeung; the jugglers, acrobats and clowns worked by themselves; the actors first rehearsed separately (within their own community) before getting together with the actors from each of the other communities to continue the rehearsal process; and the props and set people worked independently. Finally the cumbersome, multi-armed whole came together one week before the first show to rehearse as a united, cohesive group.

This method of working provided a great deal of choice for the individuals and groups of participants. Because of the number of people involved and the collective spirit of production, there were constant revisions of the script, the choreography, and the staging: rewrites of the texts happened until just hours before – and even after – each of the three shows. Aesthetic choices were made through what Nawrocki describes as a very loose group process involving the team immediately responsible for each part of the production. Makeup artists, set designers, costume-makers and clowns were encouraged to make their own choices in keeping with the general overview of the project. This process was multi-layered, lengthy, and not without much discussion. Any disagreements or differences of opinion (which, given the large number of participants, were to be expected), were dealt with through ad hoc discussion rather than through a formal process. However, ethical considerations during the creative process were paramount: everyone involved was to be respected, and so too were the goals of the project. Says Nawrocki: “This was also the nature of our work, how we work, and how we expect others to work.”<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately, *Le Cirque en Ca\$h* was possible because, in Nawrocki’s estimation, each of the community groups were already “fun-loving, justice-seeking, well-organized, committed, caring, effective groups of people, without whom, this city – and Québec – would be worse off.”<sup>27</sup> In turn, the people who participated earned a great deal of well-deserved respect for their courage, their talent and their perseverance. “It is not easy to mount the stage and perform in front of several hundred people, among them your neighbours, friends and family.”<sup>28</sup> In terms of its potential political impact, the performance reached a few thousand people who attended the shows (indeed the performances were standing-room-only, with hundreds being turned away at the door because of space and safety limitations), and thousands more made aware of the message of the show thanks to extensive media coverage. If the project were to be repeated, Nawrocki recognizes the need for better documentation, including working differently with documentary filmmakers to record the project from start to finish. Although two filmmakers were involved in *Le Cirque en Ca\$h*, they did not share an understanding of what the purpose of the process and project was, and so abandoned the work. Nawrocki managed to retrieve the footage that was filmed and would ultimately like to produce a filmic record of *Le Cirque en Ca\$h*.

*Art provides a venue for social activism that avoids many of the internal political limitations of other purely politically-oriented types of movements*

Nawrocki recounts his personal experience through the project as “one big blur of fatigue, joy, frustration, anxiety, tension, and relief.”<sup>29</sup> I would propose that this type of participation in collaborative creative processes, and the choices this participation entail, can provide an experience of “affect” in which individuals can come to conceive of themselves as potential agents able to act upon their subjective desire. Cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg hypothesizes that feelings of “affect” enable people as potential political activists and create the ground for social change. In defining affect as “the feeling of life,” he explains:

Affect always defines the quantitatively variable level of energy or volition; it determines how invigorated we feel in particular moments of our lives. It defines the strength of our investment in particular experiences, practices, identities and meaning, and pleasures... But affect is also defined qualitatively, by the inflection of the particular investment, by the nature of the concern in the investment, by the way in which the specific event is made to matter to us.<sup>30</sup>

For Grossberg, it is because of affect that one persistently struggles to care about something, to locate the energy to survive, to sustain the passion needed to imagine different possibilities, and to take action. Theoretically, individuals can thus experience agency, whereby they feel they have some degree of control over their lives as well as the ability to enact change. As an affective experience to be invested in, collaborative artistic production offers the resources that may be mobilized into forms of social activism, popular struggle, resistance and opposition.

## *Judéo-Madrigal*

As potentially profound affective experiences, community art projects can possibly tease out connections between what is perceived as an isolated individual experience and larger social and political structures. *Judéo-Madrigal* was a collaborative community art project created under the auspices of the one-year Artist-in-Community program hosted by the Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts' Youth Institute, in association with Auberge Shalom... pour femmes, a centre and transitional home run under the auspices of the National Council of Jewish Women of Canada for women victims of conjugal violence and their dependent children. With assistance from the Federation Combined Jewish Appeal's Canadian Commission on Jewish Identity and Continuity, the program was aimed at developing a cultural project related to a Jewish theme and involving the greater Montreal Jewish and non-Jewish public.

Five former residents of Auberge Shalom teamed up with singer/composer Hélène Engel to work through their individual emotional experiences of abuse in a space of shared witness. The collaborative process, which took place over several months in the spring of 1997, explored the musical form of the madrigal that was developed in Italy in the Middle Ages and made popular during the Renaissance. The madrigal is a vocal form composed for four to six singers and traditionally set to short love poems. It is characterized by harmonic and rhythmic contrasts, each line having its own turn, rather than the entire composition having a single tune with harmonic accompaniment.

To describe the madrigal, Engel invokes the metaphor of a necklace: while for typical music, all voices are the box that holds the precious necklace of the soprano melody, in a madrigal each voice is itself a necklace. For her, the equality of each voice, of each woman, was paramount to the project and to her choice of the madrigal. Creatively, she aspired to explore this form further using many voices, a polyphonic composition. Concomitantly, she wanted to work collaboratively, and to jointly investigate the coming-together of different experiences from different places.

## *Community art projects possess the potential for envisioning a different future and for creating alternative realities*

In terms of the social context, Engel's project was motivated by the desire to create a socially integrative experience wherein everyone could form relationships with one another through the creative process.<sup>31</sup> For Engel, using art as a strategy of public engagement is a necessarily transformative experience, what she refers to as "a sacred place of play."<sup>32</sup> Art is the symbolic expression of concrete problems and provides a way of acting upon problems or issues. In her view, it also provides a venue for social activism that avoids many of the internal political limitations of other purely politically-oriented types of movements. With reference to her own past involvement with political activism, she states: "I fear mass movements, so making art with small groups of people is more in keeping with my values."<sup>33</sup> She continues to explain that the affective possibilities of art are related to its connection to the individual and to individual expression, rather than to the will of the majority. In her estimation, art – more often than political militancy – welcomes minority and difference.

Specifically as regards the women who participated in this project, Engel believes in the productive power of art as a vehicle for the release of the anger about the violence perpetrated against them. She recognizes that the participants in the project did not necessarily join with political aspirations; rather, their lives had positioned them in such a way that they had to become activists in their own lives. Engel explains that the women began the project with feelings of longing, bitterness and sadness and, while she wanted to encourage their self-compassion, she also wanted to support their desire to move beyond the self-recrimination so common in victims of abuse. As it turns out, one of Engel's great discoveries as an artist was the emergence of anger as a step in the healing process; it appeared when the women discovered that what they did really pleased them. The artistic project provided the group with an individual and collective space of expression and functioned to temporarily distract focus from the abuse.

The specific parameters of *Judéo-Madrigal* began when Engel answered a call for submissions for the project. Before writing the project proposal, Engel engaged in a period of long personal reflection and then held several meetings with Devora Neumark and personnel from Auberge Shalom. An independent jury, whose members included artists, community activists and cultural workers, then selected the project that was subsequently presented to potential participants – all ex-residents of the women's shelter. At the beginning of the process, ten women agreed to participate, and five continued through to the final performance. The project itself was structured into 12 weekly sessions that took place on Sundays in an allocated space



Sheet music created by the members of the project *Judéo-Madrigal*, Auberge Shalom... pour femmes.

at the Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts. The performance of the final piece was held initially within the shelter itself, with a second performance, open to the public, but in the form of a recorded version of the madrigal and the voluntary participation of only two of the women, who elected to speak about their experiences.<sup>34</sup>

As a narrative armature for the musical composition, Engel began the early sessions by sharing with the other women what she knew about the 23 different females mentioned in the Hebrew Bible from Hagar and Deborah to Rachel and Miriam. The participants were then asked to each choose one character with whom they identified. Engel's intention was for the women to use the stories of the biblical characters to develop links with their own experiences, and thus maybe gain insight and wisdom for themselves. In retrospect, Engel believes that these links were indeed relevant and fruitful for the women's self-affirmation process.

The group proceeded to improvise based on their chosen characters, developing dialogues with and for each one. With these improvisations, the women — only one of whom was Jewish — took pleasure in conversing with the scriptures. The improvisations were then used as a basis for developing individual melodies, in close collaboration between Engel and each of the other participants, alternating between English and French. For example, *Rachel* sings: "I want to give a lot of love / I let it flow yet I feel so unsatisfied," while *Mrs. Noah* (Engel's own chosen character) sings, "Ma vie, c'est la vaisselle, la cuisine, la poubelle, la lessive, le ménage; je n'ai pas de nom, je n'ai pas d'âge [My life is the dishes, the cooking, taking out the garbage, the laundry, the cleaning; I don't have a name and my age is unknown]."<sup>35</sup>

Each session was audiotaped. The group began with a welcoming song, then the women proceeded to become their characters and to sing improvised situations. While some of the women came to the project with the confidence and ability to sing, others did not. For Engel, lack of experience or skill was not a problem; she wanted each woman to express herself vocally as best she could. After each session, Engel would listen to the tapes on her own and work with the audio files. When she found what she thought was an interesting phrase, she would isolate it and bring it to the next session for discussion. After four weeks, she recorded music using a synthesizer so as to remove any dissonance. The women initially had difficulty believing that the recording was of their own voices and collaborative work, until Engel revealed the sequence of production by playing back the tapes one by one.

That moment changed the dynamic of the group and their working process, shifting the women's overriding feelings of lack and longing to a recognition of strength and presence: from the sentiment "I want to be loved" to "I am here." Engel recognizes this moment as a change in subjectivity: from victim to agent. In this instance — when, as described above, powerful feelings of anger emerged — the women recognized themselves as the creators of something beautiful. Engel refers to this subjective change as the "waking of a sleeping artist."<sup>36</sup>

After this point, the structure of the sessions changed and became more focused. The sessions continued, with half the time devoted to improvisations, the other to creating and rehearsing for the performance. As an artist, Engel saw her role as a facilitator and coach. At times she would suggest changes to the piece; sometimes the women agreed and sometimes they did not. While at times the women had difficulty expressing to Engel what they wanted to happen with the song artistically, Engel found herself frequently challenged by the content of the material that the women were providing. The collaboration evolved with the score being continually revised. With each change the women would learn the new song. Towards the end of the series of sessions, along with the improvisations and rehearsals, the group researched and created their costumes for the performance.

Group dynamics between Engel and the other women, and among the ex-residents of Auberge Shalom themselves, were complicated. Only two of the ex-residents knew each other before the beginning of the project. The "stranger" factor and



the anxiety related to embarking on a new creative project gave rise to a situation that some of the participants related to with fear. By the end, 50 percent of the group had dropped out, although the difficulty in the quotidian lives of women dealing with the legacy of conjugal violence may explain, at least in part, the high attrition rate. Ethically, Engel maintains that it was important to her to never assume a position of superiority relative to the other women participants and yet, at the same time, she is aware that there were differences in what she brought to the project and what the others brought. She elaborates by explaining that her goals and the goals of the others were not always identical. While the other participants were profoundly engaged in a healing process that was both very real and very raw, Engel was focused on shaping a productive, creative collaboration and a satisfying aesthetic product. She felt that it was her responsibility to make sure the other participants would not be put in a position where they were being asked to make aesthetic choices they did not have the skills to make, as this would, in her opinion, ultimately have served to discourage the other women rather than have the effect of self-empowerment. They did, however, choose to give their approval or not to Engel's selections and indeed actively demanded aesthetic changes right up until the performance. The other participants also had complete control over the content and narrative of the madrigal, including how much of their own personal experience they chose to disclose.

Differences within the group and conflict resolution strategies revolved around the idea that everyone had a rightful place within the collaborative creative process. For the most part, the "majority rules" approach was not applied. Thus, negotiations were ongoing and out in the open; in fact, they were highlighted as part of the productive process inherent in creativity. For her part, Engel tried to remain flexible and open to constructive criticism. Unpacking and teasing out the challenges encountered can provide both the participants in the project (including of course the facilitating artist), and those who found out about it afterwards and from outside the process, with the information necessary to begin to conceive of alternative methods and solutions that, ideally and ultimately, would help to develop community art practice. Nevertheless, to do so, to render oneself so vulnerable to criticism, is a major step towards an ethics of being, necessary for an ethics of community art.

Audio and video recordings of the performance were distributed to each of the group members (including Engel), with the Auberge Shalom keeping a copy as well. In Engel's opinion, the project was a success. She thinks that the artistic value of the product was satisfactory. She does not feel that this work was authored by her, and therefore does not assume that she has the authority to share it with an external audience. However, the process profoundly changed Engel's life and, she suspects, affected the other participants in positive ways. She recalls her own journey, beginning with her trepidation surrounding the collaboration and its concomitant responsibilities. Engel remarks upon her surprise at the solidarity and support she witnessed, once the project was completed, among the other participants, amongst whom she observed more assertiveness and a "blooming in terms of their personal appearance and communication."<sup>37</sup>

### *To render oneself so vulnerable to criticism is a major step towards an ethics of being, necessary for an ethics of community art*

In Engel's estimation, the project provided the participants with a space to focus on their own creative potential and, through their shared experience, to begin to problematize some of the larger oppressive social structures that engender and sustain domestic violence. Community art is thus being positioned as a "new political space." This concept, originally articulated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, advocates that the definition of the political be expanded to include (among many) the dynamic domain of cultural practices, thereby giving new vitality to democratic principles.<sup>38</sup> Community art projects as new political spaces demand access to the means of cultural production and distribution, as community art contends that art-making itself is a political and politicizing space.

Indeed, it is important to specify that, taken as critical or activist pedagogy, theories of cultural democracy do not claim that art objects are political in and of themselves, but rather that the processes of production — connecting learning and research, cultural contexts and political economy, people with structures, and the critical with the creative — are all methods of contesting confounding hegemonic patterns of alienation and fragmentation.<sup>39</sup> Similar to Paulo Freire's concepts of education — where the development of a critical consciousness is dialectical, coming out of a process of critical dialogue and praxis, or action and reflection<sup>40</sup> for and about cultural democracy — critical thought is situated in, and understood through, a lived experience of art-making. For this to be most effective, it is necessary to direct creative momentum towards personal change and social criticism, while not depoliticizing the context of production.



*Entre nous*, CHSLD Saint-Laurent/Les Cèdres. Photo: Devora Neumark.

### *Entre nous*

Attempting to understand community art demands a careful consideration of both the ethics and the aesthetics of the collective production of art. What are the ethics of collaboration when engaging in aesthetic production, given the affective character of artistic creation and the potential power differentials between participants? Should the ethics of community practice be considered as an integral part of its aesthetic, and, if so, how can the aesthetics of a work be perceived as ethical practice? In tandem, can the qualities of aesthetic production be read as an ethical practice and as a forum for community activism? How do we understand, appreciate and write about the aesthetics of a work that is collaboratively produced and process-based? Finally, what social role is being prescribed for artists and, indeed, for art? Theorizing the interlinked questions of ethics and aesthetics of community art is necessary if community art practice is to be made sense of within its present social, political, and cultural context.

*Entre nous* entails 112 seasonally-rotated images created by the residents<sup>41</sup> of the CHSLD Saint-Laurent/Les Cèdres — a residential and long-term care centre for the elderly — in collaboration with Devora Neumark. Installed in groups of 28, the mounted pictures alternate between the participants' drawings — of mountains, birds, home life, etc. — and Neumark's photographs of the participants' hands holding the objects they deemed to be their most precious — a ceramic Virgin Mary and baby Jesus figurine, a bread crumb, a photograph, a guitar, etc. The project was created between November 1999 and March 2000, under the auspices of the Québec government's Secrétariat de l'intégration des arts à l'architecture, ministère de la Culture et des Communications [Secretariat for the integration of art into architecture, Ministry of culture and communications] 1% program.<sup>42</sup>

The collaboration entailed five stages, beginning with a series of storytelling circles followed by individual meetings between Neumark and each of the storytellers. Then, visiting participants in their personal living space, Neumark photographed them one by one holding what they described as their most significant object. The third stage was a series of twice-weekly drawing workshops, held over a three-month period in which many of the story circle participants, as well as new individuals, came together to draw and paint the images that would eventually become part of the four sets of seasonal groupings. Stage four was the selection, photographic development and mounting of the works. Stage five was the first installation and launch of the protocol that had been negotiated and agreed upon between Neumark and the CHSLD Saint-Laurent/Les Cèdres that combines the seasonal rotation of the images with a community gathering and story-circle.<sup>43</sup>



*Entre nous*, CHSLD Saint-Laurent/Les Cèdres.  
Photo: Devora Neumark.

Community art projects possess the potential for envisioning a different future and for creating alternative realities. They present the possibility of what theorist Angelika Bammer has termed an “anticipatory consciousness,” where individuals possess the ability to imagine better worlds.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the construction of new narratives is a motivated, rather than neutral, form of representation: as Natalie Zemon Davis has articulated, “Stories set up a special space for themselves with their ‘once upon a time,’ they are an economic instrument for making a point.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, as Susan Stanford Friedman has pointed out: “People know who they are through the stories they tell about themselves and others.” Further, she details how, through storytelling, individuals use memory, reflexivity and engagement with others to acquire a sense of self.<sup>46</sup> *Entre nous* participants were invited into a dynamic process within which the construction of new narratives of self and other was core to the experience of creating the artwork that continues to be on display in the public meeting space of the care facility.

Neumark’s motivation to pursue a community art project with the residents of these elder-care residential facilities was her desire to connect with individuals from the same generation as her grandparents, to learn from their stories and to hear how they think of themselves and consider their lives in the face of old age. She was also guided by the belief that public art is public not just because it is in accessible “public” spaces, but because it is participatory. Therefore, she wanted to create the opportunity for individuals to make significant and meaningful contributions, and to have these contributions witnessed and validated through the installation of a permanent artwork that they themselves created. Thus, participation and active listening were integral to each stage of her process – from the storytelling circles to the workshops and collective presentations in which the individuals who created the work presented it to the members of their community – affirming throughout the participants’ sense of their own capacities and continued civic relevance.

Neumark, exploring how one could tell their life’s story through images and objects, used storytelling as a way for participants to communicate what mattered most to them, while deliberately creating a space for grief and mourning, celebration and connection. Within this space, any and all emotional responses were accepted, and the work then became a conscious choice of what to make evident. For Neumark, photographing the participants’ hands, their precious objects (in a place where so much of their material life had by necessity

been left behind) and their handiwork – their drawings – could invite a sense of welcome, participation, and home from among the participants and future residents of the CHSLD Saint-Laurent/Les Cèdres. For Neumark, creating a public artwork for the common space of a long-term facility without the active participation of the people living there seemed senseless. She explains: “Anything else serves as decoration, which can be quite lovely and even meaningful to some, but does little to encourage civic agency and a sense of belonging.”<sup>47</sup> For her, creativity is transformative. The process, which she facilitated, allowed each participant to feel accepted and engaged with the level of personal transformation they were capable of, and willing to deal with. It enabled them to feel that they were part of something larger than themselves, and their participation helped them validate their communal inclusion and, in some cases, their lives.

For Neumark, the process is a significant part of the project. While the 112 final images matter – given that their permanent installation can provide a sense of witness to the agency and accomplishment of the participants – the process of how they got there and the fact that they change cyclically, thus providing a context for a seasonal celebration for residents and visitors – is what makes the work particularly meaningful. They are the aesthetic markers of a practice of ethics in which Neumark used collaborative creative processes to affirm and facilitate the feelings, thoughts, creativity and lives of the participants.

The struggle between affirming the process and evaluating the product, between the ethics and aesthetics, is a recurrent theme in recent community art discourse. The debate was played out in tandem with Neumark’s project when, unbeknownst to her, there was a challenge reaching all the way to the ministerial level about the validity of community art practice, and this project specifically, within the definition of the 1% program. Expert witnesses were called in to testify and, in the end, the minister responsible for the 1% program agreed with the jury that community-based collective art creation was valid and approved it as part of the legal definition of public art. Addressing the debate and the place of her project within it, Neumark states:



*Entre nous*, CHSLD Saint-Laurent/Les Cèdres. Photo : Devora Neumark.

As an artist I wanted to make a space for collective collaboration to be sanctioned as “public art” under the 1% program. I also wanted to participate in making a work that would reflect in its content and structure the significance of personal storytelling for the individuals involved and as part of a communal holding ground. I wanted to share with the other participants the growing sense of capacity, pride and self-authorization that often accompanies the telling of one’s own life story (aurally and visually) so that the agora would be enlivened as a true public space – that it would no longer be seen as simply a physical location but a space in which individuals could assume and affirm their collective belonging. I wanted the families of the other participants to have a sense of the significance of their relatives’ lives – that each life does matter and the traces are manifest. I wanted the public art policy in Québec to be altered so that collective creative practice is created and received by the community itself and in the larger frame of the “art world” to be considered rigorous and accomplished.<sup>48</sup>

Creating *Entre nous* under the rubric of the 1% program necessitated that Neumark follow certain guidelines concerning control over the aesthetics of the work. For instance, it was she who had the final accountability over choosing which works would be included, and it was she who acted as the photographer – framing the images of the participants with their chosen objects. She describes a certain unease with this position of authority within the collaboration, seeing as all of the work was produced through the active participation of the residents and day-centre participants, based on their own lives, experiences, objects, memories and stories.

Indeed, when considering the aesthetics of a community artwork, one must grapple with questions of collaboration in terms of who produced what, while also examining the nature or quality of the collaboration – how was the process of collective production negotiated? What are the ethics of relationship within the collaborative creative process? From its inception, Neumark was aware of the necessity of communication with, and support among and for, all individuals participating in the project in any way. During the proposal preparation, her initial meetings with the representatives of each institution were crucial. After a number of discussions with each of the representatives, during which mutual agreements about the structure, content and organization of the project were formed, she could not conceive of submitting a project without the residents’ active participation.

Once the project was chosen and approved, she worked with the personnel and volunteers of both institutions to select the individuals. Neumark was open to working with any and all residents. Many of the participants were living with dementia and Alzheimer-induced memory and sensory perception disorders. Others were blind or hard of hearing, or had mobility



restrictions. By the time Neumark actually sat with the first story-circle, she had firmly established a relationship and a presence in the community among the staff, volunteers, residents, and even family members in some cases.

Many individuals who participated in the various stages of the project did not know each other at the outset. Their involvement offered them the opportunity to form connections and, in some instances, strong bonds of friendship. Those who did know each other before the project discovered new aspects of the other participants as they joined together to hone their creative skills and develop new capacities.

Neumark reports that, during the project, many of the participants faced their own challenges as they came to terms with the meaning and significance of their participation. She discusses her careful negotiation of process and interpersonal relationships:

Given that this is also their home, I felt it was a delicate balance of boundaries between familiarity and autonomy. Each person was affirmed in their own choice of how much or little they wanted to participate in the process and also in the telling and presentation of their work. While I couldn't quite anticipate all the effects, I was particularly moved by the sense of pride created in the sharing and witnessing of the individual and collective progress.<sup>49</sup>

Working collaboratively with the residents required a great deal of patience and compassion, especially when the depth of meaning became so profound that participants needed to withdraw from the process (sometimes repeatedly) until they once more felt able to proceed. Neumark notes also that the staff and volunteers — who were not aware of, and did not have the experience of, how powerful creative practice can be — were not always able to anticipate the changes in the participants' daily lives that would be engendered by the affect of the creative process.

*Such projects can and must be viewed as facilitating social engagement by actively including individuals in the creation of their spatial, emotional, cultural and social environments*

Neumark herself recognized her own need for support throughout the process. She invokes John Ralston Saul's publication, entitled *On Equilibrium*,<sup>50</sup> in which the author equates ethics to a muscle that needs daily exercise to be healthy.

Ethical considerations concerning my interpersonal relations and the nature of the art process itself were sometimes lived as not more than a flexing of one muscle and sometimes experienced as a serious workout. The consequences of this process in the lives of the individual participants and their families, as in my own, are many and meaningful. How much did this process matter? What did this process evoke? How was it therapeutic? Connecting? Disturbing? Challenging? How much was mine to care for? How much responsibility could and would each individual take on? What degree of accountability can you expect with someone who cannot remember that the person sitting next to them is their wife? What are the limits of the artist's role? What are healthy parameters and conditions to nurture in this kind of work?<sup>51</sup>

For Neumark, the success of the project lives in two distinct yet related places, "one fixed, and one unfolding in time."<sup>52</sup> She notes the accomplishment of the participants in creating the work and hopes it persists as a catalyst for community celebrations with each seasonal transition — something she continued to participate in during the first year's cycle of image rotation/storytelling. Reflecting upon what she felt that she and the other participants gained through their participation in the project, Neumark states:

Mostly a sense of courage to find out about the places which scare us, and sit long enough in the shadow of those places until we find out that they too are part of us and what we call home. Whether it was a woman who refused to have her favourite object photographed until she found and made a sense of inner peace and resolve with her God and then died a week after the picture was taken; the man who sobbed week after week as he painted the mountain from the memories of his childhood home in the Swiss Alps; the woman who revealed the story of her artistic career cut short by her artist husband jealous of her talent with each hesitant brushstroke and oxygen-assisted breath; the participant who, over the course of repeatedly painting what seemed like abstract shapes,

came to name one of the orbs as the stick that her abuser used on her in early childhood beatings or, or, or, each of us came face to face with our own vulnerabilities, pleasures, delights and fears and let them be witnessed and made present in the stories shared and in the drawings and photographs created.<sup>53</sup>

Neumark wishes to foster more collaborative creative processes, both her own and those of others, where committed, carefully planned and participatory processes at every level are given the opportunity, including the necessary amount of time, proper funding, and human resources, to shift the understanding of what art is and can be. At the same time, such projects can and must be viewed as facilitating social engagement by actively including individuals in the creation of their spatial, emotional, cultural and social environments.

## Towards a Conclusion: Linking Personal Transformation and Social Change

Community art processes enable a linking of personal transformation and social change. As a practice, they recognize that activism does not happen only in the political or social sphere, but rather that any concern one wants to make manifest in the world requires an a priori conscious attention to address such issues as they echo and take hold within oneself. Susan Krieger argues for the necessity of understanding the self in order to produce an understanding relative to the subject of study. She articulates: "We see others as we know ourselves. If the understanding of the self is limited and unyielding to change, the understanding of the other is as well. If the understanding of the self is harsh, uncaring and not generous to all the possibilities for being a person, the understanding of the other will show this."<sup>54</sup> For all who participate in community art projects, the creative process can be personally empowering, allowing individuals to experience parts of themselves that may be closed off elsewhere in their lives. By their very nature, artistic practices have a potential for opening up and offering solutions and possibilities, because they always operate within the realm of the creative, asking "what if?" — a subjective space where one can wonder, "What kind of individuals would we have to become in order to open ourselves to new worlds?" As Kenneth L. Ames claims: "It is neither quaint nor passé to think that art and ethics, art and morality, art and spirituality might be linked. While art itself need not be explicitly ethical, moral or spiritual, a society's definition of art, its uses of art, and its hierarchy of arts, all provide valuable, if often unintended, testimony to its ethics, morality and spiritual state."<sup>55</sup>

It seems to me that community art projects, as a form of and for cultural democracy, cannot help but pose the question "How shall I live?" by facilitating people's active and conscious participation in their own lives. Community art projects provide participants with the experiential learning of skills — such as critical thinking and the ability to make oft-times complex decisions — while concomitantly engendering knowledge and ways of understanding themselves, their communities and their cultures. As multiple "new political spaces" in which individuals come to form their identities, collaborative artistic practices can provide the grounds for the development of politicized consciousness, where the personal is unquestionably political.

## NOTES

1. See her participation in *LEVIER's Second Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24, and in the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 32.
2. The questionnaire that was used in Caroline's research was elaborated at the same time as those that were used for the applications and final reports of LEVIER-funded projects. See pp. 37–38 and pp. 186–189.
3. Jeanette Winterson, *Art and Lies* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knoff Canada, 1994).
4. Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994: p. 130). Here Chambers makes a key distinction between ethics and morality, which he posits as "the name of the law... in which we are positioned and apparently held in custody."
5. Drucilla Cornell, *Transformations: Recollective Imagination and Sexual Difference* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 1.
6. The definition of community art was developed with Devora Neumark for the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)* hosted by LEVIER. Many thanks for a most productive collaboration.
7. Arlene Goldbard, "Postscript to the Past: Notes Toward a History of Community Arts," *High Performance* (Winter 1993), pp. 23–27.
8. Nayo Barbara Malcolm Watkins, "The Partnering of Artists and Communities: New Methods Evolving in The Durham CAPP," *High Performance* (Winter 1993), pp. 39–41.
9. Richard Owen Geer, "Of the People, By the People, and For the People: The Field of Community Performance," *High Performance* (Winter 1993), pp. 28–31.
10. Richard Owen Geer, p. 28 (see note 9).
11. Richard Owen Geer, p. 29 (see note 9).
12. Raymond Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," *The Monthly Review Press*, 1959, reprinted in Gigi Bradford, Michael Gary and Glenn Wallach, Eds., *The Politics of Culture: Policy Perspectives for Individuals, Institutions, and Communities* (New York: The New Press, 2000), pp. 16–20. Williams is not setting out to define a mandate for community art. However, his thoughts on culture capture the idea that the potential for making culture exists within every community.
13. Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," Simon During, Ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 203–221.
14. Cornel West, pp. 203–205 (see note 13).
15. The literature on arts activism written by feminist art activists of the 1970s and 1980s, or that includes articles about them, fare better in this regard. For instance, Lucy Lippard *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984); Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier, Eds., *Cultures in Contention* (Seattle: Real Comet Press, 1985); Arlene Raven, Ed., *Art in the Public Interest* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989); Norma Broude and Mary Garrard *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s — History and Impact* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1994); Nina Felshin, Ed., *But Is It Art: The Spirit of Art as Activism* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995); Suzanne Lacy, Ed., *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995).

16. See his participation in *LEVIER's Second Orientation Meeting*, pp. 25–27. See also his participation in the *Community Arts Training and Exchange Program (2002)*, p. 35, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, pp. 74 and 79. See also the descriptions of the humanist activist projects he has taken part in: *Une chanson pour un logement*, pp. 196–197, and *La Virevolte en musique et en chansons*, pp. 198–199. Norman acted as coordinator of this book and in this capacity he wrote the Foreword entitled *When Activists and Artists Become One*, pp. 9–10.
  17. See her participation in *Community Arts – Invitation to an Information Meeting*, p. 31.
  18. Homi K. Bhabha, "The Enchantment of Art," Carol Becker and Ann Wiens, Eds., *The Artist in Society: Rights, Roles and Responsibilities* (Chicago: New Examiner Press, 1995), p. 25.
  19. Owen Kelly, *Community, Art and the State: Storming the Citadels* (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1984). David Trend, *Cultural Democracy: Politics, Media, New Technology* (New York: SUNY Press, 1997).
  20. Owen Kelly, p. 99 (see note 19).
  21. Owen Kelly, pp. 15–17 (see note 19).
  22. *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), Tuesday, December 9, 1997: A2.
  23. Owen Kelly, p. 112 (see note 19).
  24. Norman Nawrocki as quoted in his response to the questionnaire upon which this research was based, January 2003.
  25. Norman Nawrocki, (see note 24).
  26. Norman Nawrocki, (see note 24).
  27. Norman Nawrocki, (see note 24).
  28. Norman Nawrocki, (see note 24).
  29. Norman Nawrocki, (see note 24).
  30. Lisa A. Lewis, Ed. *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 57.
  31. One consequence of the project according to Engel was that participants (herself included) experienced increased feelings of self-worth.
  32. Hélène Engel, as quoted in her response to the questionnaire upon which this research was based, January 2003.
  33. Hélène Engel (see note 32).
  34. In order to protect the anonymity of the women, no photographs of the performance have been made public.
  35. As reported by Janice Arnold, "Song addresses issue of conjugal violence," *The Canadian Jewish News*, July 3, 1997.
  36. Hélène Engel (see note 32).
  37. Hélène Engel (see note 32).
  38. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (New York and London: Verso, 1985).
  39. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, p. 88 (see note 38). For an example of cultural democracy resulting from debate over public art see: Erika Doss, *Spirit Poles and Flying Pigs: Public Art and Cultural Democracy in American Communities* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995). Doss discusses six public art examples: Barbara Kruger's mural in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles; Gary Rieveschl's abstract sculpture *Spirit Poles* in Concord, California; Claes Oldenburg's *Free Stamp* sculpture in Cleveland, Ohio; Michael Heizer's *Effigy Tumuli* sculpture in Ottawa, Illinois; Judy Baca's mural in Guadalupe, California, which she states is a "civic success because of public engagement;" and Andrew Leicester's Cincinnati Gateway (a.k.a. *Flying Pigs*) sculpture. The chapter on Baca's mural project with the residence in Guadalupe, California is, in my view, the most interesting and successful of the six chapters. See also: Joseph Golden, *Pollyanna in the Brier Path: The Community Arts Movement* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987); Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland, Eds., *The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena* (New York: Critical Press, 1998).
  40. Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), p. 19.
  41. Neumark has carefully documented the names of the co-creators of the work. They are (in alphabetical order): Marie Acoury, Georgette Anawati, Cécile Anctil, Acher Avanesian, Helena Barakett, Estelle Beaudin, Anita Bélair, Mathilde Bourdeau, Carman Brabant, Juliette Campagna, Pauline Carreau, Johanne Charles, Florence Chartier, Claire Coulombe, Hélène Dantzker, Laurent Demers, Simone Desjardins, Albert Drolet, Arsène Dubé, Josine Ducoron, Marielle Dufresne, Tanya Dumont, Florence, C. Evelyn, Viola Ferguson, Eugénie Forest, Rolande Fournier, Yolande Gozzo, Marie Grou, Paulette Guidon, Takla Habib, Marcel Hamel, Valérie Holubek, Nouhad Khalil, Georges Khayat Khalkhovichian, Mathilde Khordoc, Labiba Khoury, Juliette Khouzam, Julie Kouri, Raymond Lafond, Alice Lamarche, Claire Lapierre, Pauline Lapointe, Doris Laporte, Odilie Latortue, Marie-Jeanne Lavigne, Pauline Lefebvre, Thérèse Leroux, Laurette Lessard, Marie-Anne Lessard, Germaine Michaud, Grace Ouzanian, Eva Pacquette, Martha Perez, Ida Perrin, Irène Pistono, Pauline Prévost, Blanche Proulx, Pollux, Antoine Rausis, Joséphine Rayes, Lorraine Riendeau, Marguerite Robbins, Gilberte Roy, Soad Sardi, Charlotte Sassine, Léontine Stettmaier, Simone St-Germain, Claire St-Onge, Marie-Paule Tremblay, Rose-Anna Vaillancourt, Mariette Valade, Lorraine Vaudry, Olga Winn, and Yvette Zariffa.
- Neumark also is diligent in naming the volunteers, support staff, technical assistants, and inspiring people: Camille Bisson, Joceline Chabot, Ben P. Côté, Bubby Rosenbloom, Danièle Dontigny, Architectes Lemay et associés, Jocelyne Dupont, Faux-Cadres Canal, Christian Paul Gaudet, Yolande Desmeules Gaudet, Léa and Zev Neumark-Gaudet, Groupe Corlab (Jean-François Bleau, Yvon Délisle, Sylvie Ringuette, and the rest of the team), Karen Huska, Katja MacLeod Kessin, Rose Khouri, Nathalie Lalonde, Monic Landry, Chantale Lapointe, Denis Lessard, Louis Léveillé, Margo Manikian, Jocelyne Morin, Yvette Nadeau, Manon Pouliot, Georgette Secours, Sylvie Thibaudeau, Claudine Thibouthot and Yolande Tremblay.
42. As such, 1% of the total money given by the Québec government for this building renovation project was accorded to art installation and administered by the Corporation d'Hébergement du Québec and the CHSLD Saint-Laurent/Les Cèdres. Neumark's file was selected along with the files of two other artists from all the files on hand at the Secrétariat de l'intégration des arts à l'architecture 1% artist registry. Each was invited to submit a proposal for a permanent artwork to be installed in the refurbished building intended to house both the CHSLD Saint-Laurent and the CHSLD Les Cèdres. Neumark's proposal was drafted after much consultation with the staff at both organizations that at the time of the initial proposal and throughout the creative process were situated at different locations.
  43. Some of the panels are documented on Neumark's website: [www.devoraneumark.com](http://www.devoraneumark.com). She has also published an article describing the project, "Entre nous: Valeurs communes et pratiques créatives partagées," *ESSE arts + opinions*, 48 (Spring 2003).
  44. Angelika Bammer, *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).
  45. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 7.
  46. Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 8.
  47. Devora Neumark as quoted in her response to the Community Artists Questionnaire, January 2003.
  48. Devora Neumark (see note 47).
  49. Devora Neumark (see note 47).
  50. John Ralston Saul, *On Equilibrium* (Toronto, Penguin Books, 2001).
  51. Devora Neumark (see note 47).
  52. Devora Neumark (see note 47).
  53. Devora Neumark (see note 47).
  54. Susan Krieger, "Beyond Subjectivity," Annette Lareau and Jefferey Shultz, Eds., *Journeys Through Ethnography: Realistic Accounts of Fieldwork* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), p. 109.
  55. Kenneth L. Ames, "Outside Outsider Art," Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr., Eds., *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), pp. 253–275.



The first poster of the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty which recalls the presentation of the petition to the Québec National Assembly in November 2001. Photo: Hélène Rochon. Graphic design: Jean-François Boisvert.

*What can be said about the current use of art by political mobilization groups in Québec? It seemed relevant for LEVIER to make room in this publication to highlight the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec, which is simultaneously a movement, a network of regional and provincial organizations, and a space of active citizenship. Its grassroots organizing led to something unprecedented: the adoption of a law by the Québec government aimed at combating poverty, based on a proposal developed through broad popular consultation.*

*The Collective has always included a creative dimension in its political mobilization. Such openness to the artistic process in an activist movement inherently depends on the values and the vision of the people involved. For this group, it is hardly conceivable to work to promote an idea without using creativity. The Collective considers that art makes it possible to express its concerns and political demands, in a more visible and striking way.*

*Collaboration with people who are living in poverty is also a constant concern for the Collective in all its actions. The members have a deep conviction that a poverty-free Québec has to come about through thinking, deciding and acting WITH the people who are directly concerned. The group strives so that people living with poverty can experience and develop their own power as citizens in order to catalyze and change society. Involving the creative process is vital for the Collective because it makes it possible to include everyone – all the members can contribute according to their own abilities. Art is valued as a means of expression beyond words and big speeches; it is a way of exchanging knowledge, evaluating the political situation and seeking solutions.*

*LEVIER asked Vivian Labrie<sup>1</sup> to reflect on the potential of art in the struggle against poverty based on her own personal and professional experiences. Vivian's through-line up until now has been the popular knowledge she learned in the 1970s from storytellers in the oral tradition, which she then consolidated by researching written culture, bureaucracy and counselling. In the 1990s, Vivian became involved in action for social change and knowledge-sharing at the Carrefour de pastorale en monde ouvrier [Workers' pastoral centre] and then with the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec, where she was the spokesperson from 1998 to 2006. During that time, she took part in the citizens' adventure that led to our society being legally bound, since 2002, to "strive towards a poverty-free Québec." Between storytelling and a concern for the economy, she has continued to search for ways to make room for people and their knowledge.*

## Art in the Struggle Against Poverty

# A Degree of Freedom

## Vivian Labrie

*What excites me? It's when someone says, "Let's do it and it'll be done!" You mark time, stuck on some ridiculous little thing. All of sudden, a word, a connection, an idea ... and, aha! A door opens. The "stargate" perhaps. You see what you need to do next. You do it. You learn. That's the human adventure.*  
— Vivian Labrie

It goes with "our good friend, the unforeseen!" There are oohs and ahs! We have to deliberate. It feels good and makes room for lots of people, including those on the margins. It places us, with our diversity, in a situation of a shared quest and a sense of accompaniment. It belongs, along with other things, on the "creation" side of a triangle, the other two sides of which could be called "organization" and "identity" but it's not so sure. There are posters, pins, logos and acts of daring. Non-rigid forms. Activities in stairwells. Chronologies that are metres long. Kilometres of red duct tape. Pictures that are worth a thousand words, and words that create pictures, to become bubbles blowing in the wind. Dollars that aren't dollars, but are worth more than the real ones. Banners and many, many hours of painting together. The memorable deposition of a petition. Deliberately imaginative competency cards. And Johanne, alias JoduLoup, who is capable of stopping time. Trees. Or rather, birches. Lots of leaves. A detour that sometimes, with the use of a magic spell, opens a "stargate." And one, or even many, degrees of freedom.



Art in the struggle against poverty... and no opportunity close at hand to think about this subject with others! Since I can't speak for others, I'll speak for myself.

For me, it all started at the Carrefour de pastorale en monde ouvrier [Workers' pastoral centre] (CAPMO) in Quebec City in 1988, where I did facilitation and administrative work. Later, at the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec, which several of us decided to set up, I had a leadership role from 1998 to 2006 as a spokesperson and, for a long time, as coordinator. The Collective is best known for organizing a broad citizens' movement calling for a law to eliminate poverty. This led the Québec government to propose a project aimed at tabling the *Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion* in June 2002. Not surprisingly, the bill did not go as far as the citizens' proposal, but it was a move in the right direction. The bill was amended in parliamentary committee as a result of substantial pressure from citizens, and it was adopted unanimously by the Québec National Assembly the following December. There were a certain number of issues with the application of the law. The adventure continues. What we can affirm right off the bat is that art was indeed part of the process. That was clearly recognized by the Collective's network.<sup>2</sup> And it is quite clear, too, that this went hand-in-hand with the network's deliberate choice to involve the maximum number possible of people living in poverty within the citizens' process.

Art in the struggle against poverty... My memory is activated and sparks in all directions! How to draw from that reservoir? Come on, neurons, how about getting together for a little brainstorming? A sentence that starts with "Art in my experience of the struggle against poverty..." Go! Wow! So many ideas! Here's our workshop report!

## Art in My Experience of the Struggle Against Poverty...

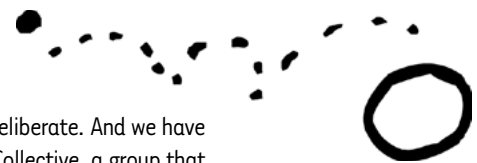
... it comes with **"our good friend, the unforeseen!"** There are oohs and ahs! We have to deliberate. And we have to ask ourselves when were the ideas decided upon? Let me explain: in an umbrella group like the Collective, a group that organizes groups, you absolutely have to be organized! You have an action plan, decided on together during meetings among the different bodies you've established, and each action leads to a list of things to do, tasks that are distributed. We got into the habit of making checklists of everything we could think of, which we'd review periodically. We'd start something, adjust, postpone. We had a feeling of not getting things done, of not having enough time. At the same time, events don't consult you. Good ideas don't either. They just come. On the doorstep. After a meeting. Having a beer, or otherwise. And when they come, good ideas start flying around and bumping up against what you've seen and foreseen, unexpectedly. So when I was in the Collective, we got into the habit—as a joke and as a way to keep things open—of ending our interminable checklists with the words "and our good friend, the unforeseen." For me, art in the struggle against poverty was, most often, a case of the unforeseeable, of "ahas!" and "wows!" that could turn everything upside-down. Of course you want that to happen, because it opens a window, but at the same time you dread it, especially since you know from experience how much energy it takes to follow up on something like this. So it often also gives rise to an "argh." Generally, we didn't say: "We're going to make art part of our action plan;" art knocked at the door, often introduced by the shared pleasure of going to some group in the network with a colleague and saying: "We've just had this crazy idea!" And as the idea made its way, the team, the executive, the general assembly, the network had to ask: "What do we do?" Since crazy ideas are often, at least at the beginning, so vague, they have to be adjusted to the seen and the foreseen, lest they give the impression of a lack of discipline or a threat to group democracy... as if you're questioning what has already been decided. You bring them up and defend them at your own risk! Nevertheless, if you find affinities between the foreseen and the unforeseen, these spontaneous ideas can help you do what you imagined, and do it with a little extra something.

Concretely, what forms did it take?



Claude Garneau helping to make a regional banner for a demonstration in May 2001. Photo: Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec.

... it must have been when we took out the brushes. We took them out often! Which brings me to the banners and the mosaic. With the banners, it started at CAPMO. One day, Monique, a literacy educator who was on the executive of CAPMO, observed that it was very difficult for many people with few literacy skills to take part fully in discussions where people are expected to speak up and make their point with articulate, well-constructed arguments. The space ends up being monopolized by the "big talkers," whether they are articulate or not! What we needed were places for slow talking, she suggested. We had already experimented with making banners for use in public events. Some of the people in the group who felt less equipped to participate in large



The concept of the grain of sand that becomes a pearl, used from the beginning of the idea of a law to eliminate poverty. Graphic design: Vivian Labrie.



The second poster, published in 2003, based on photographs taken in May 2002 of the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec. Photo: Hélène Rochon. Graphic design: Jean-François Boisvert.

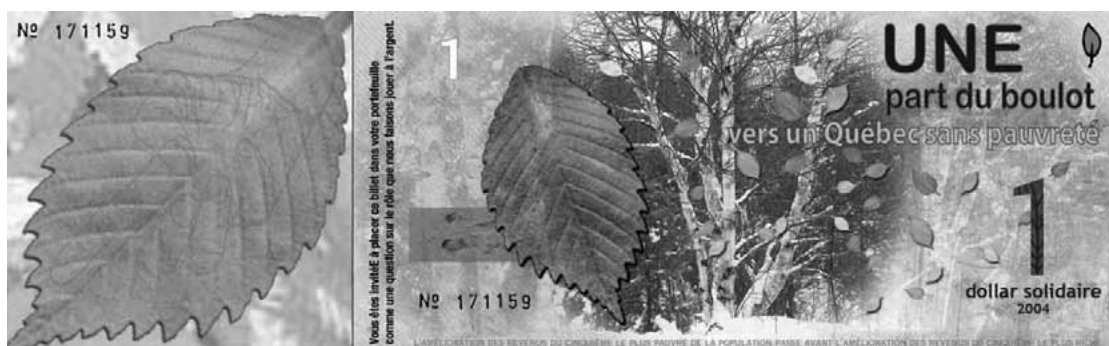
discussions were interested. It was 1997, and a “Parliament of the Street” was being planned. We had to mark out the area we would occupy in Québec City’s Parc de l’Esplanade, in front of the National Assembly. We had devised a method using a computer and a projector to trace words and images. Then, with everything else there was to do, we collected striking quotes from various people at different events, made an agreement with a fabric store that gave us a good price, found an intern and some volunteers and showed them the technique. We set up a workshop where these quotes were painted on banners, one by one, slowly, all in the same font to give them a unified look and style. We had some wonderful times, when Claude, Yvette and others truly found their place in the group, brushes in hand. A few weeks later, there were about 150 metres of banners, and they were the first things the media showed of the event. It was spectacular and a source of pride: people saw what they had said projected in the public space. This experience led CAPMO to set up a small social economy enterprise called Particip’art and to support it for several years. Later, when we collaborated with other organizations to form the Collective for a Law on the Elimination of Poverty,<sup>3</sup> we were still in the habit of using banners and organizing work parties to make them; there was the one to celebrate the 200,000<sup>th</sup> signature on the petition demanding a law based on the citizens’ proposal and the ones unfurled in the middle of the morning rush-hour during budget speeches or in front of the Québec National Assembly while a delegation was inside. So, yes, art was present thanks to the brushes. I am thinking in particular of two challenges that led to the creation of two remarkable posters. One of these was a mosaic made up of 17 × 22 squares of 2' × 2' masonite planks, calling for a law for a poverty-free Québec, which was produced in the spring of 2000 for a rally in front of the National Assembly in favour of the people’s adoption of the version of the law proposed by the Collective. The other was a series of phrases displayed on banners during The Citizens’ Forum in May 2002: “Jeter les bases d’un Québec sans pauvreté, plus solidaire, plus égalitaire [Lay the foundations for a poverty-free Québec with more solidarity and greater equality]. Le faire avec les personnes en situation de pauvreté et d’exclusion [Do it with people living in poverty and exclusion]. Donc, se gouverner et se développer autrement [Therefore, govern and develop ourselves differently].” These banners were used to decorate the Forum, then for a collective photo, and finally in the Collective’s poster. The poster, in turn, inspired colleagues with Secours catholique [Catholic aid] in the Rhône-Alpes region of France to use a similar process to produce a solidarity postcard. More recently, as part of the *Tenir parole!* [Holding fast to the word!] book project, these banners provided a reference point for collecting the memories of the people who had held them during the initial photo session.

**... it makes possible new alliances, with heads and hearts together.** The story of the banners and the mosaic shows clearly that art opens up new avenues to the “seven levels of truth.”<sup>4</sup> This counters the controlling aspect of rational education and literacy schooling. Formal education is fine, but it tends to be seen as the sole official entry point to the world of knowledge and the forums where decisions are made in society. Using brushes, wordplay or body images also allows for the articulation of problems and, often, the analyses and solutions that emerge from these processes are particularly original and imaginative. As Yvette Muise said, “I’m fed up with dreaming in colour. I want to dream logically.” At a meeting on the law we were dreaming up, in spring 1999, the facilitators asked the participants to write a word on a piece of paper cut in the form of a tree as a reference to the leaf in the logo of the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec—a tilted fleur-de-lys surmounted by a leaf. One participant, Lucien Paulhus, wrote: “I am a leaf beside the tree. After the law, I will be in the tree.” This was written in the preamble to the citizens’ law, and it marked our collective imaginary for years. On one occasion, people living in poverty had their concerns expressed by a talking fridge, stove, bed and other furnishings in the theatrical production created by *Mise au jeu*.<sup>5</sup> Then audience members were asked to take the place of one or other of the objects being performed and offer solutions as if they were that character. In this way, we learned a lot about the the problems people were experiencing privately



in their everyday lives. Another time, various people were invited to contribute an object that, for them, represented poverty. This was the exhibition *Objet : pauvreté!* [Object: poverty!]. The National Assembly refused to show the exhibition. This gave the team the idea of making a catalogue of the exhibition, complete with photographs, and sending it to every member of the National Assembly. Similarly, we could do an exhaustive critique of the employment training program procedures with their conventional ways of validating and invalidating people, or we could issue competency cards like the group of artists that created the ISO1000000000 action did.<sup>6</sup> This project was organized to coincide with the citizens' agora in October 2002, where we were camped again while the parliamentary committee was studying the project related to the bill on poverty. Each person could be photographed by the artists and could identify a skill they wanted shown on their competency card.<sup>7</sup> The card was then issued on the spot. There was no age limit, and the cards were very popular with young and not-so-young people, who had themselves certified as "great songstress," "ball of solace" or "accomplished citizen." What fun it was to receive "official" recognition as a "diplomat," a "manager of useless work" or a "good skater"! It had a lasting impact on people. To this day, I still carry my card in my wallet. It reads "sower of snails." From time to time, it reminds me who I am.

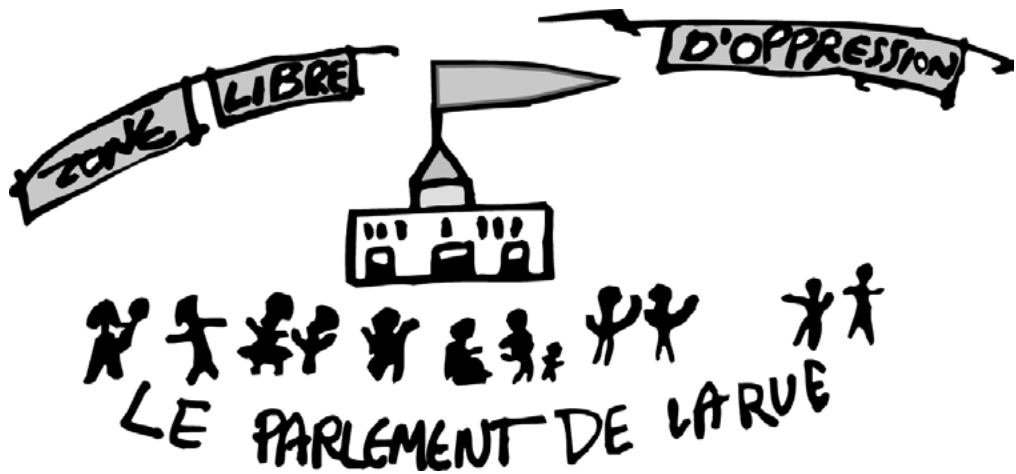
The authors of *Tenir parole!* at the book launch at the Plaza Theatre (Montréal) on February 12, 2009.  
Photo: Louis Turcotte.



The 2004 Solidarity Dollar designed by Johanne Chagnon.

... it's **Johanne Chagnon**. To me, she is *the* artist. We met in 2001, I think. In the Collective, we had already done a lot of crazy things, but we didn't call them art. Johanne had noticed the craziness and she offered to work with us. By then, I had already participated in a couple of Engrenage Noir / LEVIER activities.<sup>8</sup> Should I try to list all Johanne's contributions?<sup>9</sup> I'll forget some of them, of course, but I'll try anyway. There was her participation in a collective that had put up posters in Quebec City bus shelters imitating the style of a government promotional campaign (along with a smaller poster and a postcard using the same image), and Johanne's run-ins with the premier's office, which wasn't exactly pleased with the

poster.<sup>10</sup> There was her involvement in a LEVIER-funded project conceived by Devora Neumark called *Boîtes à (sur)prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté* [Gift boxes for a poverty-free Québec], during which boxes were left on the doorsteps of homes in well-to-do neighbourhoods in Montréal and Chicoutimi. These were beautiful boxes, some made of silver-coloured cardboard, and others of copper-coloured cardboard to represent the poorest fifth of the population. Within each box there was simply two rolled pieces of paper with a message providing information on the work of the Collective. The placement of these boxes on the doorsteps of unsuspecting strangers led to a police investigation of the two artists because people were afraid that they were parcel bombs!<sup>11</sup> Then there was the first solidarity dollar, with its birch leaf to be returned to the Collective. Each dollar that was returned formed part of a multiple-branched tree that we made during more work parties. The tree was first displayed in the Musée de la civilisation in Quebec City during an exhibition about money. To date, the tree has been shown in nine other locations including the Carrefour financier solidaire [Financial solidarity centre] (Montréal). There was the workshop on crazy ideas to use in our struggles. It was during a special session of the Parliament of the Street in January 2004. The workshop was led by Johanne. She had brought up the idea of marking ourselves with red to signify being *in the red* or to carry injuries. That led to a huge red poster representing the wall of prejudices. The poster was used to hide the plaque at the entrance to the Québec Ministry of Employment and Social Solidarity during a demonstration. Again with the accent on red, Johanne created some “word-meals of resistance” when we occupied the cafeteria of the National Assembly to protest the 2004 welfare bill. In 2007 and 2008, she was art director for the book *Tenir parole !* And in February 2009, when the publication was launched in Montréal, she arranged for a photograph to be taken of many of the participants in the book, each holding a large leaf.



Logo of the “Parliament of the Street” in 1997. Graphic design: Vivian Labrie.

... it seems like nothing at first. Art knocks on the door, but while the completed project can shake things up, the tap-tap-tap heard at the start is often rather quiet. You have to listen and to hear it. How many times have we missed the call of art without even realizing? The time with Béa, we nearly missed it. It was in the fall of 1997. We were doing a collective analysis of the situation relative to the struggle against poverty with several organizations in Quebec City. The way the discussion was organized was quite creative, but it disturbed a few people who would have preferred a good old discussion while sitting around a table rather than one in which everyone was marching around the room with bands of paper around their heads upon which was written one of their concerns. People had to form affinity groups by reading each others’ headbands. Everyone finally found their little group, except for Béa, a person living in extreme poverty and marginality, who had come there, as she went everywhere, without saying a word. At that time, Béa was essentially observing a vow of silence of sorts, so that we literally did not know her voice. That evening when we were discussing solutions, she said: “There ought to be places free of oppression, controlled twenty-four hours a day by the people.” That gave us the idea for the Parliament of the Street (mentioned above). It took our hearing Béa’s quiet comment to notice that in her freedom from the rules, she had given the game multiple meanings and defended an idea to those who did not recognize the method through which her point of view was included in the analysis. This was convincing to those who claimed it would be too much work. So there was a Parliament of the Street. And it made history while providing a place where people living with poverty took control of their stories and became actors in the changes to come. I suppose the experience could be classified as performance art.

... it produces wealth and abundance. When art comes in the door, you have to have pay attention. It’s joyous and it creates disorder. People come to the “barnraising party.” You have to move the tables, let the paint dry, clean the brushes. There’s colour, new techniques, the experience of beauty, the feeling of richness. Curiously, people don’t feel poor. It produces new ideas. Then there are all the things that you have to find storage for... and think of reusing in some way. You don’t know where to put the little paper leaves that came back from the exchange of solidarity dollars. Or the multiple paintings created under the supervision of artist Armand Vaillancourt. Or the piles of mosaic tiles. Or the rolls from the last AVEC committee. Or





The first red patches worn during the special session of the "Parliament of the Street" in January 2004 (Micheline Lebel). Photo: Johanne Chagnon.

the ideas that came out of the last brainstorming session. Or the people offering to help. As a result, you can feel reluctance at the same time as jubilation. You have to deal with it. How? Frankly, I don't know. Each experience brings its own challenges, including success. Could there be in these struggles a secret fear of losing your *raison d'être* if you win? Maybe it's a question of attitude. Anyway, it comes to mind here that art is insoluble in "sacrificial activism," to use an expression from Patrick Viveret,<sup>12</sup> who proposes instead an atmosphere of "playful co-operation" that leads to pleasure and solutions.

**... it can open a gate to the stars.** The expression comes from the AVEC committee, the committee of the Collective responsible for promoting participation by people living with poverty in the processes concerning them. It refers to the times when, as in the movie *Stargate*, you discover a kind of tunnel that takes you somewhere else in the universe, and suddenly paths open where before there were only walls. The minister said: "A buck is a buck is a buck." Someone in the group said: "No, a dollar of my welfare cheque is worth more than a dollar of the minister's income." We invented "vital dollars," "functional dollars" and "superfluous dollars." We discovered that vital dollars are local dollars, spent close to home, while superfluous dollars are dollars that flee.<sup>13</sup> Suddenly, an economic concept emerged that was useful for the struggle. A stargate opened. We continued playing with this and came up with the idea of solidarity dollars, which were designed by different artists each year from 2004 to 2006. They were non-market dollars to be exchanged for real dollars, which provided us with funding and which could be carried in one's wallet as a constant reminder of the role money plays in our lives and the possibility of freeing ourselves from its constraints in order to experience new forms of solidarity. The last dollar, designed by Francine Courchesne, also conveyed something of the idea of a stargate: you could make a hole in it and thus pass through the barrier of the bill to see something different. Wordplays, stories, common great quotations, metaphors, diagrams, drawings, in short, all the means of representation, are ways of going beyond the known to begin seeing things differently and grasping a small part of the little-known, the unknown, of what could be and is not yet.<sup>14</sup> The metaphor of the escalator emerged from a brainstorming session in which people living with poverty took centre stage. This metaphor has potential as an artistic process and as a challenge to dominant ideas about politics and economics. Essentially, in this group the question of the social ladder, of being at the bottom of the ladder, etc., often comes up. One day someone said it was actually more subtle than that. Society is more like a landing from which there's an escalator going up and an escalator going down. Living in poverty is like being at the bottom of the down escalator and being told to go up by the people on the up escalator. The image was striking and it stayed with me. A few days later, people from the group and others told the members of the National Assembly: "Instead of pushing us to go up the down escalator, why don't you do something about the escalators." That was in 2003. The image has circulated a lot since then. It is better than a lot of theoretical models on social inequalities and it's a good tool for exploring certain dynamics of the current economic crisis.

**... it seems to belong to the creation side of the creation/organization/identity triangle, but it's not so sure.**

One day in an informal seminar held with colleagues and friends as part of the Caracoleando Group (a group that we have met with several times in France since 2003), we identified instability in our relationships and we gave this instability a symbolic form. We called this the creation/organization/identity triangle. Associations often begin at the creation side of the triangle, starting with a good idea. The good idea encourages people to organize in order to put that idea into practice. By spending time together, people develop an identity. It can be tempting, in the long run, to forget the creation side, which is demanding and depends on coming up with ideas. However if you lose that, there's no more room for play. If all that's left is organization and identity, the group "falls into line" in every sense. At first glance, you might think art belongs more to the creation side. It's certain that good ideas propel a group back toward that side and test its capacity to "play." I've observed that there have been artistic responses to a need for organization: the solidarity dollars, for example, which were conceived as a form of self-financing, or work with theatre troupes such as Parminou or Mise au jeu to give a form to an event for a particular situation. Similarly, there have been artistic responses to needs related to identity such as the care taken in designing the pins that enabled the Collective's network to identify its vision for a poverty-free society. We designed those pins as little pieces of jewellery that were not explicit in themselves but that provided a pretext for conversation and gave rise to pride, alliance-building and recognition. Were we ever surprised when we noticed one of the pins on the coat of the mayor of Quebec City in a photograph in the sports pages of the paper! But that was in another time!

**...it has the patience and the impatience of a seed.**

Like a seed, art starts a cycle. In a way, it's like the oral tradition. One idea leads to another, and you don't really know how it begins and what directions it will take. One example: during the winter of 2004, Johanne brought up the idea of using the colour red. She had brought red stickers. The participants left her workshop on crazy ideas for activists with red patches on their foreheads. It created a sensation. The idea came up again in the plenary session. And then it was forgotten. Until the next fall. We were getting ready to go to a parliamentary committee the next day to protest a new welfare reform bill that was going to be another step backward. However, the law on poverty had committed the government to improve the living conditions of people living in poverty. We were looking for a way to make our point to the committee. Marie-Anne, one of the Collective's members, brought up the idea of the red stickers again. What form could it take in such a short time? Red duct tape, maybe, but we still hadn't decided on the form. How could we once again bring in our good friend, the unforeseen? After some consultation, we thought that decision could be left to the members of the parliamentary committee delegation, who said they agreed. They would make sure to state specifically what they were doing so that it would be noted in the transcript of the committee and there would be a record of it to refer to if necessary. On a signal from the delegation, the people who had come in support would also put on red squares. And we wouldn't ask anyone else to commit to it before discussing it, but just let the movement go ahead. Which is what we did. Then we watched what unfolded.

**... it's part of a journey and it requires a timetable.** Things often happen because the time is ripe – or not ripe – for ideas to become reality. Deadlines are truly revealing. The red square campaign, which was started because a time-compressed opportunity presented itself, took off. Modestly. Enough, however, to do damage to several jackets and coats: after a few weeks, duct tape marks clothes. Enough, too, to mark our constant presence at the National Assembly throughout the process – which unfortunately ended, a few months later, with the adoption of the new law on welfare that brought no significant change relative to improving the living conditions of impoverished people. The mark was prohibited, and people regularly had to remove the red squares at the entrance. Nevertheless they would reappear as if by magic from under their coats. During this period, we became attached to that little act of resistance. It reinforced the cohesion of the small group that maintained a vigil and occupied the space of protest in full view of the members of the National Assembly. The symbol did not remain stuck to the Collective, which was less attached to the duct tape after the fall. It re-emerged the following January with the students who were fighting cuts to student financial aid. And from there, it became a phenomenon in itself. The red squares took on new life in the form of squares cut from felt. Many people never knew the initiative had begun the fall before with the Collective. You still see young people wearing red felt squares to draw attention to today's struggles. In the Collective, too, it continued to evolve; it became a pin in the form of a green leaf on the red square, representing both the protest and the proposal. This pin is still being worn quite a lot even as I write these lines.

**... it disturbs, it pleases the media and it enables us to make gains.** As we saw with the red squares, art intrigues; spectacle attracts the cameras. Like our proposal to the members of the National Assembly that they try living on welfare for a month, which we made on a board that looked like a Monopoly game. The media had not been informed ahead of time. Since it was at the National Assembly and there were reporters in the corridors, some of them found out what was going on, so by the end of the activity a lot of them wanted to come in and film. In the news, they talked about "the Monopoly game of poverty." The materials had been carefully designed. It was visual. It had an impact. Like November 2000, when we presented the petition demanding a law based on the citizens' proposal. Another painting party, with 216 boxes to represent the 215,307 signatures. Then, on that day, a human chain hundreds of metres long carried the boxes from Parc de l'Esplanade to the entrance to the National Assembly. That was also when we gathered to have our picture taken around the mosaic in order to



make a poster. Art has the potential to create spectacle. It has an impact, especially if you do something out of the ordinary. Of course, that takes a certain amount of energy. But it's not in vain.

**... it's like moving from the idea of eliminating poverty to the idea of a poverty-free Québec and a poverty-free world.** In the adventure I described above, we went through some changes in the citizens' movement. Little by little, we moved from the idea of eliminating poverty to that of a world without poverty. When you think about it, this represents a change of perspective. Instead of envisaging the elimination of a far-reaching evil whose "systemic causes" are outside poor people themselves, who find themselves forced into deprivation and exclusion, we begin to imagine another way of living together. It's a qualitative leap. And I've observed that when these leaps take place, there's art in the air. So does art make it possible for people to learn to make these qualitative leaps?

**... it gives us one – or many – degrees of freedom.** One thing is certain, art offers a certain freedom. From this point on, I lack words. Reflection reaches its limits. Memory becomes cloudy. I need to let things settle and get back to life. And to experience new craziness with a few – or many – others. That too is sure: in this story, art has given rise to some very beautiful learning experiences. In our lifetime.

How, in organizations, can we carry forward these changes in ways that come about more as a result of shifts in attitude than from a "recipe"? This brings us back to the link between social change and personal change, which Patrick Viveret feels is important. Perhaps also to the difficult intersection between the "movement" dimension of citizen activism, with its disciplined vertical relationships, and the "space" dimension of collective intelligence and its horizontal relationships, a tension that we also felt at the World Social Forum. Here we would like to have the recipe... the attitude... the art of nothing that opens to everything. We are reaching the point where, when all is said and done, it's a matter of being. A few words more? We can make suggestions and stir ingredients. We can do what we can for it to come together and taste good. Synergies, reversals and consciousness cannot be forced. You can do what you can to encourage them, or at the very least, not to prevent them. You can rejoice and ride the wave when they happen. Which brings us back to the degree of freedom.

And, of course, the inexpressibility of beauty and of what sets us free.

## NOTES

1. Vivian has been involved with Engrenage Noir / LEVIER from the beginning. See her participation in *LEVIER's First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24, and *LEVIER's Second Orientation Meeting*, pp. 25–27. See the description of the humanist activist project she has taken part in as the spokesperson and coordinator of the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec, *Urbaine urbanité III*, pp. 241–242. See also the description of these other humanist activist projects, carried out partly in collaboration with Vivian and the Collective: *AbriBec – suppôt de la nouvelle humanité fiscale*, pp. 258–260, *Carte.compétence*, pp. 261–262, and *Boîtes à (sur) prise de conscience pour un Québec sans pauvreté*, pp. 263–265.
2. See *Tenir Parole! Trajectoires et paroles citoyennes autour d'une affiche*, published by the Collectif pour un Québec sans pauvreté, edited by Marie-Claude Rose, Johanne Chagnon, Vivian Labrie, Micheline Bélisle, Sophie Dupéré, France Fournier, Élisabeth Germain, Michel O'Neill and Ian Renaud-Lauzé (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2008). This often comes up in people's accounts.
3. The name of the Collective for a Poverty-Free Québec before the passage of the *Act to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion* in December 2002.
4. The "seven levels of truth" is a reference to a metaphor used by the gospel writer in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, by Nikos Kazantzakis. I take this allusion from my research on stories and the oral tradition, where you can see that in the metaphors and symbolic journeys described in folktales, the meaning is open and can be taken at several levels at the same time: literal and figurative, cognitive, relational, sociopolitical, and even cosmic. The criteria for "truth" vary from level to level, and this can lead to incongruities, paradoxes and short circuits.
5. See the description of the humanist activist project *Des familles hautes en couleur*, in which this troupe participated, p. 223.
6. See the description of this humanist activist project by the collective Cagibi international, pp. 261–262.
7. See <http://iso1000000000.ch/>.
8. See note 1.
9. See also her participation in the community art project *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors* with the organization Le CARRÉ, pp. 154–158. See also the mention of the participation of the members of this project in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*, p. 67, the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122. See also the reference to these activities in the critical summaries by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We Were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 77, and *the Means and the Ends*, p. 115, and in Bob W. White text, *The Power of Collaboration*, p. 321. See also the video *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors* made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
10. See the description of this humanist activist project carried out by the collective Cagibi International, pp. 258–260.
11. See the description of this humanist activist project, pp. 263–265.
12. See Patrick Viveret, *Reconsidérer la richesse* (Clamency, France: Éditions de l'Aube, 2008).
13. Given the current situation, these are the dollars that trigger economic crises.
14. When I was in high school, I had to choose between Greek and art. I dropped Greek and blithely chose art, and thanks to a very good teacher, I developed the habit of doodling and thinking figuratively as well as literally. This certainly affected my way of doing research, of approaching the non-verbal mechanisms of memorization used by storytellers in the oral tradition, of taking pleasure in the very imaginative approach of the Latin-American pedagogy of consciousness-raising, of using that in my relationships with people living with poverty and in developing common goals in popular coeducation. What I'm trying to say here is that the arts seem to me to be a door to knowledge and theories about the world, a way that is just as valid as the more institutional ways.

*On September 13, 2007, during the 62<sup>nd</sup> session of the United Nations' General Assembly at the headquarters in New York City, the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by a majority of 144 states in favour. It is important to note that at the time Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada had not ratified this document, which was 22 years in the making. One can only assume that the over 800 unresolved Aboriginal land claims across Canada<sup>1</sup> might have had something to do with why the Canadian neo-conservative government rejected the Declaration until November 2010.*

*LEVIER is committed to addressing historical and ongoing injustices including those experienced by the Aboriginal people living in Québec and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Since the two LEVIER orientation meetings back in 2001,<sup>3</sup> Kim Anderson has contributed in significant ways to setting this priority.*

*The text below is an extension of what Kim shared during these meetings and her presentation as part of LEVIER's study day program in November 2004, entitled Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Arts Practices.<sup>4</sup>*

Community-Based Arts and Research Practices:

## What's Ethics Got To Do With It?

Kim Anderson

In thinking about ethics and community-based arts practices, I am reminded of a story in which a friend of mine did a presentation on research in Indigenous communities for other students in her graduate anthropology class. In brief, her message was that researchers can no longer simply go into Indigenous communities, gather data and then write and publish on it. Many Aboriginal communities in Canada have, in recent years, established their own ethics review boards that researchers must pass through before entering a community, and there are often expectations that whatever is produced must be vetted and ultimately owned by that community.

This information was new to the group of students, who listened politely while my friend presented. After she had left, however, the class erupted into a vigorous debate. Many of the students felt these protocols were unreasonable, and in fact a violation of their right as researchers to "report on the truth." The lone Indigenous student in the class countered with the defence that communities who have been so grossly misrepresented by outsiders in the past have the right to determine what is written in the present.

I begin with this story because it offers a demonstration of both the contemporary politics and practices of telling stories about Indigenous peoples. The questions raised in the students' debate are also relevant, I believe, to anyone engaged in storytelling/story-gathering practices that involve people who have been marginalized or silenced. For those of us involved in community-based arts practices or research, these questions can lead us into an important consideration of the ethics and responsibilities involved in our work.

### Silencing, Misrepresentation and Cultural Appropriation: Indigenous Experiences

My entry point into the debate is as an Aboriginal writer working almost exclusively with Indigenous peoples and their stories. Had I been in that classroom, I would have told the students that everything I do as an Aboriginal writer and researcher has ethical implications. Whether I am working on a report, newsletter, non-fiction book or poem, I have my own sometimes-excruciating ethics review process that requires me to consider the history and context I am working in. I feel this is necessary because of our history and ongoing oppression as Indigenous peoples.

It begins with the simple fact that my work takes place within the colonial context of people who have been silenced, and who continue to be silenced. This has happened through exclusion, but also through misrepresentation and cultural appro-

*Kim Anderson  
(see p. 51)*



priation. Aboriginal people come from a history where our songs and stories were forbidden, where traditional ceremonies were banned, where languages were forcibly suppressed and cultures and histories negated. Those who went to residential schools had their languages literally beaten out of them; they lost out on generations of oral history, storytelling and culture-based knowledge and were told that anything they had to say wasn't valid. Aboriginal peoples have been misrepresented by outsider scholars who become "experts" about us and by history books that do not understand our societies and have often been blatantly racist. Newspapers and other media outlets continue to construct negative or faulty images of Aboriginal people and our experiences, as do films like Disney's *Pocahontas* or *The Indian in the Cupboard*. Cultural appropriation occurs in tandem with this misrepresentation: Euro-western people practice our ceremonies, dress up as Indians for Halloween or for the Grammy Awards and place our images on lunch kits. Go to any airport in Canada and you can buy one of us as a souvenir doll; go to a game and we are mascots for the team.

*Aboriginal peoples have been misrepresented by outsider scholars who become "experts" about us and by history books that do not understand our societies and have often been blatantly racist*

I have been adamant that Aboriginal peoples must be given opportunities to represent themselves and tell their own stories because of this history of silencing, misrepresentation and cultural appropriation. In the scholarly world, this means writing our own histories, sociologies, philosophies, literary theories, and so on. In the arts, the coming to voice has been really important, and support for Aboriginal artists to tell their stories is crucial. We have only just begun to represent ourselves in literature, film, theatre, dance, music and the visual arts. The healing potential for reclaiming our right to represent ourselves is tremendous, and in many cases the arts and healing programs feed one another in Aboriginal communities.

This new kind of self-representation and storytelling represents hope and change, but there is still work to be done, negative stereotypes to break, new visions to cast. This is why, whether Aboriginal or not, we need to continue to be vigilant about ethics and responsibilities in the stories we tell.

## Story Gathering, Story Sharing: Some Experiences

A number of years ago, I published a non-fiction book about Aboriginal women and identity entitled *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood*.<sup>5</sup> I was initially drawn to the project because, in writing a master's thesis, I discovered that there was very little literature about Aboriginal women, and even less by Aboriginal women. What better idea than to contribute by writing something myself! As I got into the work, however, I had to think about how my book might also contribute to my ultimate purpose: to add something to the healing, health and well-being of Indigenous peoples. What pitfalls needed to be avoided, and what strategies could be used if I were to accomplish this goal?

I realized that the first step was to develop a thorough understanding of how Aboriginal women had been misrepresented in the past, and to be clear about the damage that this has done. I was certainly not up for writing another Pocahontas story; I would have to dismiss that Indian Princess, Noble Savage and Squaw who, insidious as they are, might creep into my prose. These storylines, and the stereotypes that they sustain, have had a direct impact on the disproportionate levels of violence that Aboriginal women continue to endure. Like the land, the Aboriginal woman has been cast as either pristine or easy, but either way, she is open for the settler's transgressions. I wasn't worried about replicating the more crass elements of these representations, but had to be on guard against their subtler manifestations: perhaps by exoticizing or essentializing the diverse experiences of Aboriginal women.

To me, these are ethical questions because what I was going to produce could colour what we "know" about Aboriginal women, and how they are treated. The last thing that Aboriginal women need is another reinforcement of the stereotypes that have had real consequences in their lives. If I did it right, it might also positively influence something about what Aboriginal women know of themselves.

The book, like much of my work, was based on qualitative research. I built it out of stories that I collected through interviews with 40 Aboriginal women across Canada. Ethics were involved in this process as well, for it is not just the end product that matters, it is how you get there. Taken as such, it was not just a project of writing a book, but rather a project of how I was to engage with my community, and how I would work with members of that community to make their stories heard.

I knew that the key to this could be found in Indigenous means of knowledge creation: of the way in which we gather and then share stories. While still deliberating on these questions, I was lucky enough to hear the Mohawk scholar Marlene Brant Castellano give a talk on this subject. Marlene discussed six qualities of Indigenous knowledge, noting that it is personal, oral, experiential, relational, collective and spiritual. I took these qualities to the writing of *A Recognition of Being*, using them as guiding principles and a code of ethics.

I began the book by describing my personal journey as an Aboriginal woman looking for answers related to her own identity. Affirming that knowledge about women is not necessarily in texts written by the experts, but rather in the stories of our women, I used their words to tell the overall story. This was particularly important in the “historical” sections, where I validated the women’s oral history by weaving it in with that of published scholars. The book took three and a half years to write, during which I went through an identity journey that was similar to that which I had found among the women. Working with the women turned out to be a community-building experience in that I grew a few more “aunties” in my life, and because of my personal transformation, this was indeed an experiential project.

Throughout, I had to consider my relationships with each woman: to establish trust and then live up to it to the best of my ability. This process was relational, but also collective, as a larger story emerged from the various stories of each of these women. And from the interview process to the final publication, I was aware also of the spiritual nature of telling stories and of receiving them, and of how the book was itself a prayer. For this reason, I prepared myself spiritually before interviews by smudging and praying and also by giving my interview participants tobacco and other gifts as offerings.

*The last thing that Aboriginal women need is another reinforcement of the stereotypes that have had real consequences in their lives*

It has been almost ten years since I wrote that book, and I am now onto a second book based on oral history provided by Cree, Métis and Ojibway elders. My new work is about life stages of women and girls, as experienced or witnessed by elders who were children in the 1930s, ’40s and ’50s. Many of the principles I used in the first book still apply, only this time I have new understandings about the spiritual, relational and collective nature of listening, gathering, and sharing stories.

I now see what I am doing as a community-based arts practice, where I work with women to move the collective story forward. To do this successfully, ethically and responsibly involves developing relationships that will unlock the space where story can move in. This has come about, in part, because my mentors encouraged me to work with women through multiple interviews. I’ve learned that what one will get in the first interview is very different from what one gets in the seventh. It isn’t simply a question of trust; there is a deeper, spiritual element to teasing out oral history, and this can magically happen when you create the conditions for spirit to move in. I know when this happens because the story begins to take on a life of its own, and it becomes less about the teller or the listener. At the risk of sounding most unscholarly, I will share that in one recent instance, I ended up in an interview where I didn’t even have to ask questions anymore: the information I had prayed and prepared for began to spill out of the elder before I even had a chance to get in the door!

That being said, there are also very practical matters in the work of gathering stories from my community. I have felt exasperated and desperate at times in trying to find people to interview, in getting stood up, or feeling that no one wanted to talk to me about their childhood experiences. Where were the wise elders who were supposed to readily share their knowledge with younger generations? But this too was a learning experience that taught me a lot about how to encourage people from marginalized communities to tell stories.

It has been my observation that people who have been silenced often don’t believe they have anything important to say. Sharing stories can be particularly stressful for Aboriginal elders, who are purported to hold all sorts of knowledge as “the wise elder.” In most cases, elders of this generation went to residential schools where they were cut off from their cultures and languages and from their own elders who would have been their teachers. This doesn’t mean they don’t know anything. But perhaps the insecurities engendered by their personal and collective histories are behind the no-shows and my difficulty in getting interviews. For Aboriginal people, talking about the past can also be just plain painful; when people have been oppressed as Aboriginal peoples have, the past can be a scary place to go. I tried for years to get my own dad to tell some of our history, but his solution was to get drunk every time we had booked time for recording! It was just too hard, too much pressure, too painful. So my job now is to work with those who are ready, or to find a way to gently encourage the story out of those who need a “story midwife,” and then share it in the most respectful way.

This brings me to the point about telling the “good news” stories. I choose to write about the positive elements of Indigenous experience, mainly because I believe we know a fair bit already about the negative. The students in the anthropology class would perhaps accuse me of not telling “the truth” when, as in my next book, I will write about the power of women in Aboriginal communities at mid-century. I won’t pretend that there was no violence or alcoholism, that patriarchy was not exerting itself in both public and private spaces. And although children living in the period I am writing about suffered horrendously in residential schools, my chapter on childhood will make reference to the schools, but not include stories from them. This is because I want to offer something that we may now build on. Those elders who went to residential schools or who may have otherwise had their traditional education disrupted, can still tell extraordinary stories about the strengths that existed in their largely land-based childhood communities. This is a knowledge that our current generation of elders sometimes doesn’t even recognize that they have.

These considerations are hopefully useful for those who engage with other groups in community-based arts practices,

*Maybe it involves encouraging these community members to move on from those stories, and to begin to draw from their past experiences to build visionary stories for a healthy and powerful future*

for I see it as our job as community-based artists and researchers to help people tell their stories, whatever the medium. Ultimately, we need to find ways to unlock the space so the story can come out. That certainly involves setting up an environment of trust and respect, which can be achieved by putting oneself through a thorough “ethics review.”

The work might also involve getting people to look at the types of stories that have been told about them in the past, or at misrepresentations of their group in the present. Maybe it involves giving people a venue to tell their stories of marginalization, dispossession or abuse. Maybe it involves encouraging these community members to move on from those stories, and to begin to draw from their past experiences to build visionary stories for a healthy and powerful future.

If one is going to collaborate with the storytellers, it certainly involves respecting and observing the protocols that they set out. This can look very different for each situation, as the process of earning the right to tell a story is different every time. (If, for example, you are working with women in a group home, the ethics review and protocols might involve hanging around and doing dishes for a few weeks before “getting started”!) Working with community-based stories also involves knowing the history and contemporary context of the communities you are working with, examining your own subject position and the power relations you may hold in relation to the participants, and acknowledging the abuses that have been committed by others in your position in the past.

To the students in the anthropology class, I say that ethics doesn’t have to be such an intrusion on the telling of story. Acting ethically and responsibly, and in collaboration with community, can be a way of opening up a whole new generation of stories and storytelling, just as that day the stories magically came spilling out of the elder who answered my questions unsolicited. If we do it right, we may discover new truths, truths that can help us move towards collective healing and wellness. I am grateful to be in the process of learning this type of story-gathering/storytelling, and happy to have shared some of what I know.

*Ekosi. Migwetch!*

#### NOTES

1. According to a news report from the BBC published on June 29, 2007 – confirmed by Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper in his November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2007 speech in Halifax, Nova Scotia, entitled *Government Achievements for Aboriginal Canadians*. For reference: [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/6252218.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/6252218.stm) (consulted on February 17, 2008); [www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=1887](http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=1887) (consulted on February 17, 2008).
2. Engrenage Noir / LEVIER has been involved in the development of The Montreal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy NETWORK since 2008. Working closely with members of the Montréal Aboriginal cultural community, LEVIER has participated in the creation of the NETWORK’s Art · Culture Working Committee and the NETWORK Steering Committee.
3. See her participation in LEVIER’s *First Orientation Meeting*, pp. 22–24, and LEVIER’s *Second Orientation Meeting*, pp. 25–27.
4. See the proceedings of *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Arts Practices*, pp. 51–61.
5. Toronto: Sumach Press, 2000.

*Given the emphasis LEVIER has always placed on collaborative process, it seemed appropriate to ask each person or group that contributed to shaping what LEVIER has become to participate actively in this publication. Material was therefore sent to individuals inviting their reflections about their experience with community or humanist activist art. Each person was free to respond in the form and length that she saw fit.*

*Here is the material that was distributed to LEVIER's network:*

- *Have you observed any changes (emotional, cognitive, economic, political, cultural, etc.) in yourself, your immediate surroundings or your social sphere as a result of your participation in a community or humanist activist art project?*
- *Over the years, six issues have often been raised both in the community and humanist activist art projects and public encounters supported by LEVIER: aesthetics and ethics; individual and collective; healing and activism; here and elsewhere; institutional and grassroots organization; resistance and celebration. While they are presented here — and elsewhere in the book, where they are used to cluster the different humanist activist art projects<sup>1</sup> — as binary pairs, these terms should not be seen in opposition to one another, but rather closely related aspects and different tensions of a single process. In light of your own experience, please comment on one or more of the above-mentioned tensions.*

*Dominique Malacourt<sup>2</sup> replied to LEVIER's invitation with a combined answer to the two questions.<sup>3</sup> The following text is the result of several revisions undertaken in collaboration with Devora Neumark.*

# Away and Here in Community Theatre, or the Power of Paradox

Dominique Malacourt

I am a practitioner of community theatre. After 25 years of practice in Montréal, the Lower Saint Lawrence region and Mali, I still feel I have the best job in the world. I learned the art of walking on a high wire without looking at my feet, but I have to admit that it still makes me dizzy. It must be the best job because it fits me like a glove, it answers my need for justice, my desire to play, my imaginative fervour for remaking the world on the stage and in life.

A look back: I was born in Belgium, in a region called the *Pays noir* [black country], coal country. The coal miners were the Italian-immigrant parents of my playmates. I lived on a street that crossed the town. Across from my house, I could see on the left the neighbourhood where the Italian miners lived, and on the right, the affluent neighbourhood of the Belgians: doctors, teachers and other professionals. My house was at mid-point on the street and I didn't recognize myself in either part of town. I was five years old and I didn't understand what was happening, but already I was angry. It was August 8, 1956, the day 262 miners died, swallowed up by the mine.

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, I hesitated between two occupations: defender of justice or clown (Don Quixote or Auguste)? In the end, I'm a little of both. My vision of the clown was as a nomad, and I like to travel. That's partly why I immigrated to Québec and why I still travel to other places. My view of myself as a defender of justice, influenced by my education, has a missionary side. But I'm trying to get over it!

I do both community theatre and tightrope-walking. If I don't tumble into the void, it's because I know I'm walking in my own shoes and not in anyone else's. Theatre workshops are special spaces/times, oases for replenishment. I love being there. I have led them on my own and in collaboration with others. My work has permitted me to get to know and work with activists, union people, the unemployed, people with disabilities, political refugees: people I likely never would have met otherwise.

In this movement that's so full of life, that takes me from the individual to the collective and from the local to the international, I have gradually invented my own model of collective creation, drawing on theatrical forms from popular theatre and carnival: clowning, storytelling, masks, chorus, parade, song, etc. At the start of my practice in 1986, I did "théâtre d'intervention,"<sup>4</sup> and more specifically, commissioned theatre in the form of forum theatre; what I do now is community theatre. This change of terminology is not insignificant. It defines what is at stake in this practice.

*Dominique Malacourt  
(see p. 87)*



In my early work, I was co-author, author, actor or director of commissioned shows. In collaboration with our sponsors, we would talk about a problem in order to educate a target audience. Although the approach was participatory, we were still professionals with a message. Little by little, I gave up commissioned theatre for community theatre, in which the creations are produced not *for*, but *with*. In this case, familiarity with the language of theatre by the participants directly concerned is a first condition. Because it is practised in collective creation — and because it is rooted in reality — community theatre becomes a place of freedom, equality and solidarity. It fosters citizens' expression, reflection and civic and political involvement. The practice of community theatre is for me a key path to cultural democracy.

Is this utopian? Of course! Dizziness and paradoxes guaranteed! While community theatre is the greatest job in the world, I also feel that it borders on impossibility. I question the meaning of my work and I very often wonder if it's worth the effort. From dream to reality, there are a lot of paradoxes bumping up against each other.

The first paradox, the one that gives rise to the others, involves the recognition of the profession. The practice of community theatre takes place on shifting ground. Straddling art and culture, taking a perspective of consciousness-raising and mobilization — or conversely, social integration, instrumentalization of art and working for collective or individual development — community theatre is still poorly defined, lacking in guidelines, rarely defended and sometimes considered outmoded and inward-looking. There is almost no recognition of the practice of community theatre by government bodies or in terms of funding.<sup>5</sup> Not only does our profession have no official existence, but also we have to disguise ourselves in order to work. We are always *too* something: too *social* for the arts, too *artistic* for the social sphere.

The second paradox, a consequence of the first, is related to time: to develop everyone's creativity so that creation is really collective and not arbitrary; so that the result does not take authority over the process; and to make significant links between the micro-, meso- and macro-social, undeniably takes time. But we are driven, very much against our will, to operate like veritable small businesses. When I meet my colleagues, I'm always stunned at how stressed and tired these women are.<sup>6</sup> On the rare occasions when we get together, when we ask the simple question "How are you?" the same monotonous cassette starts to play: "I'm tired. I haven't had a vacation in two years. I'm working like crazy," in a tone that varies from self-pity to self-importance. Propelled by this very North American frenzy, how much time do we have to delve deep or work in the long term instead of just doing short-term projects? What concessions are we prepared to make to keep doing our work and build ing our companies? How much time do we have left to develop as artists? Many of us are critical of the hegemony of neo-liberal, imperialist, competitive, individualistic culture. Caught up in an *engrenage noir*, a dark system, we are in survival mode every day, just trying to stay alive. We protect and isolate ourselves.

The next paradox: one of the objectives of community theatre is to counter isolation and to work with people who are excluded. But the shoemaker's children have no shoes because we are caught up in a mad rush. How do we find the energy to form bonds among ourselves, to defend our profession, to defend art for everyone? How do we get out of this vicious circle? Mirror, mirror, tell me where to look. I need others; I need to understand things.

Yet, over the years, I have formed wonderful alliances with my peers, Québec's pioneer practitioners and the next generation. I have worked with them in my two companies and for other companies that are friends. I have also shared some intense moments with them: the training days organized by Engrenage Noir / LEVIER, the Rencontres internationales de théâtre d'intervention [International symposium of *théâtre d'intervention*], the meetings of the Comité permanent du théâtre d'intervention [The permanent committee on *théâtre d'intervention*] (CPTI), at Université Laval, where I teach *théâtre d'intervention*. Although these meetings are very stimulating, I must say that my colleagues are all in the same situation as I am: they are running to keep up! The mirror effect is clear, but it's over too quickly. The next generation of practitioners, who have been increasing in number since the 1990s, are more available, but I don't see myself in their mirrors. They see me as a teacher. But I need mirrors and allies!

One day, by sheer luck, I met Caleli Castillo, a Guatemalan street mime, in a park. Our shared understanding was immediate and palpable. A few months later, we put together a first street squad, *La Bourse et le Voleur* [The stock exchange/purse and the thief], with some thirty Montréal participants and activists.

This unforgettable experience led to the creation of UTIL (Unité théâtrale d'interventions loufoques [Theatre unit for zany interventions]). Caleli and I complemented each other: he provided political analysis and gentleness, and I, determination and passion. But our collaboration did not last long. A few days after the end of the show, Caleli collapsed in the street with a heart attack. Instead of coming to his aid, a passerby stole his money and ID. Caleli died as he lived, in the street, anonymous. In 2000, I went to Mali for a four-month internship. Since then, I've gone back five times. My life took a new turn and the paradoxes continued. Of course, what you discover on foreign soil, the people you meet, the things you do and, finally, what you get out of your stay, depend on your personality, your status and your initial objectives.



*La Bourse et le Voleur*, with Caleli Castillo, rehearsal, street squad, Vues d'Afrique Festival, June 2000. Photo: Pierre Gagné



*La Bourse et le Voleur*, rehearsal, street squad, Vues d'Afrique Festival, June 2000. Photo: Serge Parent.

Most of the cultural actors I encountered in Mali were European: programmers looking for African authors, a director in search of actors, officers directing cultural traffic from the South to the North: *hunters* looking for exportable, exotic, accessible talent for the European audience. The main advantage I had over these headhunters was that there was no Canadian or Québec government program for community theatre projects in West Africa. It took me a while to realize that this was an advantage, because at first I was furious. I, too, needed financial support to develop cultural and intercultural projects. Since I hadn't received any, I went to Mali empty-handed, and that's what saved me, because, paradoxically, this forced distancing from the world of international cultural co-operation gave me a chance — obliged me — to eat from the same plate as the local people (literally and figuratively).

I, a true Westerner, always running, found myself taking my time. I had no choice, I adapted to the pace of Mali, a country where, to the despair of the volunteers, who were more concerned with efficiency, social life is more important than work. I gradually put down roots in the neighbourhoods and villages; step-by-step I set up theatre projects with the people, and I tried to understand Malian society from the inside. I really wanted to understand! I arrived empty-handed, but time became my wealth. Because it takes time in Mali to not be told what you want to hear, to not be taken in by the words of the many Malians who, after so many years of colonialism, post-colonialism and neo-colonialism, have developed the art of being chameleons. Putting down roots, recognizing possible alliances and taking my time would become my three guidelines.

I am not an anthropologist making field observations in order to study certain aspects of a particular culture. I do not have the scientist's claim to neutrality. I am a practitioner, and it is in action that I recognize myself. I immersed myself slowly but surely, bringing only my passion for theatre, my love of *palaver*, a traditional African form of debate, and the kind of naive daring you feel when you're away from home. Quite naturally, I became for the Malians what I am here: a community theatre facilitator. I worked with different groups in neighbourhoods in Bamako or in villages. I thus had the opportunity to enter the lives of theatre students, repatriated persons, street youth, women in prison, farmers and citizens. My putting down roots occurred not only in terms of work, but also in terms of an expanded family. I now have two little brothers, three sisters-in-law, seven children and a twin brother. I've formed lasting emotional bonds, a treasure so meaningful I can't express it in words.

The first year, my theatrical action was spontaneous, based on a number of chance meetings with young people in a rough neighbourhood in downtown Bamako. The show was called *Wariko*, which means "money problems," and was placed at the impassable boundary between the South and the North. Towards the end of my stay, I met Aguibou Dembele. I recognized him as a new ally. If our paths hadn't crossed, I'm not sure I would have returned to Mali, but would, like most interns, have stopped at my first overseas experience. I knew intuitively that this man of culture would act as a mediator.

Two years later, I was responsible for a group of theatre students as part of a Québec sans frontières [Québec without borders] project run by Canadian Crossroads International. Based on the lessons learned in my first stay, the project was carefully planned through constant correspondence between Aguibou Dembele and me. The nine interns from Québec were partnered with nine Malian interns to help them integrate into the villages. The theatre was intended to be both educational (creation by the students) and community-based (creation with the villagers). The theme was schooling for girls. By the end, the project had what was needed to envisage an ongoing exchange. However, it was not continued. The Canadian non-governmental Organization (NGO) we were working for had its own view of co-operation and it made the decisions.<sup>7</sup> End of the exchange.

That didn't stop me from repeating the experience in a neighbouring country, as part of the Festival international de théâtre pour le développement [International festival of theatre for development] in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.<sup>8</sup> This time I went under the auspices of an NGO, but autonomously. I worked collectively with Aguibou Dembele and Martial Bohui, an Ivorian musician. During my short stay, I co-facilitated a creation workshop with some twenty amateur practitioners in consciousness-raising theatre. The theme chosen by the participants was AIDS. One of them, Mahamadou Hassane, was typical of the group. "When there are problems in the village," he said, "I'm the one they look to. I do theatre to solve problems and to educate people." Mahamadou, nicknamed "The People" in his village, is an "old man" as they say there as a sign of respect. "The People" is Nigerois, a farmer, illiterate and head of the consciousness-raising troupe in his village. For this workshop, I was the *animatrice*, or facilitator, but it was "The People" and the other participants who *animated* me. I came to better understand the meanings of the words *amateur* and *animation*, which are related to the French words for *love* [*aimer*] and *soul* [*âme*]. The creation workshops were definitely an oasis of replenishment for me; the pleasure, however, did not blind me, and I recognized the difficult conditions that existed all around the oasis.<sup>9</sup>



Aguibou Dembele, September 2008. Photo: Dominique Malacort.

My fourth stay was a return to Bamako. I was facilitating alone, as during my first visit, but in a more structured framework. This time Aguibou Dembele was the coordinator. The group was made up of students from the Institut national des arts [National arts institute]. Among them were some former interns I was glad to see again. The group also included people who had been returned to the country, called in Mali the *refoulés* [returnees]. The hope of finding work to be able to feed their families has taken many young Malians to the gates of Europe, where they are at the mercy of the Moroccan and Spanish police and the people-smuggling networks. Many die along the way, and others are forcibly repatriated but try again. I found myself in a collective creation workshop with a dozen students and ten of these returnees, and I proposed a clown workshop to them. Combining social criticism and humour, the creation dealt with poverty and impoverishment. It culminated in a public workshop and led to the founding of a Bamako clown troupe by the returnees.

Doing community theatre in Mali is not easy. The satisfaction essentially comes through recognition. Wasn't that just what I needed?

This is how Aguibou Dembele described my involvement in Mali:

Other whites come to Mali to line their pockets at the expense of the actors, whom they treat like the new slaves — after the plantation slaves, it's now the cultural slaves who are being exported. Working with Malian actors enables them to get a lot of funding and big tours in Europe. But they don't actually do anything for Mali. You come as a volunteer to give workshops, put on plays and do community theatre in the villages and the prisons. You are enriched through the people and experiences, while others enrich themselves in money. You swallow the dust of the village while the others sleep with air conditioners.

*We also need to question the trendy new concepts many community and humanitarian workers seem to delight in*

I went to Mali one last time in 2007, for a completely different reason. In 2005 I had decided to do a PhD because I felt an urgent need to leave a record of my work, to tell the story of my practice and to look at it alongside the practices of two other pioneers: Aguibou Dembele and Jean Delval, a Belgian I'd met a few years earlier. Jean Delval was the founder of the Théâtre des rues [Theatre of the streets], the most radical guerrilla theatre troupe in the French community of Belgium, in the Pays Noir — which is no longer black, but grey, since unemployment has replaced work in the mines. Equipped with my tape recorder, I set out to meet these two men of the theatre to collect the narratives of their practice and to observe their workshop work. From being a practitioner, I became a researcher.

My doctoral research should be completed soon and culminate in the writing of a book. This article is therefore not a summary of my research, but rather a fragment of it. I will not discuss my meeting with Jean Delval, the activist actor-facilitator from Belgium who "plants bombs" on stage while leading his workshops with exemplary calm. Nor will I talk about the mirror effect he had on me; that will be the subject of another article. For now, let us stay in Mali.

Over time, through our shared projects, I came to see Aguibou Dembele as a man whose ideal of justice comes ahead of his personal career, an artist who is working for true cultural democracy, a man swimming against the current, a marginalized person. Disturbing but enlightening paradoxes have also marked Aguibou Dembele's professional path. Mirror, mirror!

### First Paradox: Being Both RECOGNIZED by the Community and EXCLUDED From It



Aguibou Dembele's workshop in the prison for boys, Bolé, Bamako (Mali), October 2007.  
Photo: Dominique Malacourt.

Aguibou Dembele is a well-known man of theatre in Mali. From 1979 to the present, he has been, in turn, director of the Groupe dramatique national [National theatre group] and initiator of the modern *Koteba*, teacher at the Institut national des arts, director of the Troupe de marionnettes pour enfants [Children's marionette theatre], director of the Ballets maliens and teacher at the Institut national de la jeunesse et des sports [National youth and sports institute] and the Conservatoire des arts et métiers multimédia [Conservatory of multimedia arts and trades]. A talented actor, he has played over 120 leading roles in the theatre. He is one of the country's foremost directors, having directed some thirty plays. He is also a pioneer in the development of consciousness-raising theatre, and has organized many campaigns on AIDS, the sexual mutilation of girls, vaccination of children, breastfeeding, human rights, etc.

Along with his work in art theatre and consciousness-raising theatre, he has developed another area of expertise that is

of particular interest to me: community theatre. A man of action, he goes to the villages, the prisons, the hospitals, etc. Why, with his professional record, is Aguibou Dembele swimming against the current? Why is he marginalized? Could it be because he takes his stand not in a political party, but in everyday life? In 2008, there were 105 political parties in Mali. This proliferation of parties is not a result of political dynamism; rather, the parties are places of power rife with cronyism and corruption. Not participating in the network means being excluded. In one of the many conversations we had in the fall of 2007 Aguibou Dembele told me:

Everyone who, like me, doesn't agree with the system, who opposes it, who resists in some way, has no say. I'm not the only one. Even doctors, the best doctors, who refuse to go along with the lies and the waste are relegated to filthy little offices. The best engineers are put in tiny offices and have no right to do research. You see, in every department, the government has its men and every group that comes into power has its artists. Do you understand what I'm saying?

It is by accepting the corruption that people get named to key positions or obtain contracts. In everyday life, Aguibou Dembele refuses this corruption that exists everywhere, including within the humanitarian, cultural and artistic fields. The consequences are severe: once again, not playing the game means being excluded.

### Second Paradox: Working WITH the Citizens and Being Muzzled

Aguibou Dembele works with the disinherited, as he calls them, or the excluded, as we would say in Québec: village women, street children, prisoners, prostitutes, the disabled, people with leprosy, etc. His artistic talent and his grounding in traditional oral culture allow him to produce collective creations outside the institutional framework. "As a man of the theatre, that's where I feel really useful. I am constantly enriched. Every new group gives me something. It's very interesting, it's not like with professionals, who are set in their ways."

Depending on the context, Aguibou Dembele would begin the workshop with a long palaver or an oral improvisation. He uses the participants' main resource: language. Speaking of the young women prisoners,<sup>10</sup> the vast majority of whom are illiterate, Aguibou Dembele said:

They have a very rich language. Yesterday, during an improvisation, one participant used a term, an image I had never heard. She compared herself to a *sotrama*, one of those minibuses that drive around all day transporting people. If you compare yourself to a *sotrama*, you're saying other people



will have to run fast. It means, I'm better than you; you will never be able to do as much as I do. It was very beautiful the way she said that, very beautiful and very comical. It was a line I don't want to lose.

In Mali, with Aguibou Dembele, writing is done directly from life.

The actresses improvise and I put their lines on page 14 of my memory. Everything is oral, I don't write anything down. At the next rehearsal, all the lines on page 14 are in order. Then I use them as a reference point. Often I'll move lines around; I sort them and make sequences instinctively. I emphasize each line that's going to trigger a reaction, a movement and a new situation that will in turn trigger another line.

That's how Aguibou Dembele always works:

I don't prepare for the workshop because I don't know whom I'll find in front of me. I don't know how they will behave, what will be the richness of their imagination. I don't know — so every time, I'm plunging into the unknown. You have to get to know people, to read between the words. That takes a lot of time, a lot of receptiveness, and a lot of listening. Writing from life is my forte. I have a knack for it. I can write on any kind of situation from life and create a coherent play on the spot, using other peoples' words, their expressions, their reactions.

### *Taking the time to really listen to other people's words without imposing inappropriate dialogue is a rich mode of communication*

Choosing and combining other people's words raises the question, here as elsewhere, of the sharing of power and the role of the participants in a collective creation. I asked this question many times in various ways, and Aguibou Dembele answered:

No, it's not a collective creation, it's a creation based on improvisation that I direct. I put the actors in a situation; it's the actors who find the ideas and express them in their own ways. I put the lines in order to make a coherent, developing text. I write the text with their sentences, which I respect. Even if time permitted, the actors couldn't correct the text, because they know only the playful side of theatre. They are nevertheless the real creators. I'm the one who transcribes the text orally: I write the letter they dictate to me; I am therefore not the author.

It is clear that not everyone sees the practice of collective creation in the same way. In my experiences as a facilitator in Mali, I was always the oldest in the group, and also the only white person. My Québec methods of collective creation quickly went by the board. It would have been very inappropriate in the eyes of the participants not to respect the words of "the elder." To achieve some degree of equality, you have to undo certain knots, but it has to be done with absolute respect, constant patience and a lot of humour: if not, you can unintentionally act in a way that is ethnocentric and that can lead to untying the knots holding together a society that is not your own. Aguibou Dembele navigates through creation and improvisation in his own way and in his own context. He remains the captain of the ship, always on the lookout for reefs or favourable winds.

Let's look more closely at Aguibou Dembele's ability to write from life. Where does he get this special skill? From an artistic point of view, he learned it long before his studies at the Institut national des arts. As a young boy in the village of Kirango, he was naturally part of the youth association, the *kotedens*. The boys do work of common interest for the village as a whole. They help the elderly in the fields, tend the herds and maintain the houses. After the harvest season, the boys put on theatrical events for the villagers at sunset. Summoned by drums, the people gather around the *fere*, the public square, and the boys present the *Koteba*, the traditional community theatre. *Koteba* is a Bamanan word that may be translated as "great snail," "theatre" and "community." Like the spirals of a snail, everything about it is circular. The structure of the society is based on interdependence — between young and old, between the dead (the ancestors) and the living (their descendants), between the individual and the community.

The *Koteba* is based on the players' ability to improvise. Its purpose is to express community values and to regulate the socio-economic and spiritual life of the village. Between the dance (which is always circular) and the play itself, a ritual takes place to ask the spirits and the elders for permission to proceed (our concept of time is turned upside down). The young people choose a person in the village whose behaviour goes against community values (for example, an unfaithful husband or a dishonest merchant), but the actors never name the offender. They parody the person, and of course everyone recognizes who it is. The viewers join in enthusiastically. Aguibou Dembele explains:

In the local history, the word *prison* didn't exist in the Bamanan language. For the Bamanan, a prison is not an enclosure with four walls; it is moral. "Better death than shame!" is their credo. To be criticized, ridiculed, judged and condemned anonymously in the public square is worse than a prison with four walls. A Bamanan prefers confinement, deportation or even death to condemnation by the *Koteba* in the public square.

From 1979 to 1985, Aguibou Dembele, then director of the Groupe dramatique national, introduced the modern *Koteba*, combining song, dance, improvisation, traditional themes and comic characters.

You could say it is based on the traditional *Koteba*, but I don't like the term "modern *Koteba*." It's really a new kind of theatre. The term "modern *Koteba*" is used to counter a negation. It was said by Westerners that before colonization there was no theatre in Mali. While it is true there was no French-language theatre in the French conception of the professional actor, the *Koteba*, with its actors and its circular stage, did exist.

Aguibou Dembele proposed to his colleagues that they do *Koteba* in the Bamanan language, and in spite of the initial reluctance,<sup>11</sup> it worked. There were more and more *Koteba* performances, and tours were very successful throughout the country. According to Aguibou Dembele, "The audience embraced this theatre, which speaks to them about themselves, their problems and their aspirations in their language, using forms from their own culture. It's their theatre." The improvisations were supplemented with material based on the reactions of the audience, and the text was fixed only after some twenty performances. This was the late 1980s, under a dictatorship, and a lot of artists were taking a strong stand against the abuses of the system. In 1991, after the regime was overthrown, the theatre artists were congratulated with great ceremony by the president of the new democracy, in recognition of the active role they played in changing the system.

But the reality contrasted with the discourse: after being celebrated, the artists had their funding cut. The history of the modern *Koteba* stops there; the men of the theatre were muzzled and the development of a professional Malian theatre for Malians came to a halt. There was not an actual political decision to cut funding. "It was a kind of underhanded, undeclared censorship, because the Malian democrats do not tolerate criticism," says Aguibou Dembele. The village *Koteba* is also disappearing as more modern forms of justice replace its regulatory function. The transmission of knowledge no longer takes place orally, but rather through school. The young people are leaving the villages for the city. The story evenings are being replaced by television. Nevertheless, in spite of everything, the *Koteba* is still the symbol of traditional Malian oral expression, whether as popular village theatre, an inspiration for professional artists or a source for the process of creation in community theatre.

### Third Paradox: Creating FOR the People Without Having Command of the Project

In the 1980s, Philippe Dauchez, a teacher at the Institut national des arts in Bamako and a French volunteer, *discovered* the traditional *Koteba* through his missions in rural areas and became a promoter of it. He undertook the creation of new troupes, combined consciousness-raising theatre with *Koteba*, and developed commissioned theatre. He called this type of theatre, an educational theatre created by professionals for rural people who were usually illiterate and dealing with the problems that "hinder development,"<sup>12</sup> *théâtre utile* [useful theatre].

This consciousness-raising theatre is made for Malians and borrows from the popular *Koteba* form, but does this mean it is control-free? While the creators are free to decide the form, the ideas to be conveyed remain under the control of the funding agency. Those who commission the plays, who are called sponsors or, more politely, partners, are international NGOs or local NGOs funded by international organizations. Following the collapse of the Malian professional theatre, many artists, including Aguibou Dembele, got involved in consciousness-raising theatre. This theatre is not only extremely useful for raising awareness of the problems diagnosed by the NGOs (AIDS, schooling, hygiene, etc.), it is also useful for providing a living for the actors. Aguibou Dembele humorously describes the consciousness-raising theatre as *théâtre alimentaire* [bread-and-butter theatre]. Speaking of education in Malian society, he observes:

It's as if they've stuck a modern facade from the 21<sup>st</sup> century on an 18<sup>th</sup>-century world. That creates a lot of problems of adaptation; you have to bring about changes in behaviour so that people can grasp today's problems. All this creates problems that I would like to work on. But paradoxically, it's impossible for me to do so if there are no commissions!

A new professional theatre practice is developing alongside this consciousness-raising theatre. Here we are again, with the foreign cultural actors I spoke of above: European programmers seeking African authors, directors seeking actors, officers directing cultural traffic between the South and the North: headhunters.

The many international co-productions, which Aguibou Dembele calls “export theatre,” create an interesting cultural mix. Unfortunately, the tours take place in the Western countries and in the elitist network of Centres culturels français [French cultural centres] established on African soil. The indirect disadvantage is that the Malian artists, attracted by international recognition and high fees, forget the situation of the Malian professional theatre. The latest statement from the new minister of culture, Mohamed El Moctar, as reported by representatives of the Fédération des artistes du Mali [Mali artists federation] (FEDAMA), confirms this: “You are the reflection of Malian identity beyond our borders. For that, you deserve respect and attention.”<sup>13</sup>

Regarding international co-creations, Aguibou Dembele’s point of view is clear: “There are those who take their cue from the French and do theatre for export. They mount big productions with French directors. It’s very good theatre, and perhaps necessary, but it doesn’t serve the Malian public.” Swimming against the current, Aguibou Dembele calls for a theatre conceived first and foremost for Malians, a theatre that “awakens the people’s awareness. A theatre deeply rooted in the modern world and the everyday problems of my fellow citizens.” This is a challenge that seems utopian, since, as we know, the Malian men of theatre are just managing to survive through the two existing networks: the bread-and-butter consciousness-raising theatre and international co-creations.

Aguibou Dembele is nothing if not consistent, and he has taken up the fight. His article “C’est le Président Alpha qui a tué le théâtre malien [President Alpha has killed Malian theatre],” published in *Le Malien Magazine* in 2000, openly criticized the democratic government of Alpha Oumar Konaré (since 1991), who, paradoxically, was less democratic culturally than the dictatorial government of Moussa Traoré (1968–1991). Aguibou Dembele was condemned for this attack on the democratic government; it seems the worst taboo is to compare the democracy to the dictatorship.

Certainly one is entitled to cast doubt on Aguibou Dembele’s views and to ask if he was one of those privileged artists who, during the period of dictatorship, were paid to create and criticize under government control. This raises a crucial question, that of the civil servants/artists who were paid by the government for many years. What is clear is that before, during and after the dictatorship, Aguibou Dembele has always spoken out: “I do a type of theatre that is not at all innocuous. I take positions on the political powers—that-be and I don’t flatter them.”

*Propelled by this very North American frenzy, how much time do we have to delve deep or work in the long term instead of just doing short-term projects*

## Conclusion

How did these faraway experiences fuel my thinking and my practice? The paradoxes are still there, and I’ve found few answers to my questions, but the mere fact of stopping and stepping back, of living in another context, made it possible for me to deal with the complexity of the situation a little more calmly. The more complex the world grows, the more absurd it seems for me to carry the world on my narrow Auguste/Don Quixote shoulders. It’s clear that there are also other effects in the long term. They are difficult to measure, as are the results of a theatrical intervention on the participants and the audience. My conclusions are therefore provisional and subjective.

Even so, here are a few of my discoveries. I was looking for a mirror, an ally! I found one, but did I need to travel 10,000 kilometres five times to see the light? I think all those kilometres were necessary for me; they helped me distance myself mentally. But I assume that if I had been in Tokyo, the impact would not have been the same. Some people feel a special attraction to Asia, others to Latin America, and still others to Africa. Each one feels a kind of connection between the self and a distant culture, as if it were already part of our being.

It was astonishingly easy for me to adapt to Mali. It’s wonderful to feel at home when you’ve only just arrived. It’s wonderful to recognize an ally when you’ve just met. Aguibou Dembele is a Muslim, he is polygamous, the head of an extended family, whereas I’m an atheist, monogamous and childless. By Canadian criteria, I live below the poverty line, but it’s clear that I’m privileged compared to Aguibou Dembele. Despite our religious, family, cultural and economic differences, when Aguibou Dembele talks to me about his vision of theatre, his problems and the obstacles he encounters, the mirror effect is indisputable.

The resonance occurred essentially with regard to the meaning of practice and the tenacity with which we pursue our quest, regardless of our concrete conditions. With respect to the method of creation, the mirror effect was indirect. When I was leading workshops in Mali, I learned to work without a safety net. Back in Québec, I feel more self-assured, open to the unexpected. I also made a wonderful discovery in the course of my research: the narrative of practice. Taking the time to really listen to other people's words without imposing inappropriate dialogue is such a rich mode of communication that I would like to integrate it into a future process of creation. It enabled me to deepen my knowledge as a facilitator and researcher.

But what did I get out of observing Aguibou Dembele's facilitation method? Clearly, the Malian *Koteba* can't be exported without being denatured, unless you take the whole village along. Writing from life; the capacity for memorization; the way of playing with words in improvisations — all come out of a traditionally oral society. The method is not exportable, and I can accept that. In community theatre, many practitioners, in both the North and the South, use other people's methods. For example, forum theatre, which was a revolutionary practice in its time, has become a "technique" that is easy to apply and administer. But we are not facilitators, we are *complexifiers*.

On the other hand, I also don't think a practitioner should work in a bubble, constructing an amazing method through secret efforts and talents. The method exists in the hearts of all practitioners, somewhere between their knowledge of theatrical language, their specific values (which should be as clear as possible) and the characteristics of their community. The method must be allowed, through regular reflective practice, to emerge, to grow, to develop without becoming rigid. What I have kept of Aguibou Dembele's method (as well as that of Jean Delval) is that he created it without referring to ready-made recipes for thinking and acting. What is interesting is the consistency between his values, his culture and his method. The issue, then, is not whether to assimilate a method or invent an original one. The challenge is being consistent ... and it's quite a challenge!

While other people's methods cannot be copied, they can inspire us in various ways.

So I learned. But did I bring anything to Aguibou Dembele? It's true we have done some wonderful projects and had many discussions. But my plan to write a book in which he would be one of the protagonists made him smile. And I still have to make the transition from oral (the interview) to written, translating his views faithfully. Out of ethical concerns — and as I will do at each stage of my writing — I sent him this text. He responded: "Our long years of collaboration have not been unproductive. You draw me as I see myself. You describe my being, my work and my thoughts respectfully and accurately. You know me and you understand me." Did I bring anything to the participants in the workshops? While I see the project with the group of interns as having the qualities needed to envisage an ongoing exchange, can I consider, after five stays, that the sharing was equitable and the exchange reciprocal?

Whether it is a co-operative project, a consciousness-raising campaign through theatre or a community theatre creation, three questions help me measure the quality of the exchange and differentiate an "equitable project" from one that "instrumentalizes": Do we have enough time and the means to carry out our intentions? Are we acting like missionaries, spokespersons or superheroes? Are we confusing our personal needs with the needs of those with whom we are partnered?

We also need to question the trendy new concepts many community and humanitarian workers seem to delight in. I am wary of the new vocabulary — "shared diagnosis," "egalitarian partnership," "intercultural bridge," etc. I don't want to be taken in by the rhetoric of many Western co-operants, who after so many years of colonialism, post-colonialism and neo-colonialism, have developed the art of manipulation.

The fact remains that the exchange can never be equitable, because the situation is fundamentally inequitable. I am a Québécois, and even without significant financial support, I went to Mali five times — empty-handed, as I mentioned, but with a credit card, a passport and the best anti-malaria medicine. And with all that, I led workshops with the returnees. There was a real exchange between them and me, but I must never forget that our borders are not the same: if the borders have been levelled for me, they are still insurmountable for them.

I come back from Mali with my Canadian passport and find myself face-to-face with the initial question, still unresolved: the recognition of our profession. The lack of recognition of community theatre in Mali, the obligation to work only on a project basis, without a long-term perspective, the dependence on sponsors, the low regard for popular theatre compared to export theatre, the marginalization of artists who defend art for all, the underhanded undeclared censorship, are all realities we share: I saw them in a magnifying mirror. Witnessing Aguibou Dembele in his constant stubborn fight for cultural democracy strengthens me in my own positions. He goes on stage even if he's not invited, he steps forward and takes a position.

I come back to Québec with the inner conviction that it is vital for us to build solidarity so that, here, democracy, whether political, economic or cultural, is not an empty word. My feeling of urgency lingers still and my motivation is invigorated: when



Workshop/talk by Aguibou Dembele, Université Laval, September 2008. Photo: Dominique Malacourt.



citizens become actors/creators, they take their responsibility as citizens and create democracy. I fear, unfortunately, that recognition of our practice will not come any time soon, because it implies recognition of the culture of citizenship.

I am finishing the first draft of this article on October 17, 2008, three days after the re-election of the Conservative government of Stephen Harper, who made disgraceful budget cuts of \$45 million to the arts. Government-subsidized culture is in peril, the artists and their sympathizers are saying. I, too, would like to see increased support for professional creation and dissemination, both internationally and locally, but above all, I demand the right to practice art for everyone, because art belongs to all of us: to artists, of course, but also to children, to workers, to the unemployed.

Government subsidized culture is in peril because the gap between the general public and the professional artists, which is aggravated by Harper's populist rhetoric, continues to widen. While artists from the community are taking up the fight, supported in solidarity by *recognized* artists, the practitioners in community theatre are in survival mode: for us, ostracism leads not to combat, but to turning inward. Our association, the CPTI, has only been permanent for four short years. Now everything is paralyzed. We can't even manage to meet. Nevertheless, companies and individuals are forming more and more partnerships with overseas practitioners, in Belgium, Africa and South America. No doubt, that is stimulating! In general, the practitioners are trying, each on their own, to save their skins, their companies, their contracts, their networks.

I am dismayed, but careful to make sure this situation does not become an obsession. I have learned to calm my impatience, to better analyze the challenges. I assume the role of defender of justice, and by extension, that of the black sheep, with less conviction. As the poet Henri Michaux wrote: "Les dents du loup ne lâchent pas le loup. C'est la chair du mouton qui lâche [The wolf's teeth do not give. It's the lamb's flesh that gives]." Am I more realistic? Yes! Am I less utopian? No! I continue to dream ... but I don't expect to fall back to sleep. I want the dream to be a waking dream. If in future years the practice of community theatre is still not recognized officially as a profession, so what! I will continue my practice as an activist.

In the Lower St. Lawrence region, where I've lived for the last four years, digging in and vigilance are my two new reference points. I don't want to create a troupe as this is definitely too onerous a task. I am gradually making alliances with members of the communities in my region. Here, I am not an *étrangère*, a foreigner! According to a typical Québec expression, I'm an *étrange*, a person who does not come from the parish.

So community theatre will get a homeopathic dose of medicine and will make its way, each practitioner at their own pace. But it will not be innocuous and isolated. I have called it *théâtre indocile* [unruly theatre]. In order to establish collaborative relationships with peers, I am now working on setting up a social art committee for the Lower St. Lawrence region that will include all disciplines. My retreat is therefore not total; rather, it is local and temporary.

## NOTES

1. The identification of these tensions was then used to classify thematically the various humanist activist projects supported by LEVIER, as presented in this publication (see *Shaping the Experience*, pp. 190–271).
2. See the workshop *The Ups and Downs of Partnership*, which she co-facilitated, p. 87, and the description of the humanist activist project *Tournée « enquête-action » en Belgique et au Burkina Faso*, in which she participated, pp. 249–250.
3. Guy Sioui Durand also responded to the invitation. His answer is included in the description of the humanist activist project *Urbaine urbanité III*, which he organized, pp. 243–244.  
The fact that only two people responded to these questions is what led to conducting the interviews that are included in this publication so that people who did not have time to put their experience into writing or were less comfortable with writing could nevertheless be heard and seen.
4. The term *théâtre d'intervention* appears in French since there is no adequate English translation for this theatrical practice. It is a polysemic term whose meaning varies depending on the country and the time. According to the Belgian Paul Biot, "Théâtre d'intervention refers to specific events of high political intensity combining [...] theatrical creation, activist engagement and active solidarity, has a sense of urgency and aspires to invent the future. Théâtre d'intervention is thus marked by its timely nature and relation to specific events." (in *Le théâtre d'intervention aujourd'hui*, no. 17 [2000], p. 27)  
In Québec, the term *théâtre d'intervention* is more generic than specific. According to Quebecker Hélène Beauchamp, "Théâtre d'intervention is a theatre of intelligence, of making connections. It is not just a mirror. It calls on people and urges them to make connections between everyday concerns, the political manifestations of power and the realities of social organization [...]. More than any other theatrical form, it evolves, proliferates, changes [...]. Struggles are in constant movement, and so is théâtre d'intervention." (in "L'usage du cœur dans le domaine réel," *Théâtre/public*, 61 [1985], pp. 43–47)
5. In 2008, the Canada Council for the Arts Artists and Community Collaboration Program allocated a relatively small sum to be shared amongst all community artists in Canada.
6. In Québec, 90 percent of practitioners are women.
7. See also: Dominique Malacort, "Expérience de théâtre social Nord/Sud," *Cahiers de théâtre JEU* 113 (April 2004).
8. For this I received support from Engrenage Noir / LEVIER (see note 2).
9. See also: Dominique Malacort, "Variations sur la guerre dans une ambiance festive," *Cahiers de théâtre JEU* 117 (April 2005).
10. Many of the prisoners were young, uneducated village girls who worked morning to night seven days a week as maids for Bamako families. If the young woman got pregnant (raped by the boss or manipulated for a crust of bread), she risked being fired in the city and repudiated by the village. The girl would then turn to infanticide. If she ended up in prison, she could spend years awaiting trial.
11. The actors of the Groupe dramatique national had become accustomed to working in French, using authored texts. Their reference was the traditional French theatre as promoted at the William Ponti School in Sénégal, a French school whose mandate was to educate the African elite.
12. In Burkina Faso, a neighbouring country, this theatre is called "theatre for development" and the form favoured is that of "forum theatre."
13. FEDAMA, "Le 'mal d'air' des artistes," [www.bamanet.net/actualite/Generale/5089.html](http://www.bamanet.net/actualite/Generale/5089.html), November 22, 2007 (consulted June 8, 2008).

Petra Kuppers  
(see p. 64)

*As i was walking down  
the street i saw this man  
holding a camcorder in  
each hand. when he saw  
me he started mumbling  
about the handicapped.  
i cant recall what it was  
exactly he said but i got  
the idea that he was the  
recorder for the cosmos  
and he told me who i was  
and my talents in life. i  
asked him how he had  
this knowledge, he said he  
was disabled too because  
he had to carry these  
recorders all day. he  
invited me along but  
realized i was on my own  
path. we shook hands  
as best we could. and said  
see you later  
— Neil Marcus*

*I play, dance, write,  
talk, question and listen  
with my ears and body  
to discover who I am  
and explore my shifting  
relationships to people,  
community, history,  
myself and my  
ever-changing body.  
With The Olimpias,  
I resonate with the  
productive tensions  
engaged in the inbetweens  
and intersections of  
performance, disability,  
non-disability, difference,  
and connection in life/art.  
— Leora Amir*

Petra Kuppers has been a LEVIER contributor for many years. The conversation between Devora Neumark and Petra — which began at a conference held in Germany in 2001<sup>1</sup> — has continued over the years, resulting in a number of collaborations initiated at times by Petra and at times by Devora on behalf of LEVIER. In 2004, Petra was invited to facilitate a workshop in Montréal entitled A Culture That's 100% Accessible?<sup>2</sup> Following this event, Petra invited Johanne Chagnon and Devora in 2007 to contribute to two of her publications.<sup>3</sup>

LEVIER asked Petra to participate in this publication in such a way as to link her community performance practice with a critical reflection on disability activism. As recent studies show, poverty and disability are greatly correlated, but the two do not have to be synonymous. Within Canada, as in most places around the world, disability often means a life of poverty and that living in poverty often leads to greater incidence of disability.<sup>4</sup> Culture's role in moderating the marginalization of people living with disability is especially significant if we take into account the extent to which "disabled performers challenge established aesthetic norms every time they enter the public domain."<sup>5</sup>

Petra chose to respond to LEVIER's request in association with two individuals with whom she has been closely collaborating. Neil Marcus is a playwright, actor, poet, and performance artist who earned national acclaim when he crafted his experiences as a man living with a severe neurological disorder, dystonia, into a powerful staged work. Storm Reading, first produced in the late 1980s, challenged audiences to re-evaluate conventional ideas about disability and set a standard for performing artists with disabilities. Leora Amir is an adult education instructor and studies theatre and dance at California State University, Sacramento. For the last eight years Leora has dealt with, and been sparked by, a neurological "condition," her explorations into the field of disability studies, and her contacts with people in the disability performance/art community/communities.

## To Dance in the Circle: Disability and Accessible Aesthetics

### An Olimpias<sup>6</sup> Essay

Petra Kuppers, Neil Marcus and Leora Amir

Disability Culture  
Disability Access  
Disability Aesthetics

Access for whom? On whose grounds? Integration or expression, pride, celebration, the heft and depth of experience? Pleasure? Spectacle? Love? We are in time and space together, carefully, attentive, in contact.

In these pages, voices of Olimpias collaborators create a round, a call and response, a circle dance.



Rehearsal photo from *Burning*, an Olimpias Production, Berkeley, California (dancers Neil Marcus, Leora Amir, Christina Braun). Photo: Kelly Rafferty

**Neil Marcus:** When I think of dance I think of popular culture: TV movies, clubs, John Travolta, Fred Astaire, *Dirty Dancing*, Gene Kelly, *Flashdance*. It seems quite right that I, as a disabled person, have a lot to give to the world of dance. My disabled moves do fit right in. Dance is all about how our bodies speak. What our aesthetics are. What we “say”. Certainly I have a lot to say. Perspective on the whole world.

I have entered the world of the dance and I have made my mark.

**Petra Koppers:** What are the relations to the mainstream? Beyond access (we don’t just need spaces without stairs, or budgets for Braille instruction, or helpers), we need to re-think what art processes can be, and what beauty can mean.

As disabled artists we need to — and can — challenge dominant aesthetics. We can decide to be, but we do not need to be, exotic others in some postmodern production that still relies at heart on a 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic of vanishing humans: on waifs, machines, on dead maidens and consumption. We can also dance with many other dancers, disabled or not, who embrace a more affirmative logic of embodiment, in which touch and breath and skin and the vibration of the ground bind us into a kinesthetic circle.

Disability questions what dance can be: high-tech acrobatics. The touch of a feather on skin. A circle dance. Jumps and slides. The majestic turning circle of a powerchair. The ballet of crutch and foot and cane. The straight and curved lines of manual wheelchair users, never matched by bi-pedal dancers. The sound of two hands intertwining across a distance.

**Neil Marcus:** bubbles float past my window as i write this. someone is sending spheres of soap to the heavens. maybe it’s a person in a wheelchair who wants to be free of the confines. disability is a reality that seldom gets expressed; but to talk about it without including the feeling of the wind on her cheek seems to be telling only part of a story.

**Leora Amir:** Dance gives me a way of looking at disability through a different lens. When I am watching a duet, I am attentive to the connection between these two people — what is their relationship? How are they connected? What do they do for each other? How do they lift each other? Why do they lift? And what joy to be lifted, supported, held closely to another’s body, let down sensuously or humorously or casually. Two people with connection and willpower. This is partnering — onstage and in everyday life. (How does their physical connection affect their lives, their minds, feelings, and perceptions?)

But offstage, the non-disabled world’s viewpoint towards the lifted is, “Oh, they need to be lifted because they’re weak, they can’t do it themselves, how sad...they’re so dependent” or if they’re enlightened, they’ll maybe say, “We’re all interdependent” or something. But this is partnering too — both people are a full part of the dance. In a way, a duet or a relationship takes two who are equally involved, not equally strong in all areas. (Good partners complement each other, work well together, spark each other and support each other.) At a contact improv class, a larger man said, “I, too, want to be lifted.” I want to take the ride too. I want the freedom and the view from that place too. Dance gives me a way of looking at disability through a different lens.

Drawing by Neil Marcus.



*Cripple Poetics* poetry reading, Adelaide, Australia. Photo: community participant.

**Petra Kuppers:** Dance/contact/pedagogy. I have danced all my life, although my stamina and reach ebb and flow with time. I dance with other disabled people, moving quickly past the scripts for managing non-disabled expectations. In the Olimpias Performance Research Projects, we work on expressions outside "mixed-ability." Non-disabled people dance in the Olimpias, as allies, celebrating the creative expression of disability culture, which extends beyond the limits of specific impairments.

My creative aim has never been to integrate disabled dancers into non-disabled dance practices, or even to change non-disabled dance practices into accessible formats.

I am intellectually interested in those projects, too, and deeply supportive of all expressions that broaden human art practice. But my own art work and the work I host as a community artist take the necessary time and the necessary space to focus on the specific bodily and sensorial creative expressions of people whose bodies, senses or minds have been medically labeled as pathological.

In recent years, as my physical compass yet again grows smaller, I find poetry an art practice well suited to dancing and performing differently. I find closeness, connection and love in dance: in the everyday, on the stage and in our community circle.

### Contact Improvisation

Drags her foot, languid, with a stutter,  
ankle sweeps the ground, a little vibrato on the toe  
and she dances, her fingers float up, her chin down.

If you catch her carefully on the marley,  
handbreadth beneath her left subscapularis,  
your weight hangs in the balance.

You move together: floor dancer, stepper,  
the guy with the wheelchair lays a casual curve  
crutch girl kicks up the cane in a grand round

blind bloke connects round metal and a clavicle's tip  
sleight of hand, quick fingers float into song:  
bodies stretch over and now

into contact.

Levitation: gaps disappear in the light

You can see inside.



Lecturing about dance: Neil Marcus and Petra Kuppers with community participants, Warrnambool, Victoria, Australia. Photo: Andrea Harper.





Olimpias school visit in Alice Springs, Australia. Photo: community participant.

**Neil Marcus:** There are two quotes that I base a lot of my thinking on.

The true revolutionary is motivated by great feelings of love (Che Guevara)

If I am to be part of the revolution, there must be dance (Emma Goldman)

In dance. in my life. the questions of integration. disability. nondisability. mixed abilities. they are all put forth as issues to ponder. and to find and state and manoeuvre some correct way to label the difference of being...

I say, dance is the stuff dreams are made of. My movements, or lack thereof, are as bountiful and beautiful as my imagination makes them. Body expression has no boundary. It's universal

Every body can dance. Everybody can love.

There is no disconnect between the two.

#### NOTES

1. The *Translation, Transition, Transformation* Performance Studies International conference held at the University of Mainz.
2. See the proceedings of this workshop, pp. 64–65.
3. *Community Performance: An Introduction and Community Performance: A Reader*, edited in collaboration with Gwen Robertson (New York and London: Routledge, 2007).
4. For more information about the connection between poverty and disability in Canada, see the Council of Canadians with Disabilities web link: [www.ccdonline.ca/en/socialpolicy/poverty](http://www.ccdonline.ca/en/socialpolicy/poverty).
5. Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).
6. For information about the Olimpias project, see p. 64.

Bob W. White  
(see p. 101)

After Bob W. White took part in the Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program in November 2006,<sup>1</sup> LEVIER asked him to further develop the reflections about collaboration that he had shared with the participants.

Bob W. White is an associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at the Université de Montréal. He has conducted extensive fieldwork in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo, and is the author of *Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire*, a monograph that examines the relationship between popular music and political culture. He has published on the performance and the history of Congolese popular dance music, the political culture of the Mobutu regime, the critical study of world music and more recently on intersubjectivity in cross-cultural relations. He is currently working on a comparative analysis of cultural policy in French-speaking Africa and audience-based approaches to the study of culture and politics in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa.

# The Power of Collaboration

Bob W. White

*Taupe : petit mammifère, répandu en Europe, en Amérique, etc., caractérisé par un corps oblong, un pelage ras, velouté, noir ou gris argenté, un museau allongé en boutoir, des yeux très petits, une ouïe et un odorat développés, des membres antérieurs robustes, aux mains larges, à paume nue, aux doigts munis d'ongles tranchants, servant à fouir et qui vit sous terre, se nourrissant d'insectes, de vers, de larves, considéré à la fois comme utile et comme nuisible aux cultures.*

— Dictionnaire Larousse

*Je ne vois guère plus qu'une taupe; et d'ailleurs j'irai bientôt dans leur royaume, en regrettant fort peu celui-ci, mais en vous regrettant beaucoup.*

— Voltaire<sup>2</sup>

## A Mole at the Workshop<sup>3</sup>

When I spoke to the participants in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program* organized by Engrenage Noir / LEVIER in November 2006, I described the feeling of saturation I had with respect to what was said the first day. As if to confirm that impression, one of the participants in the workshop, with a mixture of irony and affection, compared my presence to that of a mole. Throughout that first day of activities and discussion, I had thought about the possibility and the importance of my speaking up, but I didn't feel ready. "With broad paws and bare palms," I took notes, and I listened while trying to grasp the various levels of complexity I had been asked to comment on. Not only was I afraid of my voice and everything it represented to the ears of others (university professor, white man, anthropologist), but frankly, I also wondered about the value and relevance of my expertise. What was I doing in a context of artistic and community practices that, like many contexts, probably had no knowledge of, or need for, anthropology, a discipline "considered both useful and harmful to ... culture"? What did I have to add concretely? The answer to this question, as unsatisfactory as it may be, will be the subject of this text.

The anthropological approach to fieldwork, that at some level has always required collaboration between anthropologists and their subjects, is based on observing "other cultures" — that is, the cultural aspects of non-Western societies, since historically most anthropologists have come from the West — but also on listening, although that aspect is often neglected in the stories the discipline tells itself about its role in history. Over the last several years, I have been working on the idea of *listening*, as method<sup>4</sup> and also as metaphor<sup>5</sup> — not only listening to others, but also listening to the self while listening to others.<sup>6</sup> For reasons that may seem obvious, listening is an integral part of any collaborative endeavour. However, collaboration in anthropology more often refers to collaboration among anthropologists than to collaboration between anthropologists and representatives of the groups they are studying. In my own research, it took a long time before I worked explicitly on the subject of collaboration, not only because I was not sure if it was an acceptable subject in my colleagues' view, but also because there are still relatively few theoretical models for thinking about this issue.<sup>7</sup> I am therefore grateful to the organizers of the LEVIER training program for giving me the opportunity to take my reflections beyond my role as an

anthropologist. Before answering the question “Why work together?” which is the main purpose of my article, I would like to define the various components of collaboration, especially the question of how power can have an impact on interactions among individuals.

## Power and Collaboration

Of course, when I speak of the “power of collaboration” I am playing on the ambiguity of the word *power*, which can mean “force” but also “authority.” It is important to set these two definitions of the word aside while we consider what is at stake in collaboration. As Michel Foucault would say, power is not something one possesses; rather, it is a fundamentally relational phenomenon: “Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations.”<sup>8</sup> The concept of *hegemony* used by Gramsci,<sup>9</sup> which makes a crucial distinction between *power* and *power relations*, allows us to distance ourselves from the simplistic opposition between domination and resistance that has too long characterized the literature in anthropology.<sup>10</sup> According to Gramsci’s analysis, hegemony does not refer to the use of force, but rather to a situation when the dominant classes impose an ideology that is explained as “common sense” and is generally accepted and reproduced in a society, even by its most marginalized elements. It is in this sense that we can say that the dominated participate in their own domination, in part because the ideology of the dominant classes prevents a critical view of how that domination operates. In other words, the dominant needs the dominated. This model of power, which comes out of the Marxist tradition but also echoes Plato’s lesson on false consciousness and alienation in the cave allegory, allows us to glimpse the full relational complexity of power.



Bob W. White and his colleague Yoka at the beginning of his last research trip to Kinshasa in July 2008.  
Photo: Serge Makobo.

Anthropology has focused a good deal on the question of power, mostly in the study of “micropolitics,”<sup>11</sup> the analysis of the dynamics of power in a context of social, local or affective dynamic. At the same time, anthropology as a discipline has also been much criticized for the way it bases its own authority as a manifestation of power. In an analysis that is still as fresh now as it was 25 years ago, Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other*<sup>12</sup> suggests that anthropology has created its own object of study (“exotic” or “premodern” or “primitive” peoples), using writing strategies that create temporal and geographic distance between the West and the other cultures of the world. In fact, the denial of shared time and space — what Fabian calls *coevalness* — constitutes the erasure not only of a relationship of intersubjectivity between self and Other, but also of the presence of the anthropologist observing culturally-based forms of knowledge.

One of the criticisms that could be made of Fabian’s analysis today is the fact that it is limited to writing (an observation that puts him, despite significant differences, in the same current as the anthropological postmodernists in the United States), without proposing models for understanding what exactly is erased and what can be done to remedy this situation. But Fabian’s analysis opened the eyes of many anthropologists, bringing them back to the ethnographic field as the intercultural site par excellence, where knowledge produced on the practices, beliefs and values of a particular people is the result of a series of encounters and conversations. His subsequent work<sup>13</sup> deals with the revalorization of local knowledge and the impossibility of understanding the cultures of others outside the metaphor of conversation. In this sense, Fabian’s work has contributed positively to a resurgence of interest in the idea of knowledge as a “goal in itself” without, however, talking about the practice or theory of collaboration.

In recent years, anthropology has shown growing interest in the question of collaboration, not only because all ethnographic work is the product of ongoing collaboration between researcher and subject, but also because collaboration represents an entry point into various discussions about ethics. According to Luke Eric Lassiter, “collaborative ethnography is first and foremost an ethical and moral enterprise, and subsequently a political one; it is not an enterprise in search of knowledge alone.”<sup>14</sup> It is no longer appropriate to simply talk about the “Aboriginal point of view,” as the previous generation of anthropologists did, or of the “dialogic” or “polyphonic” forms of ethnographic texts, as the next generation did. In contemporary anthropology too, we observe an “irruption/eruption of ethics,”<sup>15</sup> in which “ethics is not only an attitude of

questioning, a predisposition and an intention, but a project — a fallible and perishable project — that exists in tension with (and therefore bound to), a setting, history, tradition and language.”<sup>16</sup> Drawing in part on the work of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur, Louise Lachapelle explains that any attempt to articulate an ethics of community art must first be cognizant of the historical relationship between art as an autonomous form (“art for art’s sake”) and art as social engagement, since “the practices of community art remain dependent on this artistic culture that aims to change the world.”<sup>17</sup> This caveat is also important for the theories and the practice of collaboration.

It is difficult to talk about a “method” or a “philosophy” of collaboration.<sup>18</sup> The theoretical approaches to this topic are very varied and most of the models available recognize the fact that every collaborative process is unique because every collaboration is unique. Despite these factors of complexity, a distinction can usually be made between “participatory” and “strategic” collaboration.<sup>19</sup> Participatory collaboration combines human and material resources around a shared objective that benefits all participants in the project, although not necessarily for the same reasons. Strategic collaboration tends to strengthen the status or authority of the persons who initiate and control the collaboration. The difference between these two poles is often difficult to establish, in part because there are many cases in which collaboration is expressed through a participatory rhetoric but is structured around a strategic approach.

### The Pitfalls of Collaboration

Edith Regier’s film *Reparative Culture*,<sup>20</sup> which was shown during the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program* organized by LEVIER, begins with some words often attributed to the Aborigine educator and activist Lila Watson: “If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then let us work together.” But according to a contribution to the blog of the Northland Poster Collective (an on-line store for material on social justice), this quotation — which has been repeated “thousands of times” — is not from Lila Watson. “Ricardo” (a founding member and artist) explains:

We create a lot of art based on quotes and are always trying to get the most accurate information we can on them. After some years we found some citations of it that mentioned Lila Watson. Excited to finally find a source for the quote we decided to research it. We finally tracked Lila down. She is still a community leader and activist (in Brisbane, I think). Anyway, we explained that we wanted permission to use the quote in a poster. Her husband (who acted as go-between in these conversations) knew exactly what quote we were calling about. It had already made the rounds widely. Lila explained that she had been part of an Aboriginal rights group in Queensland (the hotbed of Black Power organizing at the time) in the early 1970s. They had come up with the phrase in the course of their work — probably for some of the printed literature they produced as part of their organizing. She could not remember the exact process of how it had come about. She was quite clear, though, that she was not comfortable being credited for something that had been born of a collective process.<sup>21</sup>

*The idea of “giving a voice to” is problematic because it makes no distinction between the ability to speak and the right to speak*

After receiving this information, Northland began to use the attribution “Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, 1970s,” despite the accusing messages they receive from time to time on the subject: “Of course, we still receive a few indignant e-mails such as ‘you know you should attribute this quotation to Lila Watson, Aboriginal activist and educator.’”<sup>22</sup> The irony of this story is obvious: despite the importance the quotation places on a collaborative approach, the process of collective work is totally erased when it is attributed to the genius of a single individual.<sup>23</sup> In the following section, I will explore the complexity of these words, looking at the meaning of its various components.

### “If You Have Come to Help Me You Are Wasting Your Time...”

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could be described as the humanitarian era, and many authors have discussed the political effects of a culture or industry of intervention.<sup>24</sup> But this tradition of “coming to help you” certainly did not begin with the emergence of the category “Third World.”<sup>25</sup> Before humanitarian aid, anthropology wanted to save Aboriginal cultures whose traditions seemed to be endangered, but anthropology was also an instrument of domination in the development of the colonial project.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, and for much longer, Christianity spread throughout the world in order to save souls, often with devastating effects. The desire to help others is not bad in itself, but the desire to save them presents certain pitfalls:



With violence, creativity, and the tendency to want to save others so intricately related, it is no wonder how often the anxiety experienced at the threshold of change gets acted out through violence or attempts at heroism — as creativity and personal development are much more demanding.<sup>27</sup>

I share with Julie Fiala the concern for distinguishing between authentic collaborations and those “that merely pretend to understand it,” although I know that the concept of authenticity is problematic and that the continuum model does not solve the problem of opposition. In one of the rare texts that analyze in concrete terms the relationship between the intentions and the effects of collaborative work, Fiala presents three examples of collaboration in the context of community art. According to her, the collaborative project of the artist Judy Chicago (*The Dinner Party*<sup>28</sup>) “is less collaborative than directive, more directive than co-operative,”<sup>29</sup> and the approach of the artist Suzanne Lacy hides behind a collaborative rhetoric.<sup>30</sup> “The relationship between her self and Others is not at all reciprocal: the others have become pawns in *her* game.”<sup>31</sup> Fiala’s analysis is detailed and precise from the point of view of both art and ethical thinking. She contrasts the work of Chicago and Lacy with that of Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge,<sup>32</sup> which she considers much more collaborative. It should be noted, however, that Fiala provides less evidence to support the collaborative example (Condé and Beveridge) than the directive examples (Chicago and Lacy), either because it is easier to say what collaboration is not than what it is, or because Fiala is more approving of the Condé and Beveridge’s collaboration. In either case, what is not said seems important here.

### “But If You Have Come Because Your Liberation is Bound Up with Mine...”

One of the greatest pitfalls in wanting to help the Other is the lack of distance of the self and the danger that the self will project its need for effectiveness (“It’s horrible! We have to do something!”) and recognition (“We are their only hope”) onto the others. From this point of view, the Other is not someone who is fighting every day to reach his or her goals and who faces obstacles invisible to the outsider, but rather someone who needs to be liberated, someone who is suffering, someone without resources or recourse. The concept of resonance, an important concept for the understanding of intersubjective and intercultural dynamics, may help the Self acquire some detachment from him- or herself. According to the Norwegian ethnologist Unni Wikan:

Resonance thus demands something of both parties to communication, of both reader and author: an effort at feeling-thought, a willingness to engage with another world, life, or idea: an ability to use one’s experience ... to try to grasp, or convey meanings that reside neither in words, “facts,” nor text but are evoked in the meeting of one experiencing subject with another or with a text.<sup>33</sup>

Resonance can be defined as the feeling or emotional reaction that arises in us when faced with the difference of the Other: disdain, fear, frustration, confusion, fascination, unease, anger, etc. Resonance in itself is not productive. On the contrary, if it remains in the realm of the unspoken, it can have very negative consequences on the relationship between self and Other. But like Hans-Georg Gadamer’s concept of prejudice,<sup>34</sup> and because resonance, like prejudice, is universal, the intelligent use of resonance is a necessary condition for an intersubjective or collaborative process. In other words, awareness of the individual, social and cultural baggage of the self is essential to our understanding of the Other; indeed, according to Gadamer, it is a fundamental condition of that understanding.

Resonance, as awareness of the suffering of the self, enables the self to better understand the link between his or her own liberation and that of the Other. It is true, as Martin Luther King stated, that injustice is everybody’s business (“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”), but it is also important to show how privilege hides behind the ideology of opportunity or perseverance (the highest expression of which is the famous “American dream”) and how, in the history of the world, the accumulation of wealth is less the result of progress than of exploitation. It is in this sense that the liberation of the self is linked to the liberation of the Other: while the survival of some people is threatened, others are imprisoned by the webs of the ideology that justifies their privilege:

Despite its bitterness and violence, the whole point of Fanon’s work is to force the European metropolis to think its history together with the history of colonies awakening from the cruel stupor and abused immobility of imperial dominion.<sup>35</sup>



Photo from the book *The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie’s African American Community*. Photo: Danny Gawlowski.

Working with the Other requires that the self recognize his or her own perceptions, but also his or her vulnerability:

It is precisely this “intersubjective vulnerability” that situates collaboration in relation to ethics, not an ethics of individuation that separates Self from Other, but rather an ethics of responsibility that unites Self and Other. A collaborative ethics, I feel, is similar to Gilligan’s second model: it is an ethics of attention, reactivity and responsibility.<sup>36</sup>

### “In this Case, We Could Work Together...”

While the concept of collaboration refers to the possibility of “working together,” a theory of collaboration should not make the mistake of presuming consensus, harmony and equality. In other words, all reflection on collaboration should take into consideration the dynamics and the stakes of power (power in the sense of imposition of authority). At the same time, we need a positive model of collaborative work (power in the sense of force), an ideal to reach if we want to bring about social change through common or shared projects. What are the factors that favour the development of a true “collaborative ethics?” First of all, flexibility with respect to the objectives and results of the project, an attitude of detachment, “without being attached to any specific outcome,”<sup>37</sup> is important. Listening also plays a role, as long as it is active listening that truly seeks to help the Other to grow.<sup>38</sup> Finally, there is creativity, a source of inspiration, certainly, but also of problems, because creative processes — like concepts of beauty — not only are subjective and personal, but also often remain in the realm of the unspoken.<sup>39</sup>

*It is true that injustice is everybody’s business, but it is also important to show how, in the history of the world, the accumulation of wealth is less the result of progress than of exploitation*

### Criteria for Evaluating Collaboration

If we accept the proposition that human relationships are always already marked by inequality, how can those persons who possess power ensure that they do not abuse their status, and how can subalterns “speak truth to power” without endangering the future of the collaboration or their role in it? What are the signs that enable the various collaborators to “read” the power dynamics in the development of a collaborative project? What criteria should be used to evaluate the nature and quality of collaboration?<sup>40</sup>

#### • Management of the body

What are the visible signs in the body language exchanged among the various members of the collaboration? Here it is necessary, above all, to look at the dynamics between persons who have different degrees of power in the collaboration. Is this a matter of distance, of a mutually admiring gaze, of a positioning of authority, of closeness, of affection or of indifference?

#### • Management of speech

The idea of “giving a voice to” is problematic because it makes no distinction between the ability to speak and the right to speak. Take the example of Cathy Stubington (*Something From Nothing*),<sup>41</sup> who is an instrument for the voices of others; she is always present, and we listen to her listening to others. Compare her voice with that of Edith Regier (*Reparative Culture*)<sup>42</sup> and you will see quite a big difference with regard to the management of speech. It is not because speech is distributed (as in the expression “to give someone the right to speak”) that this is necessarily a problem of power. It is not a question of “giving the right to speak,” but of creating the conditions that make speech possible (see the example of the group *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors* [Open your treasure chest]).<sup>43</sup>

#### • Conflict management

Self-censorship is a real problem, but here I am thinking in particular of the concept of “creative conflict” as explained during the LEVIER training program. This does not mean that we should seek conflict; but when conflict occurs, you have to be able to air it in order to find a lasting solution that releases the tension in the group and puts out the fires of resentment. Have the interests and values of the various members of the group been articulated? Is responsibility for the conflict shared? Is reconciliation authentic? Is it able to change the relational dynamics as well as the perceptions of the self?

#### • Time management

Time is one of the most precious resources in collaboration. In other words, collaboration requires a lot of time. A preoccupation with obtaining results can indicate that the project is not providing enough time for quality collaboration. Is there time allowed for exploration, for correcting errors and for understanding? For ensuring that all the members of the group possess the same information? Is there enough time for all the steps in the collaboration, especially those having to do with objectives and project design?

#### • Management of power

Power is something very subtle, especially in contexts where egalitarian discourse predominates (community action, certain art contexts, international co-operation, certain areas of academia, etc.). Are differences of status within the group explicit? Are the roles of the various members of the group clearly defined? Do the processes of consultation for decision-making permit the decision-makers to be guided by the feelings and fears of the group? If decisions are not taken by consensus, are the decision-making criteria known and understood by all members of the group? What are the motivations and inspirations of the project organizers?

#### • Management of diversity

Are the persons responsible for the project aware of the many forms of diversity within the group? Not only do human beings come to a collaborative project with diverse personal objectives (self-realization, career development, humanitarian concerns, curiosity, social networking, etc.), but they also come with varying traditions (spiritual tradition, socio-economic status, level of education, linguistic background, sexual or cultural identity, etc.). Some of these differences are more important than others at different times. Are the persons responsible for the project able to name these differences without resorting to stereotyping the participants? Are the participants open to discussion of these differences and their potential impact on their interpretation of reality or on the evolution of the collaboration?

#### • Management of fear

Many problems have a common source: fear. In every situation of collaboration, there are numerous fears: fear of losing oneself in the project, fear of losing the participation of the others, fear of failure, etc. One participant in the training program used the magical expression "internal saboteur" to describe the little voice within each of us that makes us doubt our ability and often by extension the intentions of others. Will the persons responsible for the project create conditions that allow this voice to express itself, to name the "internal saboteur" and to guide it so that it becomes a positive factor for the progress of the project as a whole?

*If we accept the proposition that human relationships are always already marked by inequality, how can those persons who possess power ensure that they do not abuse their status*

### Why Work Together?

Experience with the collaborative approach clearly shows that it is not possible to collaborate with everyone or in all situations. In a research project on the reception of popular music in the Democratic Republic of Congo, my colleague Lye Yoka and I called into question the "collaborative" nature of the project:

We put this word in quotation marks because we are not sure that what we experienced is a true collaboration, or even, at the time of writing this article, whether collaboration should be the standard by which we measure the success of the project. After all, it has never been proven that collaboration can change the world.<sup>44</sup>

In a process of self-critical analysis, the obstacles to working (conflicts, differences of opinion, misunderstandings, etc.) can be used as elements of analysis in order not only to understand the cultural differences of the members of the team, but



Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, *Our Poverty is Their Power*, 1992, 16" x 20", black & white offset poster. © CARCC 2011.

*Our Poverty is Their Power* looks at the trap of poverty created by the inadequacies of welfare. It was produced in collaboration with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and supported by the Toronto Labour Council.

also to demystify the power relationships that characterize a project articulated through a model of "North-South" co-operation. Eric Luke Lassiter, in a book that provides an impressive overview of the question of collaboration as a methodological and ethical approach in the social sciences, emphasizes the danger of ethnocentrism in this area of research: "Again, collaborative ethnography has clear limitations, not the least of which is its emergence as a very, although not exclusively, US-centred project endowed with ethnocentrism about the construction of equity, democracy and social justice."<sup>45</sup>

In spite of this criticism, which is quite justified, I continue to believe that the concept of collaboration deserves more attention, both in the research community and in the context of the struggle for justice and social change. Devora Neumark has pointed out the transformative potential of collaborative work: "...often what at first appears to be a disadvantageous (or worse) situation turns out in the end to be a real gift, an opportunity for healing."<sup>46</sup> The self is necessarily changed by the encounter with the Other, but this change involves certain risks: "Translating risk into symbolic language can help mitigate the doubt and the fear of what can sometimes feel like death as one lets go of old beliefs."<sup>47</sup> This is the real value of collaborative work. Through the externalization of values and experiences, and often through symbolic representation, the self becomes detached from aspects of identity that keep it from growing.<sup>48</sup> But the advantages of collaboration are not limited to personal development, because the collaborative process has a great deal of potential for community action projects. Cathy Stubington's video, *Something from Nothing*, shows that the collaborative approach provides access to a broader audience. As a result, the audience's participation may take unexpected forms, often very personal, breaking out of the structures that reproduce the rigid distinction between "expert" and other forms of knowledge (see, for example, the letter campaign in the video *La Piel de la memoria* by Pilar Riano-Alcalá<sup>49</sup>).

It could be said that the true value of a collaborative process is its ability to highlight the "co-produced" nature of knowledge, the fact that knowledge is constructed through communication between self and Other. The community ethnographic research project *The Other Side of Middletown*<sup>50</sup> is an excellent example. In this book, the result of a long process of reflection and consultation between a group of US researchers and members of the Black community of the city of Muncie, Indiana, the authors' objective was to bring these two communities closer together through an exploration of oral history. Muncie, also known under the pseudonym of Middletown, has been the object of observation and study by researchers in anthropology and sociology since at least the 1920s, when it was seen as an opportunity to document social and demographic changes in a "typical" city of the Midwestern US. Most studies had tended to describe Muncie as a homogeneous city populated only by whites, which was rather far from the truth, especially in view of the participation of members of its Black community in the civil rights movement.

It was to correct this history that the ethnologist Eric Luke Lassiter and his long-time collaborator, the activist and politician Hurley Goodall, a native of Muncie, decided to organize a collaborative ethnography project on the role of this minority that had been invisible in the history of the community. *The Other Side of Middletown* included collaboration at many levels. First, the project was conceived at the boundary between academic research and the conservation of a marginalized community's memory. Since the idea came out of a conversation between the two principal collaborators — and was not initiated by either one approaching the other — the objectives were articulated through a process of collective exchange, in part because Lassiter and Goodall already had experience working together. Secondly, there was collaboration among the various researchers in the group, each one of whom came from a different disciplinary tradition: anthropology, folklore studies,



history and communications. The diversity of the team highlighted the importance of having a deliberate approach with respect to methods, including the formation of teams made up of student researchers, but also of advisors from the community, and the systematic use of feedback techniques. For example, the team set up a process of consultation with members of the community for drafting the interview questions, but also for interpreting the data, an aspect that, according to Lassiter, is among the greatest challenges of any collaborative process.<sup>51</sup>

In spite of doubts expressed by Lassiter regarding the exhaustive nature of the work done, the results of this project seem significant for both the Black community of Muncie and the scholarly community. The project led not only to a collective book by some 20 contributors, but also to a public exhibition and several showings of the documentary film that was produced as part of the project. This experience, which the publishers present realistically, with failures and disappointments as well as successes, permits us to draw several conclusions on collaboration. First, we need to distinguish between the concept of reciprocity that is so dear to researchers in the social sciences (the idea that the researcher has to find a way to compensate the people he or she is working with) and the concept of collaboration.<sup>52</sup> The classical anthropological model is based on the idea of reciprocity (and its corollary "the gift") as compensating the members of a community for their generosity, hospitality and participation, but the reciprocity has no impact on the objectives of the project, which remain scientific objectives. The collaborative approach enables us to go beyond the paradigms of classical anthropology. It is not enough to "look over the shoulders" of our interlocutors<sup>53</sup> or even to call for a "dialogic" approach,<sup>54</sup> since both aim for the same result: to advance science, and not to rethink our relationship to knowledge. The Middletown project enables us to understand the conditions and dynamics of knowledge that arises from an encounter in which self and Other take part in articulating a temporary, but shared, meaning, not necessarily a spiritual or cultural communion.<sup>55</sup>

*One of the greatest pitfalls in wanting to help the Other is the danger that the self will project its need for effectiveness ("It's horrible! We have to do something!") and recognition ("We are their only hope") onto the others*

When we take up the challenge of producing something together, the implicit becomes explicit — not only the different aesthetic concepts, but also the power dynamics, the presuppositions and the objectives with respect to the work to be done together. Being obliged to produce something (a show, a video, a song or a text) has the effect of forcing collaborators to agree on a process, a target audience and a final product. If no agreement is achieved, the group falls apart and the collaboration fails. Without understanding the dynamics of this failure,<sup>56</sup> it is impossible to promote a "collaborative ethics," because in the abstract, the idea of collaboration falls too easily into the discourse of equality, reciprocity and sharing, concepts that can hide the true face of power.<sup>57</sup> If we want to work to change the world, and if we believe that the simple fact of working together is a concrete way to reach this objective, we are obliged to scrutinize collaboration and seek guidelines that will enable us to finally discover its power, without cynicism but also without illusions.

#### NOTES

1. See Bob's participation in the program, pp. 101 and 106, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, pp. 109, 114 and 115.
2. At the request of the author these two passages have not been translated from the original French. The translations of these citations are as follows:  
*Mole: small mammal found in Europe, the Americas, etc., with an oblong body; short velvety black or grey fur; an elongated snout; very small eyes; acute hearing and sense of smell; powerful forelimbs with broad paws and bare palms and sharp claws it uses to dig; lives underground and feeds on insects, worms, larvae; considered both useful and harmful to agriculture.*  
— Dictionnaire Larousse  
*I hardly see better than a mole; moreover, I will soon go into their kingdom, barely missing this one but missing you very much.*  
— Voltaire
3. I would like to thank Devora Neumark for her help with this text and for suggesting a number of important references. Thanks also to Devora and to Louise Lachapelle for the invitation to take part in the workshop on which this article is based.
4. Bob W. White, "La démarche ethnographique et la collaboration" and "Écouter ensemble, penser tout haut : Musique populaire et la prise de conscience politique au Congo-Zaïre (1980-1997, 2006)," in Bob W. White and Lye M. Yoka (eds.), *L'ethnographie de l'écoute : Culture et société à travers la réception de la musique populaire à Kinshasa* (Paris: L'Harmattan [forthcoming]).
5. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007). Peter Szendy, *Listen: A History of Our Ears*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).
6. David Michael Levin, *The Listening Self: Personal Growth, Social Change and the Closure of Metaphysics* (New York: Routledge, 1989). Brenda Ueland, *Tell Me More: On the Fine Art of Listening*, (Tucson: Kore Press, 1998). Unni Wikan, "Beyond the Words: The Power of Resonance," *American Ethnologist*, 19 (August 3, 1992), pp. 460-482.
7. Luke Eric Lassiter, *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
8. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. I: "An Introduction" (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 94.
9. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, c1992-c2007).
10. Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist*, 17:1 (February 1990), pp. 41-55.

11. Bob W. White, *Rumba Rules: The Politics of Dance Music in Mobutu's Zaire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
12. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).
13. Especially *Remembering the Present: Painting and Popular History in Zaire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). But see also *Power and Performance: Ethnographic Explorations Through Proverbial Wisdom and Theater in Shaba, Zaire* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).
14. Luke Eric Lassiter, p. 79 (see note 7).
15. Louise Lachapelle, *L'art communautaire ou retrouver le chemin de la maison?* See the text in this publication, pp. 52–61.
16. Louise Lachapelle, p. 53 (see note 15).
17. Louise Lachapelle, p. 54 (see note 15).
18. Luke Eric Lassiter (see note 7).
19. This second meaning corresponds to another sense of the term that is also quite common, that of political co-operation with the enemy, which is synonymous with betrayal.
20. See also the presentation of this video in the program schedule of the *LEVIER Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 103, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 112.
21. northlandposter.com/blog/2006/12/18/lila-watson-if-you-have-come-to-help-me-you-are-wasting-your-time-but-if-you-have-come-because-your-liberation-is-bound-up-with-mine-then-let-us-work-together-2/. Consulted on June 23, 2008.
22. See note 21.
23. Julie Fiala, *Collaborative Ethics*, 2001 (essay available online at engrenagenoir.ca/blog/ressources/textes). Louise Lachapelle (see note 15).
24. James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development', Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Vinh-Kim Nguyen, "Sida, ONG et la politique du témoignage en Afrique de l'Ouest," *Anthropologie et sociétés*, 26:1 (2002). M. Pandolfi and D. Fassin, *States of Emergency: Anthropology of Humanitarian Intervention* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).
25. The term "Third World" originated during the Cold War to identify the countries that were neither communist nor capitalist. The term is still used today despite the collapse of the Russian system and the negative connotations associated with it.
26. Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (London: Ithaca Press, 1973).
27. Devora Neumark, "I Am Because We Are...and in order to." www.devoraneumark.com/site/texts/iambecauseweare.pdf, 2005, p. 8. Page consulted on November 6, 2009.
28. An installation in homage to women's history in the form of a huge triangular table with 39 place settings with stylized plates honouring 39 famous women. The place settings were produced from 1974 to 1979 through the participation of hundreds of volunteers, and the installation was presented for the first time in 1979.
29. Julie Fiala, p. 9 (see note 23).
30. Particularly for the public performances in which Lacy collaborated with elderly women: *Inevitable Associations*, in 1976, and the two projects, *Whisper, Whisper, the Waves, the Wind*, in 1984, and *Crystal Quilt*, in 1987.
31. Julie Fiala, p. 12 (see note 23).
32. These two artists developed partnerships with various mainly Canadian union locals.
33. Unni Wikan, p. 463 (see note 6).
34. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).
35. Edward Said, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," *Critical Inquiry*, 15 (1989), p. 223. On Franz Fanon, Martinique-born French psychiatrist and writer, one of the founders of Third Worldist thought.
36. Julie Fiala, p. 4 (see note 23).
37. Devora Neumark, p. 7 (see note 27). Compare with Hans-Georg Gadamer's discussion of the "game" (see note 34).
38. Carl Rogers and Richard Farson, "Active Listening," in David Kolb, Irwin Rubin and James MacIntyre, eds., *Organizational Psychology* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1979).
39. See Devora Neumark (see note 27) on creativity in the collaborative process.
40. This section is inspired by Habermas's discussion of ethical discourse. In future writing I will develop this framework more fully in order to show its relevance to artistic and ethnographic practice.
41. Video documenting a community art project shown as an example during the *LEVIER Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*. See the introduction to this video in the program schedule, p. 104, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 119.
42. Video documenting a community art project shown as an example during the *LEVIER Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*. See the introduction to this video in the program schedule, p. 103, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 112.
43. Community art project produced with the organization Le CARRÉ. See the description of this project, pp. 154–158; see also the participation of the members of the project in the *LEVIER Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004), p. 67, in the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, p. 106, and in the training and exchange program *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 122; see also the reference to these activities in the critical summaries by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *And If We were to Tell the Story... Thoughts on Our Journey*, p. 77, and *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 115. See also the video, *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors*, made by the members of this project, in the compilation *Documenting Collaboration* inserted in the centre of this publication.
44. Bob W. White and Lye M. Yoka (see note 4).
45. Luke Eric Lassiter, p. xii (see note 7).
46. Devora Neumark (with Caroline Alexander Stevens), "Entre nous: Valeurs communes et pratiques créatives partagées," *Cahiers de l'action culturelle*, 4:1 (2005), p. 28.
47. Devora Neumark, p. 7 (see note 27).
48. On the subject of silence, see the interview with Vincent Crapanzano: Chowra Makaremi, "Engaging with Silence: Interview with Vincent Crapanzano," *Altérités*, 5:2 (2008), on-line journal at www.alterites.ca/vol5no2.html.
49. Video documenting a community art project shown as an example during the *LEVIER Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*. See the introduction to this video in the program schedule, p. 104, and the reference to this activity in the critical summary by Rachel Heap-Lalonde, *Between the Means and the Ends*, p. 113. This project included a collection of objects related to significant memories for people in a neighbourhood of Medellín, Colombia, who were asked to write letters to neighbours they did not know on the history of their object and their vision of the collective future of the neighbourhood; the letters were distributed at the end of the project.

The philosopher and literary critic Edward Said (*Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Vintage, 1996)) proposes the image of the "amateur" (as opposed to the role of "expert" usually played by the intellectual) as a model for intellectual intervention, using the word *amateur* to refer to knowledge that is not motivated by money or professional advancement.
50. Luke Eric Lassiter, Hurley Goodall, Elizabeth Campbell and Michelle Natasya Johnson, Eds., *The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie's African American Community* (New York: Altamira Press, 2004).
51. Luke Eric Lassiter, Chapter 8 (see note 7).
52. Again according to Lassiter.
53. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
54. James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
55. Hans-Georg Gadamer (see note 34).
56. Michael H. Agar, "Towards an Ethnographic Language," *American Anthropologist*, 84 (1983).
57. A good example of this abuse is the famous "shared anthropology" of Jean Rouch, the French filmmaker and ethnologist who did so much to help his "African friends," but who, in the end, left them no intellectual legacy other than the cult of his personality (Bob White, "Caméra Intouchable," *Hors Champs* (February 2005)).

*LEVIER has been hosting workshops entitled Soma: An Experiment in Anarchism, led by Jorge Goia, since 2007.<sup>1</sup> Created in Brazil as an anarchist therapy by Roberto Freire, Soma is used in these intensive workshops as a social laboratory – bringing together art, activism and the learning of new skills. Participants are invited to play as a way to rediscover the body and partake in collaborative games to rethink relational dynamics.*

*Although the content of LEVIER's Soma workshops – and their alignment with the collaborative work needed in any co-creation process – are discussed in Preparing the Ground, Goia, a Soma facilitator trained by Roberto Freire, was asked to define the underlying principles of this approach in greater detail for the benefit of this publication.*

*Soma: An Experiment in Anarchism has radical implications and great potential because it emphasizes the physical body in order to observe the human interactions that have developed in capitalist societies. Jorge Goia describes this journey from therapy to experiment.*

# Soma: Origins and Paths of an Anarchist Experiment

Jorge Goia

“There’s nothing as contagious as the taste for freedom,” Roberto Freire (1927 – 2008) used to say to explain why he went on to create Soma – an anarchist therapy.<sup>2</sup> Also, poetically, this sentence from one of his books introduces his unorthodox path: he was a graduate in medicine who practiced endocrinology and psychiatry and trained in psychoanalysis; he worked as a journalist and political activist, and widely in the arts – drama, music, TV, and film and was a best-selling author with 30 books published in Brazil. In this productive walk through science, art and politics, Soma<sup>3</sup> is a synthesis of Freire’s activism.

Roberto Freire was part of a generation of Brazilians who dared to live a dream. Together with Paulo Freire (not related) and Augusto Boal, he took part in the educational and cultural projects that were changing Brazil before the US-backed military coup in 1964. They were jailed and prosecuted during the dictatorship because their activities were considered subversive to the authoritarian regime. Later Paulo Freire and Boal’s writings were translated and read around the world, spreading their ideas about how to raise awareness about social and political justice. Roberto Freire is less well known, but in some ways the three complement each other. If the Theatre of the Oppressed<sup>4</sup> can be seen as one of the most engaging forms of mixing art and activism, and the Pedagogy of the Oppressed<sup>5</sup> is a revolutionary approach to education, Soma works with those who are involved in art, activism and popular education.

When Roberto Freire created Soma – an anarchist therapy – in the 1970s, he was looking for therapeutic methodologies that could help and support people who were involved in the resistance against the dictatorship. He studied the psychological and emotional aspects of being an activist and the contradictions between ideology and practice. Why is it so difficult to overcome emotions such as jealousy, envy and fear that disrupt the collaborative process? Taking part in different kinds of social and cultural movements, Freire realized traditional forms of activism, from political parties to clandestine organizations, have the same limitations of the power structure they want to overcome. And he dug deep, finding the virus of authoritarianism not only in the state political system, but also in all relationships – family, school, sexual, leisure – and moral values, in the slightest rules of behaviour that regulate life with other people. Capitalism contaminates everyday activities and private relationships, making it difficult to associate and collaborate; therefore an anarchist therapy like Soma should be used as an antiviral to capitalism.

Freire created Soma as an open work-in-progress throughout his writings, to present and make public his political views, theoretical approaches and ethical choices. Unfortunately, his main publications are not translated into English or French

yet. But to understand what Soma is about, a brief introduction to Freire's ideas is necessary. A blend of science, literature, and philosophy, his novels, essays, and therapy books all express an anarchist approach mixed with the search for pleasure, beauty and good humour as the most important things to being an activist.

His first novel, *Cleo and Daniel* (1966), was a big success among young people and a generational book for many Brazilians who took part in the fight against the authoritarian regime. It tells the story of the rebellious effect of love under relationships of power and how moral and sexual repression can create despair, fear and madness. Authoritarianism does not just forbid freedom of speech, it also kills the possibility of love. The social and personal are one and the same when Freire writes about revolution.

Why are those who want to change society unable to comprehend the nature of society?  
Because they want to make omelettes without breaking eggs, that is, to change society without changing themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Like lots of people in Brazil, I came across Soma by reading Freire's books and got hooked on his writing. My favourite book is *Utopia e Paixão – A política do cotidiano* [Utopia and passion: the politics of everyday life], published in Brazil in 1984, written by Roberto Freire and Fausto Brito. The book was born of hours of conversation between the two authors. Freire, temporally blind as a result of torture suffered during the dictatorship, spent most of his time in hospital talking to Brito. Reflecting on their hopes, "there's light even in the darkness," they wrote a poetic invitation to bring passion into politics and utopia into everyday life, challenging hierarchical relationships at the personal level of love, family, school, and friendship. Toward the end of the military regime, they were two militants in crisis with their activism. They had struggled to not die, and now, almost survivors, they had to find a new way of living! And to live is more than just to survive, because "love, not life, is the opposite of death!" When we are completely safe, there's no risk, no change, no movement!

Risk is synonymous with freedom. Power is established in the search for security. People who like risk and adventure have to accept insecurity, because they have their own utopia; they live for satisfying, at any cost, their need for pleasure. The highest form of security is slavery. As slaves, we are someone's property; we do not run any risk so long as we obey the fundamental rules of slavery: not to be free, not to have a choice.<sup>7</sup>

His other books took this search for freedom and love in social and personal life deeper, maintaining a confessional tone and allowing readers to follow his struggles, contradictions and discoveries. *Sem tesão não ha solução* [Without *tesão* there's no solution] created a major polemic in the late 1980s, and some newspapers refused to print the word *tesão* in their reviews of the book. The dictionary definition of *tesão* is "sexually excited." But Freire captured the semantic transformations of this word, linking them to the 1960s spirit of rebelliousness and love, when young people started to use *tesão* to describe something or someone that brings out the experience of beauty, cheerfulness and pleasure. These three elements are, either together or separately, parts of Roberto Freire's proposition for the meanings of the word *tesão* in Brazil.



Jorge Goia  
(see p. 130)

SOMA workshop facilitated by Jorge Goia, World Social Forum in Porte Alegre (Brazil), 2003. Photo: Jorge Goia.



With its current use, the word *tesão* seems to have made everything sensual. Sensuality is the greatest honesty, what really matters; it's the clearest and most intense, the most sincere and real sensation of being alive.<sup>8</sup>

After defining his approach to *tesão* as a political approach to everyday life, ideologies could be split in two, one linked with pleasure and the other with sacrifice. Freire wrote that you can find the ideology of sacrifice in many different doctrines: Christianity is based in the idea of hope in heaven, even if life isn't good down here. Marxism asks us to support proletarian dictatorship before the communist paradise. Psychoanalysis does the same, talking about repressing our biological instincts to allow life in society.

Our life is full of the "rights" and "wrongs" we learn somewhere in the world: through family, at school, from religious traditions, and so on. And these worlds, of course, are also full of rights and wrongs, setting moral and social rules, control based on behaviour patterns. Sometimes we must ignore our thoughts to be able to listen to ourselves because our thoughts are just reproductions of ideas that are not our own. We need to take the risk of being ourselves.

How many "selves" are there in what one calls "oneself"? We can clearly recognize different, and sometimes paradoxical, messages when we come across a decision to be made. We've got different ideas of what should or shouldn't be done, feelings and emotions, our mood at the moment, the consequences of our actions, how they will affect other people, what we think are other people's opinions. How can we know what is nature and what is culture, what comes from our "real" self and what is regulated by social conventions?

*Anarchism must not continue to be ignored as a collective practice if we want to break down the absolute power of science*

Most of the time, we know these kinds of messages come from either past experience or future expectations and projections. We are not looking at or perceiving the present, but are somehow disfranchised from it, even if we appear to be concerned with the here and now. We can experience these thoughts and emotions when we come up against a challenge, face a life-changing choice, or just play a game.

Drawing on Max Stirner's anarchist ideas, Freire developed his own theory about a biological pleasure principle that could be an internal compass to guide our decision-making. We would need to relearn how to perceive our feelings and emotions, doing things because they bring us satisfaction, pleasure and fulfilment; otherwise, if we do things that sacrifice our pleasure, we expect other people to do the same and feel upset and frustrated if they don't. The ideology of pleasure is Freire's anarchism against the ideology of sacrifice of capitalism.

Declaration of an anarchist lover: Because I love you, you don't need me. Because you love me, I don't need you. In love we never let ourselves be completed by the other. We are deliciously unnecessary to each other.<sup>9</sup>

Within this political framework—Freire's desire to bring freedom into emotional matters—Soma was created as a journey to rediscover human relationships. It seeks to challenge the regulation of life shaped by hierarchical rules and social conventions with playfulness and co-operative games. The group dynamic facilitates an environment where participants can develop more autonomy and creativity through awareness of the body and the production of non-authoritarian relationships.

The word *Soma* comes from Greek, and it means the totality of being in the widest and most complete sense—the body and its extensions, relationships, ideals, dreams, skills—but above all, the body as the source of desire and pain, and adventures through the dynamic between risk and safety. There is no hierarchical separation of mind, body, soul, emotion, feeling, whatever: Soma is antonymous to psyche in the sense that Soma is material, touchable, visible and alive!

Freire adopted this concept to make a statement: Soma is not conventional psychotherapy, where you talk and listen to a therapist. Basically, Soma sessions are split in two parts. First, participants play a game to experience situations that raise questions about their everyday life. Soma games come from research into "unblocking creativity" for actors: a series of workshops that make possible a rich journey of discovery for the individual about the nuances of his or her behaviour. Inspired by Wilhelm Reich, Frederick Perls, Gregory Bateson, and *capoeira angola*, an Afro-Brazilian art form, Freire created

an experimental laboratory to inspire an empowering group dynamic where capitalist values should be challenged at a personal level.

The games ask the group to interact physically, most of the time without any verbal communication, creating its own way to deal with impasses and differences. They invite an environment where one can perceive physical reactions in usual situations of human relationships, conflicts, making choices, taking risks. The games raise different issues that trigger observations of how we respond to situations involving trust, responsibility, sharing, collaboration, confidence, conflict, care, and others.

After they have played together, participants sit in a circle to talk about their feelings, emotions and perceptions. The talking part is as important as the games. It is when the paradox between therapy and anarchism creates a singular group dynamic. The aim is to observe how the body is related to emotions and how this experience can avoid generalization and find its singularity—each one is one-of-a-kind. To accomplish this, it is necessary to leave behind two fundamental stones of psychological science and of all hierarchical relationships: interpretation and judgment. It is like relearning how to listen to others.

Interpretation means that someone, usually an expert in something, can reveal what is unclear for other people. It is a “why” based on the power of knowledge, a cause explaining all consequences, usually a ready answer disenfranchised of human singularity. Sometimes people with therapeutic experience would look at me and wait for a “scientific explanation” for what they said about their life or behaviour. I would joke, “What kind of explanation do you want? One based on psychoanalysis? Or a cognitive-behaviour approach? I can also provide a body-emotion theory.”

An interpretation closes what could be widened and leads to judgment and blaming of something or someone. Right and wrong, in terms of behaviour, are based on the idea of normality. It is not by chance that the first anarchists, a long time ago, put together as their main targets the trial and law. That, above the materiality of the state and property, is where the engine of social control operates. Listening to judgment-making immobilizes the possibility to create, freezing “reality” and its meanings in space and time.

But if we get rid of the capacity or authority to interpret and judge, how can we make use of psychological knowledge when listening to other people? I learned to think that we could keep asking interesting questions, opening different windows, offering different points of view. The major trap in modern science is reductionism: rational explanations that always leave something out of the process. What would happen if we dared to stop looking for definitive answers? We could have more descriptions about possible interactions, to raise questions, not just point out ready responses. We would need to learn how to be a “creative listener,” one that helps someone perceive more things, make more articulations, and escape from the definitions and normalizations regulating everyday life.

*Such an approach breaks with the traditional rational way to develop skills, where the mind is split from the body, the individual removed from its surroundings*

A good listener is someone who makes the other feel fluent, bright and inspired when he or she talks. And there are listeners who make the other feel dull, boring and repetitive. Among the Zapatistas, leaders are not the best speakers in the community but the best listeners. In the Soma process, this is one of the main skills necessary to develop a group dynamic based on horizontal relationships, where there is no space for judgment or interpretations, even more so because there are so many psychological theories around the body and its links with mind and emotions.

If therapy has found the space to spread as a commodity in capitalist society, it is because being listened to became rare and institutionalized as the notion of a private life grew, rather than the function of friends and communities. In these crazy times when people spend lots of money to have someone to listen to them talk about their life, we could think of psychological therapies as a new religion, with all metaphors well applied, like guilt/sin, therapy/confession, prescription/ritual, and health/cure.

Neurosis, paranoia, anxiety or depression: everything becomes a symptom for the prescription of pills and recipes in self-help books. The speed with which “scientific” truths change confuses anyone who relies only on cartographies such as psychology, neurophysiology, cognition, hormones and genetics. What we believe today to be fact, using science to explain feelings and emotions, might be in doubt tomorrow, but this doesn’t matter to the consumers of therapy. They carry on believing in the authority of the therapist with scientific knowledge, which is another product of the neurosis of capitalism.

Anarchism must not continue to be ignored as a collective practice if we want to break down the absolute power of science. Experiment is not an exclusive right of whoever can control variables, but a metaphor for life. Giving up the pretension of prescription, of establishing a general formula to be applied across the board, expressions of laboratory, experiment and science can gain other meanings and follow other paths. When Soma expresses its political interests, it escapes traditional therapeutic methodologies.

What constitutes someone's behaviour, character or emotions? The traditional division of Cartesian heritage points to an inside, psychological subject that is before any material reality. Or to an outside culture shaping, formatting and defining all nuances of an individual who is almost a blank canvas awaiting the social painting. These are some beliefs that drive psychology as a modern science, and they justify therapeutic techniques and methodologies. But even using different approaches, when reduced to the psychological or to the sociological, therapies keep working with their binds with concepts like health, illness, treatments, medicines and healing.

To avoid these conceptual networks, an anarchist therapy needs to use theories as maps, to build methodologies with appropriate instruments, to point to effects that produce results, to confront those who determine objectivity as scientific proofs with certificates, numbers, and graphs. We need theoretical tools to blow up the walls of arrogant scientific knowledge, as David Graeber says in his writing about anarchism and anthropology.<sup>10</sup>

*Art and activism are pedagogical tools because they can affect people to create unusual articulations and new propositions*

If in the modern laboratory theories sustain hypotheses, in an anarchist experiment they are more indications of how to find paths, avoid abysses, and take shortcuts, how to stop and enjoy the view. In a Soma workshop, we take the risk of missing the point. An experiment can be a life-changing experience when it creates new possibilities: one more step and we are not in the same place any more. It means looking more to the process than to the results, how it feels in the body than what comes to the mind.

A body is an interface that becomes more and more describable when it learns to be affected by differences.<sup>11</sup> A body is not a provisional residence of something superior, but what leaves a dynamic trajectory by which we learn to register and become sensitive to what the world is made of. To have a body is to learn to be affected, to learn how to make more "articulations."

The body is the inevitability of human beings; it is built, but not just by determination and definition. It has biological influences, but not like a gene holding its destiny; it receives cultural education, but not like a moral standard frozen in time and space. When the body is in articulation, it is in transformation. The more articulations we make, the more we are affected, the more we become sensitive to difference, and the more we can refine our senses to perceive, opening possibilities of new engagements, affects, and effects. And when we perceive more contrasts, we make more mediation, and more articulations.<sup>12</sup> Soma gives the body the voice to express doubts and questions, where often one prays for certainty. Soma doesn't try to define one's body; the process attempts to keep one's *Soma* moving.

Soma groups are a space for experiences of what was previously only potentiality, where the body games create an environment that provides skills development.<sup>13</sup> Skills only exist and appear in relationship with either something or someone, in our multiple interactions with and possibilities in the environment. This relational approach breaks from the idea that skills are something one owns, confined inside oneself, and isolated from life experience. The world is a space for experimentation, with our dwelling creating an environment to develop skills and make possible livelihoods. And only in relationships can we now apply what was just potentiality before.

The skills required to play Soma games can produce new ways to perceive and relate, skills to facilitate consensus, to create new forms of non-hierarchical sociability. But these skills are not properties of the participants; they arise in the involvement with the group dynamic. This process creates an environment in which the consensus-based decision-making process starts in each participant's body, mind, emotions and feelings. Such an approach breaks with the traditional rational way to develop skills, where the mind is split from the body, the individual removed from its surroundings. Consensus and autonomy are ethical proposals to live with less hierarchy in a group, and they require learning skills other than the ones developed by authoritarian societies. Soma challenges participants to reinvent relationships, creating new forms of socialization and activism.

These are the reasons that I have been doing Soma — an anarchist experiment. Changing therapy into experiment, I have turned the sessions away from an emphasis on neurosis (we have something wrong) towards gaining skills (we can learn

something new). Soma seeks to inspire skills to build horizontal relationships, skills that can transform the way we perceive the world, rebuilding the body and its dwelling and livelihood.

When we give up imperatives of “truth,” ethics comes close to aesthetics, and science flirts with the arts. Soma can be approached both as an art form and as activism, envisaging a radical participatory, collaborative practice, where one can live singular experiences. And art and activism are pedagogical tools because they can affect people to create unusual articulations and new propositions.

With this experimental format I’ve been practising, Soma can be a form of politically-engaged live art that aims to challenge the authoritarian or submissive behaviour that we discover in our daily lives. It encourages perception and awareness of how this behaviour reproduces authoritarian systems and aims to extend this awareness to other areas of our lives, to resist and to react against hierarchy and social injustice.

Soma is inspired by anarchism and psychology, two wide fields of subjects separated by a sea of ideas. Linking these, Roberto Freire dared to dream a bridge between them, with the possibility of fighting against oppression and domination with more than words and rationality. The politics of everyday life begins with our private matters; when our feelings and emotions come together with our beliefs and ideology, we raise awareness and bring out the physical reality of our bodies educated in the capitalist culture of fear and security.

The original contribution of Freire’s Soma lies in its hybrid approach: a mix of therapy and pedagogy, arts and science, politics and emotions. And for him, emotions are not immaterial, subjective, something that just appears in the lack of reason; they are bodies affecting themselves. Emotions can be at the same time cause and effect, the result of changes and the trigger of modifications.

He lived them, with intensity. Freire liked to be called Bigode (moustache), his nickname, even by participants in his therapy groups. He loved being informal, going out, enjoying life, crossing boundaries of traditional relationships with a sometimes-disturbing radical honesty. He used to define himself as a militant of pleasure, someone not ashamed to show his emotions and feelings even when they were against social rules.

I talked only about love in all my life, in all the books I wrote, but I haven’t got any explanation for it. With love you can just do a necropsy, never a biopsy. If I examine it, I stop loving. Love is not to be understood, but felt, experienced.<sup>14</sup>

Roberto Freire created Soma with the dream of spreading personal and social change like an infection: once you’ve got that taste of freedom in your body, you won’t be satisfied with less. I worked with him for almost 20 years and shared a beautiful collaborative friendship. In his last years, I was already living abroad, but got in touch frequently with him to tell him about my experiments with Soma, and how it still leaves indelible pleasurable experiences of utopia and passion. Doing Soma is not to keep just Freire’s work alive, but also his desire to see more and more people *tesão*.

#### NOTES

1. See an account of one of those workshops, pp. 130–131.
2. Roberto Freire, *Soma – Uma Terapia Anarquista*, Volume 1: *A alma é o corpo*. (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Guanabara, 1988).
3. R. Freire, *Soma – Uma Terapia Anarquista*, Volume 2: *A alma é o corpo – Prática da Soma e Capoeira*. (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Guanabara, 1991).
4. For further information about the methodology of Soma, see: [www.somaterapia.com.br/eng/index.jsp](http://www.somaterapia.com.br/eng/index.jsp).
5. The Theatre of the Oppressed is a method elaborated by the Brazilian director Augusto Boal, who was influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, starting from the ‘60s, first in Brazil and then in Europe. This method uses theatre as means of knowledge and transformation of the interior reality in the social and relational field. The public becomes active, so that the “spect-actors” explore, show, analyze and transform the reality in which they are living.
6. It is a method of “awareness” experimented with by Paulo Freire first in Brazil from 1962 to 1964 where he was responsible for a comprehensive Ministry of Education and Culture literacy program which reached about two million illiterate men and women, and then in Chile between 1964 and 1967, under the government of Eduardo Frei. The struggle for the liberation of oppressed populations is what contextualizes Paulo Freire most. His practice of illiteracy elimination brought him to understand the overriding importance of awareness as a prerequisite in any transformative action.
7. Roberto Freire, *Utopia e Paixão – A Política do Cotidiano*. (Rio de Janeiro: Ed Guanabara, 1984).
8. Roberto Freire (see note 6).
9. Roberto Freire, *Sem Tensão Não Há Solução*. (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Guanabara, 1987).
10. Roberto Freire, *Ame e Dê Vexame*. (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Guanabara, 1990).
11. David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004).
12. Bruno Latour, “How to Talk about the Body? The normative dimension of science studies,” *Body and Society*, 10:2/3 (2004), pp. 205–229. Available on-line at: [www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/article/077.html](http://www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/article/077.html).
13. Bruno Latour (see note 11).
14. Timothy Ingold, *Perception of the Environment: Essays about Livelihood, Dwelling and Skills*. (London: Routledge, 2000).
15. Interview of Valmir Santos with Roberto Freire by Brazilian online newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* (February 11, 2003), at: [www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/ilustrada/ult90u30634.shtml](http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/ilustrada/ult90u30634.shtml) (page consulted March 6, 2010).



From March 26 to 30, 2008, the fourth edition of the International Community Arts Festival took place in Rotterdam.<sup>1</sup> Given LEVIER's interest in expanding the Québec-based community art network internationally, Devora Neumark attended this event and animated a workshop.

One of the other workshops was facilitated by the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA). During this two-part interactive event, Ernesto N. Cloma (PETA senior member and faculty) and Joaquin "Jack" Yabut (PETA Theatre Centre director), invited participants to first engage playfully in a variety of movement exercises before reflecting together about the experience. Cloma and Yabut also presented a brief overview of PETA's integrated approach linking artistic practice with social change, political agency and economic development.

Inspired by this presentation, LEVIER invited Ernesto to write about PETA's experiences for this book. PETA doesn't just theorize about economic and political change in abstract terms, its cultural work is context-specific and community driven.

Ernesto joined PETA in 1977 with a teaching background of 27 years. In the early 1980s, he started using theatre arts in his work with children in difficult situations. He was a community theatre activist during martial law in the Philippines in 1972 and now uses art on a consistent basis with children and youth. Today, at 69, his dream is to meet as many artist-teachers as possible to exchange experiences working with children to build a peaceful and better world for everyone.

The following text offers several examples of PETA's profound commitment to working with the creative process in the service of improving the living conditions of people with whom the association collaborates.

## PETA's Theatre Experiences in Philippine Communities

Ernesto N. Cloma

### What is theatre?

Theatre is a creative reflection of people, societies and histories.

Theatre is a catalyst for social change.

Theatre is education supporting capacity-building within individuals and communities, and developing critical faculties among the audience.

Theatre is a tool for empowerment.

Theatre is a popular tool, not limited to the "artist" only: it can be used by people, especially by people living in poverty and the voiceless, as a means of exploration, expression, advocacy and action.

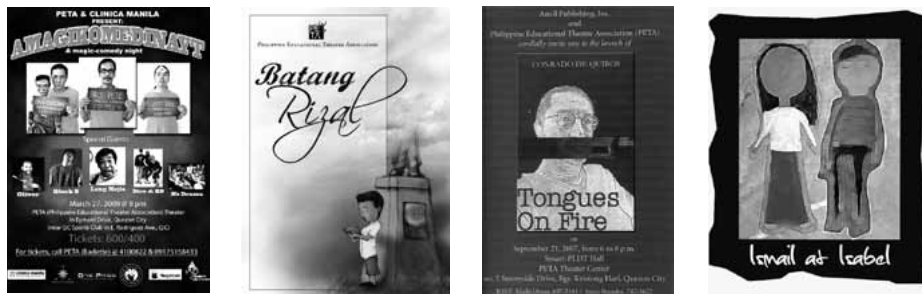
Theatre is able to liberate creative power towards fulfilling one's mission in life and supporting others to do so as well.

The collective and participatory process of theatre is a venue to learn and exercise teamwork, negotiation, tolerance and respect for diversity.

Theatre that does not speak for its own time has no relevance.



*It's my dream to meet as many artist-teachers as possible to exchange experiences working with children to build a peaceful and better world for everyone.*  
— Ernesto N. Cloma



Selection of images from PETA's theatre work, taken from their website.

In the Philippines, socially engaged theatre dates back to our Indigenous ancestors who made use of rituals, songs and dances to appeal to their gods about what was happening around them. With the Spanish colonizers came miracle plays and *senaculo* (a dramatization of the Bible) intended to convert Filipinos to Catholicism. *Komedya* and *moro-moro* (stylized plays showing the power and strength of the colonizers over the natives) brainwashed the locals to be submissive to the colonizers.

The Philippine Revolution of 1896 brought independence in 1898 — a short-lived independence on account of the arrival of the Americans. The new conquerors brought with them vaudeville, cabaret and the English classics, turning Filipinos into little brown Americans. While seditious plays done in the *sarswela* form (a popular musical theatre form from Spain) kept the national spirit burning, the US influence was increasingly felt, especially through the public education system.

In the 1940s, with the advent of World War II, the Japanese arrived and stayed for almost half a decade, but eventually Big Brother America came back and continued the Hollywoodization of Philippine theatre. The student and labour movements of the 1960s inspired Filipinos to explore issues of identity and the social environment from a Philippine perspective. It was during this historic moment that the national theatre movement began and, in 1967, Cecile Guidote-Alvarez founded the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) with the aim of creating a community theatre project that would focus on the stories, aspirations and struggles of the Filipino people in their day-to-day living and their quest for a better life.

Since 1967, PETA has presented more than 300 (mostly original) plays using the best of Filipino design, music, movement and theatre traditions. These plays (spoken in the language of the people) tackle social issues relevant to ordinary Filipinos. Additionally, PETA has developed an artist-teacher outreach program, as well as workshops, seminars and other educational training focused on artistic skills enhancement, alliance building, community building and advocacy work within schools, government and a variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) within the Philippines and elsewhere around the world, wherever people want to work with and adapt PETA's pedagogical approach to their social, political and economic situations.

The principles, frameworks and philosophies guiding all of PETA's programs were culled from the first thirty years of experience and direct interactions with local Filipino and foreign-based artists and pedagogues. Books on various schools of thought in educational theatre written, by internationally renowned theatre artist-pedagogues, have also influenced our pioneering members in coming up with tools and techniques needed for community art. Our predecessors worked with these resources, adding, changing and interpreting them in keeping with what they thought would be meaningful to the Filipino people.

PETA's community work prioritizes collective participatory art that emphasizes risk-taking — working on the premise that mistakes are doors to discovery. The responsibilities of PETA's artist-teachers include starting from where the participants are, relative to culture, heritage, economic situation, life challenges and beliefs; working with these to collaboratively create engaging dramatizations; and creating an atmosphere of freedom, wherein the participants can be creative, expressive, critical, and willing to challenge themselves. For example, in the mid-'80s, a group of organized banana planters, nestled at the foot of the mountains overlooking Tagaytay City in Batangas, sought PETA's assistance to help them confront their problem — the harvest was good but there were no roads to transport their product to the town markets. Middlemen got most of the earnings as they bought the crops at very low prices when in fact these bananas commanded a high price in the local markets.

PETA worked with the group to come up with a performance about the problem that was then shown in public with the local government officials attending. A continuous dialogue with these officials led to the construction of a feeder road that helped farmers transport their own products to the town market. PETA sought the help of co-operative organizers to inspire and provide the group with tools so that they could create their own co-operative. The youth, sons and daughters of the fruit farmers, organized themselves into a theatre group that performed for and presented educational activities (emphasizing the ideals of the co-operative) to local audiences.



More recently – in 2003 – Infanta experienced a great flood. The deluge, as the locals call it, left the community devastated. Waves carrying timber, mud and stones washed through, destroying and killing whoever and whatever was in the way. With the help of local government organizations and NGOs, PETA and the youth of Infanta came together to help each other overcome the staggering effects of the destruction caused by the flood. The theatre group Sibol ng Kabataang Teatro (SIKAT) came up with mobile performances about the event that served as tools for psychosocial intervention for the community people caught in the trauma. The group, now associated locally with the church and the schools, is still active. Youth members have since gone on to become artist-leaders and artist-teachers and continue to perform locally and internationally. Three youths from Infanta, namely Lasha Majerle Po, Dianne Rose Sibayan and Joan Vargas, all alumni of SIKAT, participated in the 2008 International Community Arts Festival in Rotterdam showcasing the play *Infanta*.

PETA practitioners believe that there is a child, an adult and a parent within each person, no matter what their age. Theatre art participants explore each of these roles (the child, adult and parent) in the process of creating an art piece. In PETA's pedagogical processes, the PETA artist-teacher begins with childlike playful activities. Then they gather participants in a circle to talk about what they did, what they felt, what they thought about the activity and how they can use it in their daily lives with other people. Thus, the experience is theorized and applied to group improvisatory art activities that may include skits, visual output, movement and so on.

In the process of analyzing the art product and processes, PETA uses the OAO framework that was a product of the 1979 workshop of a progressive PETA artist in Butuan, Mindanao.

"O" stands for Orientation – What are the content, the message and the premise of the art product? What does it want to tell or what problem does it address? Is it clear, logical, concise and relevant to the prospective audience? Will it move them to reflection and action?

"A" stands for Artistic – How is the work presented? Did the acting, story development, scenic design, music, costumes, props, technical effects, movement (especially with dance theatre), voice and singing (e.g., in musical theatre) contribute to creating a thorough understanding of the play and its intent?

"O" stands for Organization – What human relations transpire during the play's production? Is the process democratic enough to provide room for exploration, recommendation, suggestion, discussion, debate or other interaction that will enhance the likelihood for the objectives set by the group (performers, artistic pool, technical group, the director, the producers, etc.) to be realized in the play and its performances? At the end of the run, would the participants still want to work together or is this the first and the last time they will collaborate?

PETA's continuous search for educational tools and processes to better our community work has led us to work with civil society groups. In September 2001, PETA convened the Asia-Pacific Conference entitled *Theatre and Cultural Work in Building Civil Society*. The keynote speaker, Dr. Nicanor Perlas, shared insights about the interaction of culture, polity and the (market) economy and focused on how linking these oft-considered autonomous spheres can actually create the kind of society our communities want. Following this event, PETA continued to work with this conjuncture of influence and began to work with this approach to develop analysis tools for theatre processes and productions.

Now, in preparing for any theatre project, whether it be training, workshops, production or other events, we aim to involve the three realms of society: culture, politics and the economy.

To address the issue of culture, we look at the full participation and perspective of the cultural workers in the theatre group involved; we consider the lives of the people and their actual situations; and we integrate the heritage of the implicated community and other civil society elements affected by the project.



To address the issues of politics, policy and governance, we consult or invite the direct involvement of the local government agencies or offices whose mandate is parallel to or in some way related to the theme, premise or content of the theatre project. The participation of these individuals may come through recommendations or endorsement of the project. Their participation strengthens the implementation of local policies relevant to the project theme and may even extend to their physical presence in the theatre project or financial support.

To address the issue of economy, we seek the involvement of local business groups and economists to assert the economic viability of the project so that their support will help reach the target recipients of the activities.

We feel that the fullest participation of these three realms moving towards a common goal usually produces better results. One example is the building of the PETA Theater Center in Quezon City that was built with the active participation of, and strong alliance between, cultural and economic institutions, business groups and government agencies.

Another example is the theatrical work done around the issue of mercury pollution affecting the riverside communities of the Boac River in Marinduque due to the open-pit mining conducted by the Marcopper Mining Corporation since the 1970s. In preparing for the theatrical production in the early 1990s, the youth group Teatro Balangao (composed of college students and out-of-school youth) worked with PETA to gather personal stories about the polluted river from the local community-members. This research was then integrated with local traditional rituals and beliefs to produce a script that was rehearsed and presented within a variety of communities supported by local progressive groups dealing with this problem. The production made use of songs, dances, ritual and realistic scenes to make the performance more meaningful and appealing. There was also a performance for local government officials organized in an attempt to help create policies for the local mining establishments and to create measures toward clean waste-disposal processes. It was the firm hope of the group involved that there would be a shutdown of the mines. For a short period, mining did stop, but the closing of the mines was unfortunately not realized because they are a major source of work for the community. The economic needs of the community made them appeal to restore work in the mines.

*Theatre is a popular tool, not limited to the “artist” only: it can be used as a means of exploration, expression, advocacy and action*

Teatro Balangao members continued working with the children, doing artwork with them. Most of these children were also brought to the Philippines General Hospital in Manila to deal with their health issues and physical recovery. Some PETA staff conducted sessions with the children before they were returned to their province.

A local parents' group working with two parents of Teatro Balangao members did advocacy work against the mining operations, while Teatro Balangao continued to perform for local conferences and education programs on the island.

But this advocacy work is far from being completed because, for example, in March 1996, the Philippines experienced one of its more disastrous industrial pollution incidents at the centre of which were the Marcopper Mining Corporation and the Marinduque Boac riverside community.<sup>2</sup>

There are still hundreds of professional and amateur theatre troupes in the Philippines (including theatre groups using traditional theatre forms, university and other school-based theatre groups, etc.) all using theatre art as a mirror of the lives of the Filipinos, their aspirations, their struggles, their hopes and their dreams. Philippine history continues through theatre.



### PETA's Community Partners

Presently PETA's community partners include:

Teatro Colegio of Tacloban (province of Leyte) which works with university-based theatre groups in Tacloban City;

Teatro Agape, based in Pasig City's market, whose members are young people and market vendors;

PILAK (Bahay Tuluyan, a non-profit organization working with children and street children centres), which advocates for street children;

Inigmata (ECLIPSE in Ormoc, Samar Island), which presents stories of children working in the sugar cane plantations of the Visayan Islands;

Teatro Uhay (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes, Philippines) which deals with the problems associated with the trafficking of children and especially the healing processes of child survivors of trafficking;

Batang Art of Nakar, Quezon, which tackles environmental issues and other problems affecting the communities at the foot of the Sierra Madre Mountains in Quezon province;

YATTA of Dumaquete City, an urban-based youth group working on issues of gender and sexuality;

Teatro Akebono (Development Action for Women Network, Manila), which produces yearly performances, related to the plight of Japanese Filipino children in the Philippines, which they tour in Japan;

Teatro BATIS (BATIS Center for Women, Quezon City) which is composed of former entertainers in Japan who create advocacy performances based on the stories of overseas Filipina workers.

PETA's special programs help popularize theatre work and processes as a means of bringing people together for social analysis, debate and action. These programs include:

The Metropolitan Teen Theater League (PETA youth arm), which works with school-based theatre groups composed of students and teachers, to raise awareness among youth about their potential for activating social change;

Until recently — when the funding ran out — the Women's Theater Program worked with women's groups on issues of gender, sexual and reproductive health;

An offshoot of PETA's partnership program with the Mekong Region was initiated four years ago. Artist groups from the Mekong countries (Thailand, Laos PDR, Vietnam, South China, Cambodia and Burma) come together for three to four weeks at a time as part of the Mekong Performing Arts Laboratory to interact, make art and discuss sexuality, gender and health as they develop advocacy performances on related themes.

*PETA practitioners believe that there is a child,  
an adult and a parent within each person,  
no matter what their age*

### NOTES

1. Community Art Lab Research Coordinator Eugene van Erven programmed the festival together with Rotterdams Wijktheater Artistic Director Peter van den Hurk. For more information see the report: *International Community Arts Festival Rotterdam 2008, An Extensive Report*, Rotterdam's Wijktheater, Rotterdam, 2008, ([www.icafrotterdam.com/icaf/previous-editions](http://www.icafrotterdam.com/icaf/previous-editions)).
2. When the company finished one of its operations in Marinduque, it plugged the old pit with concrete so that it could act as a disposal pond for mine waste. The pit's drainage tunnel ruptured, releasing tailings into the Boac River system, virtually killing the river. The effects of the incident were so devastating that a UN assessment mission declared the accident to be a major environmental disaster.



For LEVIER, it is important to critically reflect on the broad movement relative to community and humanist activist art practices in addition to presenting local collective and individual experiences. Furthermore, LEVIER wanted to explore how these creative practices from Québec and elsewhere relate to the alter-globalization movement, which is gaining strength throughout the world.

It is clear to LEVIER that the two movements are guided by a similar set of motivations and principles:

- the search for equitable ways of being in the world;
- forms of action and organization based on networks and horizontal relationships;
- the importance placed on changing structures and behaviours while nurturing "personal change so that structural changes become possible and sustainable;"<sup>1</sup>
- a concern for ethics;
- the quest for innovative and persuasive collaborative political action emergent from the communities implicated in the specific struggle, and based on the participation, concrete needs and creativity of the people involved;
- the importance of being rooted locally when confronting global domination.

Activist groups, however, do not always recognize that community and humanist activist art practices are useful intervention tools. It is still rather uncommon today in Québec and elsewhere to see creativity, let alone collaborative creativity, integrated to its fullest within sociopolitical struggles, despite the history of art used in social movements — such as the vital role that music played in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and in the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa. It was to promote this recognition that LEVIER insisted on being registered in the "mobilization" category rather than the "art and culture" category when we participated in the World Social Forum 2009 in Belém (Brazil) and in the Québec Social Forums in 2007 and 2009 in Montréal.<sup>2</sup>

LEVIER therefore put out a call for texts addressing the connection between alter-globalization and community and activist art. Ève Lamoureux<sup>3</sup> provided the following material that deepens our understanding of the subject, while raising questions that she considers the most pressing and which pose challenges to these activist practices.

## Alter-globalist Practices and Community Art under Observation

Ève Lamoureux

In this article, I propose to examine the relationship between experiments in community art and the new social movements, in particular, alter-globalism. What do they have in common? What are their differences? To what extent can Engrenage Noir / LEVIER be considered part of the current protest movement? How does its conception of action combining art with social and political engagement promote connections with other activist, affinity and rights groups? On the other hand, are there differences?

I will attempt to show that, despite a few differences and some problems that need to be overcome in order to forge closer ties — which I will discuss in more detail — the current protests coming out of the social and alter-globalist movements and those that come out of community art have one essential characteristic in common: they put forward a particular view of the role of civil society as being in tension between, on the one hand, criticism of the liberal conception of representative democracy and, on the other hand, the promotion of an "alternative" democracy that allows for diversity, real (and not just formal) equality and greater participation by social actors in determining the direction of society.

To do this, I will explore the following elements: definitions; the type of organization and the logic of action; cultural, social and political limitations revealed by the critical action of civil society; and the effects of protests as well as their limitations.

Ève Lamoureux  
(see p. 93)

## A Few Definitions

Several analysts of the new social and alter-globalist movements emphasize their profound criticism of representative liberal democracy and the capitalist economic system. This negative basis of protest is accompanied by alternative proposals promoting a new political culture. In the classical duo of modern sovereignty — law and negative freedom versus popular sovereignty and positive freedom<sup>4</sup> — the idea of positive freedom is crucial because of a conception of civil society as opposed to the state, which demands spaces of autonomy and participation outside those that are devoted to political power (at the local, national or international level) and express new values and ways of doing things culturally, economically, socially and politically. This civil society projects itself as a “new symbolic political community.”<sup>5</sup> It thus becomes a “force of opposition against the state, the site of social dynamics and change, while the state acts as regulator and guarantor of an order of things inherited from the past.”<sup>6</sup>

In clear continuity with the social movements that emerged in the 1960s — despite development and innovations — the current protest movement is extremely diverse, even fragmented, in its protests and demands, its forms of action and its organizational strategies. It takes the form of “a loose conglomeration with unclear boundaries and varying density,”<sup>7</sup> a broad coalition that is both concrete (that comes together at certain times) and also (and perhaps primarily) figurative and symbolic. This broad coalition, which, unlike the Marxist movement, refuses to prioritize the many issues raised and attacks the three structures of domination — capitalism, (hetero)sexism and racism — as well as the inequalities, injustices and oppression they give rise to.<sup>8</sup>

This conception of the general aims of the struggle arising from civil society is quite consistent with that expressed in community art. However, the latter also includes, at the heart of its strategy, the whole question of art and, more broadly, creativity. Neumark,<sup>9</sup> an artist and co-director of Engrenage Noir / LEVIER, explains the philosophy of this art as follows: “LEVIER’s goals are to facilitate relationships between artists and community groups with an emphasis on holistic individual and collective artistic practices of all kinds concerned with social responsibility and the equitable distribution of resources.”

*Conceptualized as deliberative and participatory, community art projects use shared creation as a strategy of intervention on the self, the collectivity, the systemic structures of domination, politics, etc.*

These practices require collaborative work between one or more artists and the members of a community (community group, activist group or other group) who “have in common a situation of marginality or social, economic, cultural or political inequality.”<sup>10</sup> They require that the artist have some background in the sociopolitical issue dealt with or in a group, and that the works be produced in co-creation with the members of the community. The participation of the members is crucial in determining not only the execution of the project, but also its conception, the vision of art that shapes it and the whole creative process. This leads to a profound transformation of the role of the artist, at least in relation to the modern conception: he or she is no longer the creator alone in the studio, the master of the work, the sole possessor of talent and artistic knowledge. Also stripped away is the avant-gardist view of the humanist intellectual as the supreme guide, in advance of the groups, leading them toward the light of artistic knowledge (cultural democratization) and success in achieving political goals.

Conceptualized as deliberative and participatory, community art projects use shared creation as a strategy of intervention on the self, the collectivity, the systemic structures of domination, politics, etc. They thus offer “an overall approach that calls on all levels of society and aims to act on the power differences created by today’s society and give a voice back to people in situations of poverty and exclusion.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus it is appropriate to consider community art initiatives, at least as they are defined here, as one of the many forms civil society uses to protest power and exploitation and generate new values, ethics, attitudes and behaviour. Their distinctive characteristic, however, is the importance placed on the artistic process and on co-creation. But for the purposes of this discussion, I am going to analyze the social and alter-globalist movements and community art side by side.<sup>12</sup>

## Organization and Logic of Action

It is important to remember that these two approaches to protest are not radically new and that they are extensions of previous social and artistic movements. For example, alter-globalism owes a great deal to the protest movements that emerged in the late 1960s, which were then called the “new social movements.” These were intended both as a response to the labour movement, which was then in crisis, and as its next generation. Their borrowings, from feminism and anarchism among others, include the issues raised and the values promoted — which are described as postmaterialist and are related to everyday life — as well as the organizational model, with ideas such as work in affinity groups, networking, direct action, etc. The alter-globalists also deliberately blur the boundaries between private and public. We have second-wave feminism to thank for the idea that the personal is political. However, the personalization of commitments also arises out of the increased individualism of advanced capitalist societies. Political engagement, considered in a detached way from the perspective of common or public sense, increasingly takes a personal tangent and includes “self-exhibition” in public discourse, focusing on unique experiences. This personalization is related to the effects of the political emergence and mobilization of groups of people who have generally been unseen and unheard, those people who are *without* — without papers, without status, without work, etc. — and the “figure of those without.”

Community art in its more sociological and political dimensions draws from the same sources. In its specific artistic aspect, it draws on the tradition of dematerialization of the art object, which goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century with Duchamp’s “readymades” and experiments in engaged art that are often described as more sociological, such as those associated with the Situationist International, Fluxus, “sociological art” and the artistic and theoretical tradition of cultural studies in the English-speaking world.

These previous (sociopolitical and artistic) movements, as Vander Gucht explains,<sup>13</sup> profoundly changed the paradigm of engaged art:

There was considerable upheaval in the definition of engaged art at the beginning of the 1970s, with the rejection of the absolutist paradigms of art (“art is everything”) and politics (“politics is everything”) in favour of new relativist paradigms (“everything is art” and “everything is political”). ...The revolutionary messianism of historical avant-gardes was thus replaced by the project of regaining and reappropriating the public sphere in and through artistic practice.

What are the major characteristics of the social and alter-globalist movements, and what are those of community art?

## A “Dis/organized” Organizational Model<sup>14</sup>

The loose coalition of social and alter-globalist groups is developing in a flexible, egalitarian way that contrasts with the classical model of bureaucratic, hierarchical parties and unions. Melucci<sup>15</sup> speaks of a multiple leadership: sharing of responsibilities, shifting representations, alternation. Associations and groups are joined in networks in order to ensure a high level of autonomy for the units. Less and less connected to “vertical associative networks,”<sup>16</sup> the groups are concerned with concrete action that is often carried out locally, although there is increasing recognition of the internationalization of social problems: this is the environmental movement’s well-known “think globally, act locally,” or “glocal.” Thus, the logic of action transcends the context of the nation-state, both at the subnational and international levels, with community art being involved more at the former level.

These movements also share with community art a temporality of action in the present that is quite different from the anticipation of the “Grand soir” [the sudden revolutionary change] of the great narratives of liberation, in particular that of Marxism-Leninism. They thus try to respond concretely and immediately to the experience of oppression. As Jordan states:<sup>17</sup>

What is key about dis/organization is not just the way it puts principles of equality and justice into action, but that in doing so it brings a little of the future into the present. Dis/organization is a prefigurative politics, because it attempts to preview what social change may bring. In being dis/organized, activists begin to act as if the world they want to live in has come into existence. Prefigurative politics means acting now, as you want to act in the future.

According to this view of action, means are as important as ends, and the struggle must be consistent with the principles put forward. This mode of organization shows a "concern (at least a declared concern) for direct democracy, ...a rejection of delegation and hierarchy."<sup>18</sup> Two elements seem particularly important to me, at least with respect to the closeness of the social and alter-globalist movements and community art.

First, I note the attention to pluralism; both in the movement as a whole (among the various groups) and within the groups, since these groups consist of people with extremely varied histories. The groups or communities thus allow for a diversity of opinions and experiences, and create a "place of freedom that is opposed, whether explicitly or not, to partisan politics."<sup>19</sup> Members are expected to make a "distanced commitment,"<sup>20</sup> that is, one that is variable and volatile over time, but that requires substantial involvement and participation at particular moments. In addition, "the concrete commitment of everyone at the base is preferred to alignment on positions defined at the top."<sup>21</sup>

This diversity may be surprising because, since the 1970s, a large proportion of sociopolitical struggles have been over so-called identity issues. It should thus be clearly understood that the current collective identities are being put forward without the promotion of a univocal, uniform vision stressing essentialist characteristics that are supposedly natural or intrinsic to a group of people:

First of all, collective identities are instruments of social closure. They make it possible to define the boundaries of a symbolic community by providing attributes whose shared possession will enable a boundary to be drawn between the inside and the outside of the community, between Us and the Others. But they must be understood without any essentialist tendency.<sup>22</sup>

This question of identity issues in the struggle (involving both personal and collective identity) is central to community art projects. For this reason, I would like to discuss it a little further, exploring how plural identities and collective identity can be considered together. While it is true that people today "choose" their own identities (and therefore that members of the same community can be extremely diverse), they are nonetheless still situated in social relationships of domination and struggles against these relationships, which influences their identity and their political subjectivation:

Through social relationships, certain social identities are chosen, others are constructed and still others are assigned... There results a "bricolage" of identity that depends both on a personal effort of construction of the self based on the many social relationships we are part of — which may be called narrative identity — and on collective modes of existence and relationships that are dependent on social struggles and the relationships formed through them.<sup>23</sup>

The identity-based struggles that are characteristic of modernity are thus in part struggles of reconstruction of collective, community and personal identity<sup>24</sup> related to the need for better cultural and political recognition,<sup>25</sup> but they are also attempting to change the many unequal relationships societies are based on:

As Honneth points out,<sup>26</sup> recognition simultaneously has symbolic, institutional and redistributive dimensions. The three are important and complementary. Recognizing an identity symbolically also means recognizing the harm done and trying to do something to lessen it. Recognizing it institutionally means moving toward egalitarian inclusiveness. As for redistribution, it makes the process of recognition concrete, somewhat as Marshall<sup>27</sup> said of social rights that they give substance to civil and political rights.<sup>28</sup>

The second element that seems decisive in both activist and associative engagement and community art is the importance placed on participation. Participation is "valued per se as grassroots self-organization according to an associative model that combines individual autonomy and collective autonomy, while respecting the diversity of the actors and causes."<sup>29</sup> In addition, special attention is paid to the inclusion and involvement of people who are unseen and unheard culturally, socially and politically. Artistically, their participation favours the exploration of art and creative power as means of personal and collective change.

The primacy given to participation is related to a conception of direct action that has its origins in the anarchist view of political struggle (including councilism) and the artistic-political experiments of the Situationist International, with Debord's theory of the "society of the spectacle." Against the effects of advanced capitalism, which makes people passive spectators of their own lives and of art, the media and politics, only participation can break the mould, overcome the spectacle and allow people to take back control of themselves and the world.<sup>30</sup> In addition, direct action favours concrete initiatives by anyone to transform everyday life.

On the basis of this participatory bias, many cultural and political practices are questioned, and other models are proposed. The usual hierarchies in the artistic, social and political spheres are challenged, since involvement has to be as egalitarian as possible. The legitimacy of those who possess knowledge or hold positions of authority is questioned and the status of artists, politicians and experts is challenged. How and in the name of what do they have the authority to determine the right way of thinking of and doing art, politics and economics? The actors of civil society put forward a conception of power that moves away from “‘power over,’ which is associated with domination,” and embraces “‘power to,’ the capacity to act together.”<sup>31</sup> Consequently, in contrast to the avant-gardist view, the idea is no longer to “work for” or to “speak for,” but rather to “work with” the people primarily concerned by the cause or social problem dealt with.

*Against the effects of advanced capitalism, which makes people passive spectators of their own lives and of art, the media and politics, only participation can break the mould, overcome the spectacle and allow people to take back control of themselves and the world*

Some efforts in both sociopolitical protest and community art are intended to modify the forms of political deliberation, first within the groups and then on a more directly political level. The social actors propose a more inclusive, diverse communication using other deliberative tools (expressive speech, personal testimony, symbolic rhetoric, life stories, etc.). Political deliberation in the usual conception — as described, for example, by Habermas<sup>32</sup> — as rational, reasonable exchange imbued with “good intentions” is not immediately accessible to everyone, which results in the exclusion from the public sphere of those people who have neither the necessary cultural heritage and influence nor the material circumstances to acquire them. Many other forms of expression and communication are essential for the public emergence of these people. In this regard, Neumark<sup>33</sup> emphasizes the importance of the narrative form:

I believe in the power of story. Letting a story take shape as you are telling it, through the choice of words, the pace and the rhythm, is an act of trust, courage and transformation. Every time you tell it, a new aspect of the self and its new meanings is revealed, especially if the story is being told within the friendly circle of a community. To me, this type of participatory narrative of a life experience that highlights certain events and their significance is one of the most powerful mechanisms of personal and social engagement, as well as one of the most active instruments of participatory democracy. I have come to define citizen volunteers as people who choose freely to expose their vulnerability and take the risk of letting down their usual defences.

The value placed on egalitarian participation often leads people to speak in a way that, at least at first, is more expressive than analytical. It also changes the traditional political divisions between private and public, specific and universal. But we must be careful. In a social context marked by pluralism of identity and culture and structural inequalities of a cultural, economic, gender or racialized nature, the idea of promoting other forms of communication and discourse in the public sphere is not (at least, not necessarily) intended to promote particular interests or views in themselves, but to convince people of the public nature of the questions and issues raised, which would otherwise be relegated to the private sphere. The issue of conjugal violence is a very good example of this.

Furthermore, the structural inequalities in our societies, which are related to the three great relationships of domination — capitalism, (hetero)sexism and racism — make it impossible to believe in a general abstract meaning obtained through rational, objective, impartial discussion. The relationships of domination make it extremely difficult for people who are victims of injustice and oppression to master these tools, and therefore favour the dominant groups’ positions, which, because of their rational, objective, impartial form, are immediately interpreted as representing the general interest. Reproducing — without problematizing — the dichotomy between reasoned speech and expressive speech or personal testimony or the dichotomy between common good and private interest can be equivalent to reinforcing the position of the dominant group, since this group possesses the tools of argument, the conditions for developing them and the supposedly legitimate place to



use them: "After all, when social arrangements operate to the systematic profit of some groups of people and to the systematic detriment of others, there are *prima facie* reasons for thinking that the postulation of common good shared by exploiters and exploited may well be a mystification."<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, participation in public life with diverse other individuals in itself leads to a form of shared experience,<sup>35</sup> which creates a certain shared meaning even if none was present to begin with. It also develops sensitivity to creativity and artistic expression that transforms individuals' very perception, their relationship to the world and their position in it. Thus, as Dupuis-Déri explains,<sup>36</sup> "The majority cannot arrogate to itself the privilege of defining the universal and deciding what are basic rights, any more than a minority can. These rights must take into account the universal fact that there is no abstract individual... and that inequalities exist... which directly affects equality among individuals and their relative freedom." This is as true for political as for artistic expression. And many current art practices, including community art, are based on a combination of these two types of expression.

## Action in Networks on the Margins of Institutions

The reticular coalition mode of organization of the social and alter-globalist movements is widely known. It enables many very different groups both to maintain their independence (to operate as they wish, according to principles they freely determine) and to join together with others, most often in organizing visibility activities (such as demonstrations). This conception of shared action, unlike grouping everyone in a single party or organization where the leadership holds the power, for example, allows very different groups to work together temporarily around a specific issue. It thus favours heterogeneity<sup>37</sup> with regard to the groups' ideology and functioning, and permits a flexible, ad hoc logic of collective action among the various groups. It also corresponds to the way community art and groups such as LEVIER function.

In this form of organization, effective political action is not neglected, but it is not seen as requiring a completely common identity or identical views. Autonomy of groups and collectives is necessary, but it is combined with a sense of belonging to a movement based on members sharing a certain way of thinking about things, carrying out struggles and organizing. This reticular organization enables groups to quickly plan and carry out actions that make their demands known.

Melucci<sup>38</sup> explains how social movements alternate between latency and visibility. During latency, people gather in affinity groups, creating a breeding ground for new values and original ways of being involving trust and expressive speech. During visibility, they use various strategies — mobilization, conferences, public meetings, marches, occupations, press conferences, "disruptive" or civil disobedience actions — through which the diffuse network pulls together, takes stock and develops solidarity. There is thus a great diversification of the repertoire of action as well as an alternation between offensive actions, public opposition to the state and the market, and strategies to influence decision-makers, which may take the form of discussion or conflictual collaboration.

Here I observe two important differences between the social and alter-globalist movements and community art that perhaps partly explain some of the problems artists may encounter when they approach groups or communities to develop creation projects. First, the experience provided by community art essentially belongs to the periods of latency of groups and communities. These periods are often when groups turn inward and look at themselves. Sharing, openness and solidarity with other groups occur mostly during periods of visibility and the organization that goes on then. Thus, when an artist applies, as part of a project funded and supported by LEVIER, for example, to collaborate for several months with an organization, he or she has to deal with its organizational logic, since its members tend to be more favourable to partnerships that are more situational or more related to actions of mobilization, protest or conflictual negotiations with political institutions. Although the artist is not "outside" this community or this social and political question, although he or she is "rooted," as Kester suggests,<sup>39</sup> proposals for projects that are different from the usual ways of doing things and that are not related to mobilization but to the internal practices of the organization can be destabilizing, even confrontational. Incidentally, the greater ease groups working in mental health and certain women's groups have in getting involved in community art projects seems very revealing. They have an organizational culture and a sensitivity to the power of creation that favours openness to this type of experience, since it is relatively close to some of their own approaches or is already part of their way of doing things.

The second difficulty in the encounter between social movements and community art arises from the “second” axis of the logic of action of activist, affinity and rights groups. In comparison with more usual political action (that of political parties and unions), theorists have stressed the symbolic aspect of their struggles, the importance of the community life of the association, and the close connection between ends and means. However, the strategic aspect of these groups should not be forgotten. Generally they do not just propose cultural, political, social and economic alternatives in the public sphere, but also seek to directly influence the political and economic powers, although they most often do so from outside and not from within. Thus, their action and planning of resources (financial and human) are subject to strategic calculations and assessments of how they can increase their influence. And this is even more important in those groups (and they are many) in which the living conditions of most of the members are closely connected to the gains and losses of the organization. It is thus not just a question of grand principles or ideals, but of often very pragmatic assessments of the real effects of particular decisions on the members.

It seems to me that this strategic dimension is often somewhat neglected in community art. Except with respect to recognition and funding from the art world, the question of the political effectiveness of struggles and the need for compromise and pragmatism in relations with institutional power is much less present. Historically, moreover, this question of the effectiveness of action is a thorny question, an extremely sensitive (even very problematic) question in engaged art. The long time frames of community art projects, the extremely demanding ambitions in terms of deliberation and participation, and the refusal to use predetermined artistic and political content can create tension (and even conflict), first with the organization’s “ideological” action plan (i.e., it already has a certain set of demands) and then with the action itself, which often requires speed, strategy, compromise, realism, etc.

*While activists have often underestimated the fundamental, intrinsic power of art and have instrumentalized it, artists often dismiss strategic imperatives and the vital importance that questions as down-to-earth as food, housing and clothing may have in the struggle*

One of the original features of initiatives such as those proposed by LEVIER is that the organization does not present itself either as one group among many (since the projects funded require artists to become involved in existing communities) or as an organization that favours the strategic takeover of artistic creation by activism. Art and creativity are taken extremely seriously. The distinctiveness of the artistic-social and artistic-political approach of community art is stressed, theorized, experimented with and re-examined. However, the artists are dealing with groups and individuals who do not necessarily understand (in the deeper sense of seeing and accepting its full richness) or have not internalized this way of seeing art and social or political action. The artists, on the other hand, may fail to grasp the effect of the lack of resources in the vast majority of groups, the strategic imperatives of the struggle (which are often thwarted by the political agenda or financial requirements) or the real, concrete and sometimes vital needs of the members. They may then misinterpret a group’s refusal (resulting from lack of understanding, time or resources), underestimate or even scorn its strategic pragmatism, or fail to understand the scepticism of some members (“What will that do for me concretely?” “What will it change in my own situation?”), etc.

It must always be kept in mind that two visions and two types of logic of action come together here, and that, despite their many commonalities, openness, attentiveness, a desire for mutual understanding and compromise are essential on both sides for this meeting to work and be fruitful. While activists have often underestimated the fundamental, intrinsic power of art and have instrumentalized it, artists often dismiss strategic imperatives and the vital importance that questions as down-to-earth as food, housing and clothing may have in the struggle.

## Cultural and Artistic Dimensions

Obviously, the artistic dimension is fundamental in community art. And many analysts of the alter-globalist movement stress the importance that innovative cultural practices also have for these groups. The idea of carnival is often mentioned, as well as the use of giant puppets, costumes, posters, theatre pieces, yoga against war, provocative humour, etc. The high-lighting of festival, expressiveness and pleasure contrasts with the traditional serious, analytical, highly codified nature of political action, but also of revolutionary protest. It seems that we are seeing a change in the revolutionary model, one that puts "the power of the radical imagination"<sup>40</sup> at the heart of its strategy. As Déry explains:<sup>41</sup> "In the process of expression, countering alienation is important, as is the attempt to break down models and stereotypes, conditioning, conformism and entertainment as consumption."

What status is given to imagination and creativity? They are often seen as tools for mobilization and visibility, and in this sense they have a certain strategic, even utilitarian, dimension. Also, activists often favour the use of spectacle or shock to guarantee notice. Many find cultural practices effective in countering repression by police and political authorities and allowing certain liberties. This being said, more detailed studies, including work by Jordan,<sup>42</sup> show that the social and alter-globalist movements do not reduce imagination and creativity to a mere strategic tool.

Drawing on Melucci,<sup>43</sup> who analyzes social movements as creators of new "cultural codes," Jordan<sup>44</sup> sees the central idea of transgression and departure from conventionality as essential to the cultural, festive and artistic dimension of alter-globalism: "Transgression involves some change in these normal states of affairs. This change can be symbolic, for the normal conditions of life clearly involve many symbolic dimensions." In addition, transgression requires solidarity and a sense of shared identity, which are forged through action. Finally, the concept of experience is fundamental. In what Jordan<sup>45</sup> calls "pleasure-politics" (referring, among other things, to raves), what is essential is not saying, showing and convincing, but rather experimenting with something that becomes "reality" only as it is experienced and shared.

In spite of these common ideas, it seems to me that two elements distinguish the artistic practices of community art from the more broadly cultural practices of the social and alter-globalist movements. First, community art does not seek only to deconstruct cultural codes, symbols and political images; it also challenges the modernist conception of art and the art that is generally valued by official art institutions.<sup>46</sup> Artists in this current express a clearly artistic concern that other activists do not necessarily share. They spend a great deal of energy creating a "new" conception of art as a factor in individual, social and political change, which distances it from "great art," from cultural and social activities using art, and from engaged art in which art is seen as subordinate to politics.

As "tools of visibility," activists' cultural and artistic practices stress above all the idea of a certain "political discourse" expressed through images or represented symbolically in a creative, joyous, irreverent way. The political dimension of community art, however, seems to me to be less connected to the end result than to the process itself.

## Social and Political Problems Exposed Through Protest Action by Civil Society

As Canet<sup>47</sup> and Duchastel<sup>48</sup> show, the current conception of civil society—seen as being in opposition to the state and putting forward a view of direct political action in the social sphere—explains (and also acts on) the three closely linked "crises" affecting liberal democratic institutions. First, the "crisis of legitimacy" caused by the increased difficulty of reconciling the idea of the nation and state institutions. This crisis is both internal, because the fragmentation of identity affects unity, and external, since "citizen identity tends to migrate from the strictly national context toward an increasingly global context."<sup>49</sup> The second crisis is one of regulation, since representative state power is losing its force in favour of legal power, and we are witnessing a certain substitution of government for governance.

Finally, there is a "crisis of representation" that affects both the political world and the world of art, although in different ways. In the political world, two things are mainly at issue. First, there is the idea that "relationships between society and the institutions of power are no longer—or are tending less and less to be—mediated by representative bodies (such as political parties)."<sup>50</sup> Second, we seem to be witnessing the disappearance of the principle of a normative reference that made it possible to determine the legitimacy of an action by virtue of the fact that it was taken for the "public good." The effectiveness and legitimacy of political action were ensured by the representative system, since the guidance of society was not seen as the prerogative of the strongest of a multiplicity of competing interests, but rather as compromise or consensus for the common good. The crisis of representation results from social fragmentation, the proliferation of sites of

power, the historic protests of those excluded from the system, and the demand for better representation for all and greater participation in democratic institutions.

The current protest movements tend, at least theoretically, to replace the representative model with the participatory model: "Since representative democracy is considered insufficient to ensure participation, there is a demand for the establishment of a direct relationship between citizens and deliberative bodies. It is no longer a matter of criticizing the weakness of the electoral system, but of proposing an alternative."<sup>51</sup>

In art, the crisis of representation is often associated with the paradigm shift from modern to postmodern art. It has given rise to many questions and uncertainties with respect to positions and beliefs that were more or less widely accepted in the past. Is there really a universal aesthetic judgment, as Kant claimed? Who determines the criteria for "true" and "beautiful" art? Why is this art that is supposedly universal always defined by the dominant class? What is the influence of the institutional art community and the market in determining aesthetic criteria? How is it that professional artists have a quasi-monopoly on the definition of art?

*The long time frames of community art projects, the extremely demanding ambitions in terms of participation, and the refusal to use predetermined artistic and political content can create tension (and even conflict) with the organization's "ideological" action plan and with the action itself, which often requires speed, strategy, compromise, realism, etc.*

The artists involved in community art are among those who are thinking about these questions and proposing conceptions of art that are profoundly different from the modern conceptions and are related to their personal, cultural, sociopolitical and other allegiances. They reject the idea of the autonomy of art, seeing art as closely connected to social and political issues and presenting it directly in community and public spaces. They are also deconstructing the aura of the artist and of art institutions, promoting not just access to "great art" for communities of people seen as "neophytes," but creative and artistic exploration and development for these people through projects in which they are true co-creators.

### The Effects of Action by Civil Society

The first effect of action by the social and alter-globalist movements is that of their expressive role, since they generate "new ethical forms, new moralities, that are seeping into the smallest crevices of society and are becoming the ways in which we think the good life can be lived."<sup>52</sup> They thus provide alternative discourses that contribute to changing practices, providing better public information, raising consciousness and mobilization. They also enable people who have been unheard to be listened to:

First, these movements enabled women citizens to develop self-confidence and trust in each other. Second, the organizations provided fertile ground for development that made it possible to express experiences and subjectivities that were not being expressed in the prevailing terms of political discourse. Finally, they made it possible to identify systemic discrimination.<sup>53</sup>

With regard to this last issue, community art plays an important role in exploring the life experience, discourse and creations of people who are usually excluded from both art and the public sphere. It also offers a very distinctive way of doing this: collective creation that explores both the individual and the cultural, social, political economic, etc., reality of the people involved.

A second effect of the mobilizations of the social and alter-globalist movements is their opening up other places for political action and other conceptions of citizenship. These groups and movements (I include community art here) are demanding spaces of autonomy, participation and initiatives against the far-reaching power of the state<sup>54</sup> and the technocratic management of public affairs (as well as the quasi-monopoly of the art community on the definition and structuring of art). There is thus a project of democratization from below, a demand for real (not just formal) sociopolitical equality and for a participatory collective reappropriation of the “means of conscious regulation of society.”<sup>55</sup>

The demand for autonomy for civil society is historically — and still today — somewhat contradictory.<sup>56</sup> The growth of big government is in part the result of constant demands for greater equality: “The propensity of modernity to politicize all relationships of power or domination, in short, to politicize the social, finds its response in the socialization of the political order, which tends to invade all spheres of life.”<sup>57</sup> In addition, the desire for autonomy is accompanied by demands that state and institutional structures provide the financial and logistical means for implementing projects. Thus, to give only this example, on the one hand, community art proposes a different conception of art, in conflict with that put forward by most of the art world — a practice that also occurs in other places. On the other hand, a battle has been waged (and it is not over) with the state and the art institutions for them to make funding available to these artists and to recognize this type of artistic practice. Thus, against the state and certain institutions, autonomous initiatives are being created that would not otherwise have been able to emerge, but that are demanding the intervention of institutions in order to survive and grow.

*The rejection of uniformity, the acceptance of differences and the challenging of the only speech authorized or accredited in the public sphere cannot stay at that level, or else it will play into the neo-liberal game of perceiving the public world only through the prism of free competition among personal or community interests*

This action by civil society conveys the idea that citizenship cannot be reduced to voting<sup>58</sup> and that the more officially political places and ways of doing things do not represent all the possibilities for political participation. Participation by social actors (including artists) favours social innovation and contributes to the development of a critical civic sense that is sensitive to inclusion and diversity.<sup>59</sup> The mobilization of civil society is thus not unrelated to issues of citizenship, since it favours “genuine participation in democratic institutions,”<sup>60</sup> deprofessionalization of political action, revitalization of institutions through greater transparency and better representation,<sup>61</sup> and the inclusion of those who are most disadvantaged culturally, socially, economically and politically.<sup>62</sup> This inclusion of the “figure of those without”<sup>63</sup> does not come from outside, directed from above, but from the self-organization and (re)empowerment, through action, of the people who are primarily concerned. As Désy states,<sup>64</sup> if there is consistency to be found within the disparity of the social and alter-globalist movements, it is “the perspective of the emancipation of individuals and social groups on the basis of pluralism.”

Finally, the actors of civil society are proposing an alternative conception of power that is no longer centred on purely state structures (state-centrism). Few among them<sup>65</sup> want to take power. They contest power that is imposed from above (“power over”), which is seen as a source of domination and oppression, and favour direct, non-representative unmediated power that circulates among social actors.<sup>66</sup> Drawing on Lefort’s concept of the “empty place of power,”<sup>67</sup> Lamoureux states that this is not a “naïve position” that would deny the existence of institutions, but rather a conception of power as not being able to be “captured definitively by any group.”<sup>68</sup>



## A Few Questions

I have attempted in this article to shed light on the logic of the action of the social, alter-globalist and community art movements, their many similarities, the few important differences between them, the sociopolitical issues they reveal, and their cultural, social and political contribution. To sum up very briefly, their central idea seems to me to be the promotion of an “alternative” democracy that favours diversity, true equality and greater participation in order to improve the way we live together in society.

However, this mobilization of civil society also causes difficulties and raises questions. I would like to conclude with these, emphasizing the elements that seem to me the most relevant for community art.

First of all, as Couvrat states,<sup>69</sup> the social and alter-globalist movements have taken little interest, or not enough interest, in “the demanding exercise of forming a credible alternative to existing governments.” They most often act outside the real sites of power, and while they seek to influence power, they do not try to control the spheres where the important decisions are made. This is why authors such as Duchastel<sup>70</sup> emphasize the importance of their role in terms of circulation, information or consultation, but also point out their virtual absence when it comes to decision-making.

In analyzing initiatives such as community art, the issue of decision-making is of lesser importance, but it should not be absent as concerns two questions in particular. The first is related to the positioning of community art within the institutional art world. Greater recognition would increase the financial and logistical means available to artists. But more important still, greater visibility of the projects carried out and the extremely rich analysis developed in them would make their practices and the issues involved better known, would potentially increase the interest of the artists and the communities addressed and interested in this kind of approach, and would heighten the impact of alternative propositions (artistic, cultural, social and political) through broader dissemination in the public sphere.

The second question is broader in scope. People involved in initiatives described as micropolitical should think more seriously about the wider, more macropolitical impact and repercussions they want them to have, and about strategies for achieving this. The significant investment of time, energy and “heart” by activists depends less on boundless idealism than in the past, and more on seeking concrete results that are small and quite immediate, but the fact remains that any commitment or mobilization suffers and gradually declines if there is no perception of gains or of “making a difference.” We must not underestimate the effect of discouragement, disillusionment and even distress that commitment can create in people for whom the struggle is much more than just symbolic or a matter of ideals but is expected to concretely improve their lives.

The many citizens’ groups of the last forty years have clearly shown their capacity to change practices, win certain social protections and put forward social innovations that are sometimes adopted on a broader scale. However, the “better world” they hoped to create still seems very far off, and many doubt that they have the real power to achieve it. In addition, their gains are always threatened with economic and political appropriation and are at the mercy of the changing moods of those in power (who would have thought, even a few months ago, that the right to abortion in Canada could be seriously compromised or threatened?). The idea here is not to promote a return to a revolutionary conception of taking power or a Marxist definition of engaged art, but to point to the urgent need to develop (through action and through theory) a better connection between micropolitics and macropolitics, between the political action of civil society and the sites of concrete decision-making power.

A second difficulty I see, which is also very present in the conception of community art, is the current emphasis on ethics at the expense of a certain neglect of politics. Far be it for me to deny the gains of a struggle that does not dissociate ends and means, or the importance of solidarity, respect and sharing in a group, or the progress achieved through attention to processes in which all participants can express themselves and there is respect for diversity and different aptitudes. Nonetheless, this emphasis on ethics has certain disadvantages. First, it is associated with a kind of speech that is much more expressive and “liberating” than analytical and strategic. While I would not dispute the impact of this form of expression, political or artistic-political action cannot and must not stay on this level or else it will remain very marginal and fail to fulfill its aspirations. This is a huge challenge! How can we develop a discourse that is more detached and analytical without (re)excluding people either because of the level of argument or because of the “pragmatism” or “seriousness” a more strategic struggle requires? And how can we ensure that this discourse is not suggested to them from outside, but that it really comes from them?

Furthermore, the fact that the predominance of the ethical question emphasizes commonality, sharing, consensus and community has not been sufficiently problematized. This way of thinking about how we live together in society — although it is easily understandable in a society marked by the effects of individualism and the dissolution of social bonds — denies one of the essential dimensions of politics, that of debate, “dissensus” and disagreement.<sup>71</sup> Even though these actors of civil society have done (and continue to do) their best to show the relationships of domination and power that exist and to reduce the economic, cultural, social and political divisions, they sometimes tend to forget them when it comes to conceptualizing struggle and politics. Community art, in my view, clearly raises political issues, and not only or essentially ethical ones. Although working on the (re)construction of identity and self-expression is an essential first step in subjectivation, enabling individuals to become subjects/agents, it must be accompanied by a disengagement and a reappropriation of an identity free of the effects of suffering and domination. In this sense, the struggle is a question not only of recognition, but also of a different division of society’s “parts and shares,” to use Rancière’s expression.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, the rejection (at least, the partial rejection) of the representative conception of democracy and the legitimacy of liberal democracy is not without problems. The most important of these, with respect to what connects community art and the social and alter-globalist movements, is the rejection of the universalism of art and of the “legitimate” way of speaking in the public sphere. Rather, it is not so much the attack against this universalism, which has always hidden exclusion and domination, but the present difficulty of (re)conceptualizing two aspects that were intrinsic to it: first, the detachment from primary reality that makes criticism possible, and second, the idea of collective action guided not just by competition among private interests, but by a certain public interest. Expressiveness is essential, but it must be accompanied by a more detached, more analytical perspective, which favours a more incisive critical vision and strategic thinking. Moreover, the rejection of uniformity, the acceptance of differences and the challenging of the only speech authorized or accredited in the public sphere cannot stay at that level, or else it will play into the neo-liberal game of perceiving the common world, the public world, only through the prism of free competition among personal or community interests. It is imperative to rethink strategies (and theory) in order for the primary personal utterance to be transformed into struggle, demands and proposals that recreate a certain public meaning, a political meaning.<sup>73</sup>

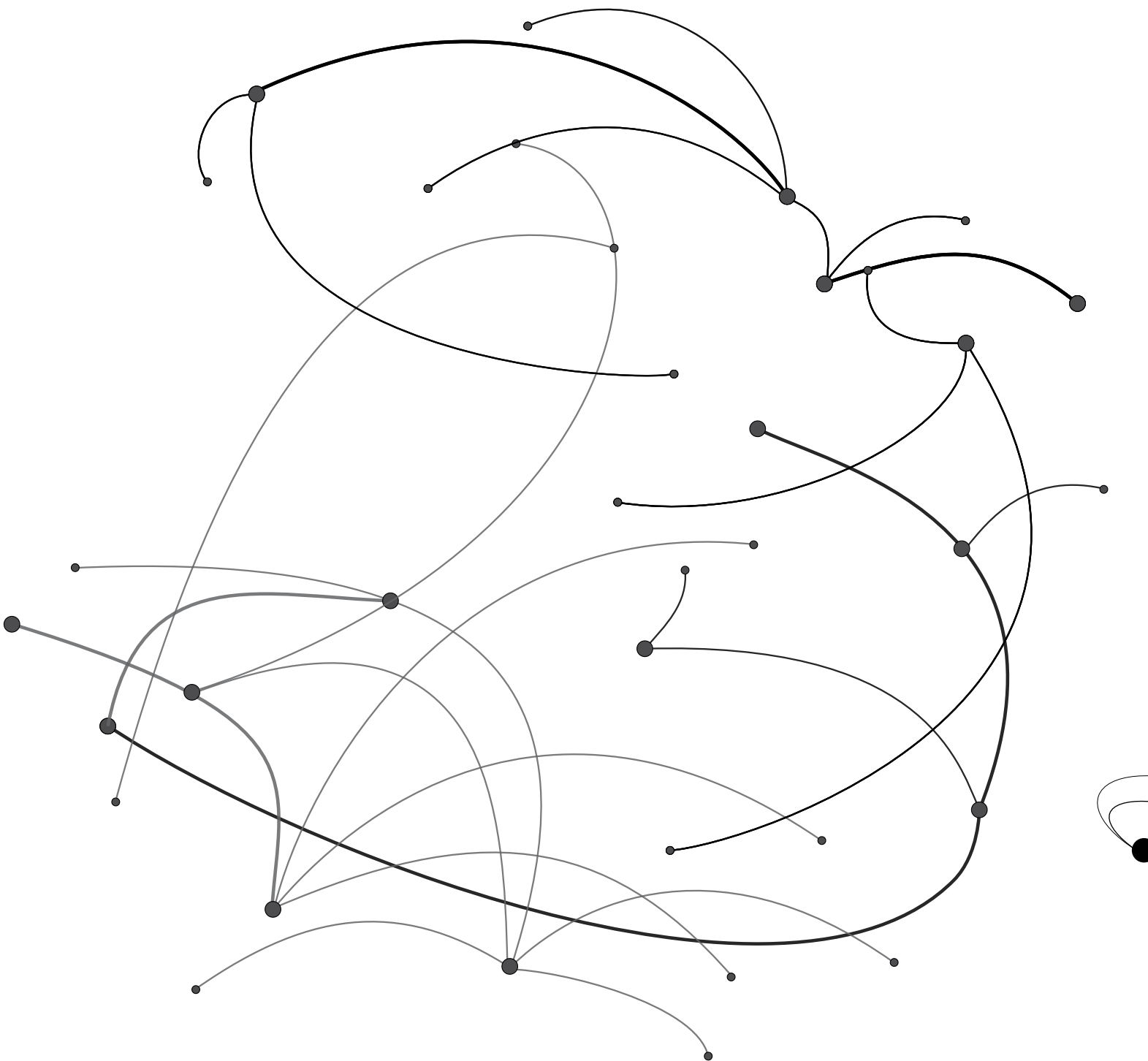
#### NOTES

1. Chico Whitaker (co-founder of the *World Social Forum*), *Changer le monde, [nouveau] mode d'emploi* (Ivry-sur-Seine: Éditions de l'Atelier, 2006), p. 19.
2. On each of these occasions, LEVIER co-presented workshops with projects members.
3. See Ève Lamoureux's biography, p. 93. Ève also took part in preparing and facilitating two meetings organized by LEVIER, entitled *When Is Art?* See her account of these meetings that she co-wrote with Devora Neumark, pp. 93–99.
4. Positive freedom and negative freedom are two very different conceptions of freedom, the former associated with the freedom of the Ancients, and the latter with modern, liberal freedom. Roughly, the contrast here is between a political, collective view of freedom that stresses citizens' participation and involvement in the polis, and an individual view of freedom as being in opposition to a power that governs everything and as constituting a sphere of autonomy in which human beings can do as they wish.
5. Raphaël Canet, “Solidarité nationale, luttes sociales et recomposition identitaire: Communauté politique et société civile à l'ère globalisée,” in *Crise de l'État, revanche des sociétés*, Jules Duchastel and Raphaël Canet, eds. (Outremont: Athéna éditions, 2006), p. 20.
6. Raphaël Canet, p. 19 (see note 5).
7. Alberto Melucci, “Mouvements sociaux, mouvements post-politiques,” *Revue internationale d'action communautaire*, 10/50 (fall 1983), pp. 13–30.
8. Diane Lamoureux, “Les mouvements sociaux, vecteurs de l'inclusion politique,” dans *Du tricoté serré au métissé serré? La culture publique commune au Québec en débats*, Stephan Gervais, Dimitrios Karmis and Diane Lamoureux, Eds. (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2008) pp. 209, 210.
9. Devora Neumark, “Bio,” in *Devora Neumark: Home Beautiful*, 2007: [www.devoraneumark.com/site/bio/bio.html](http://www.devoraneumark.com/site/bio/bio.html) (page consulted on April 15, 2007).
10. Devora Neumark, “Entre nous : Valeurs communes et pratiques créatives partagées,” *ESSE Arts et opinions*, 48 (Spring-Summer 2003), p. 50.
11. Guy Sioui Durand, “Tranches radicales de l'année d'art 2002 au Québec,” *Inter, Art actuel*, 84 (Spring 2003), p. 14.
12. As requested by the editors of this book when they commissioned me to write this article.
13. Daniel Vander Gucht, *Art et politique: Pour une redéfinition de l'art engagé* (Bruxelles: Labor, 2004), p. 8.
14. I have borrowed this term from Tim Jordan, *Activism!: Direct Action, Hacktivism and the Future of Society*. (London: Reaktion, 2002), p. 73.
15. Alberto Melucci (see note 7).
16. Jacques Ion, “Conclusion: Métamorphoses de l'engagement, espace public et sphère politique,” in *L'Engagement au pluriel*, Jacques Ion, ed. (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2001), pp. 196–217.
17. Tim Jordan, p. 73 (see note 14).
18. Isabelle Sommier, *Le renouveau des mouvements contestataires à l'heure de la mondialisation* (Paris: Flammarion, 2003), pp. 24, 25.
19. Martine Barthélémy, “Le militantisme associatif,” *L'engagement politique: Déclin ou mutation?*, Pascal Perrineau, Ed. (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale de sciences politiques, 1994), p. 97.
20. Jacques Ion (see note 16).
21. Isabelle Sommier, p. 24 (see note 18).
22. Raphaël Canet, p. 9 (see note 5).
23. Diane Lamoureux, pp. 210, 211 (see note 8).
24. Neumark, in her theories of community art, has put a lot of emphasis on this dimension, which sociologists and political scientists have often tended to dismiss. See note 10.
25. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
26. Axel Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).
27. Thomas Humphrey Marshall, “Citizenship and Social Classes” (1949), reprinted in his *Sociology at the Crossroads* (London: Heineman, 1963).
28. Diane Lamoureux, p. 213 (see note 8).

29. Christine Couvrat, "Altermondialisme, société civile et démocratie radicale," in *Crise de l'État, revanche des sociétés*, Jules Duchastel and Raphaël Canet, Eds. (Outremont: Athéna éditions, 2006), p. 224.
30. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1970).
31. Diane Lamoureux, "Féminisme et altermondialisme," paper presented at the *Colloque international Genre et militantisme* in Lausanne in November 2004, published on-line by the Université de Lausanne at <http://www2.unil.ch/liege/actus/pointfort2.html> (site consulted on January 12, 2005), p. 5.
32. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).
33. Devora Neumark, p. 48 (see note 10).
34. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere. A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), pp. 72-73.
35. Ian Angus, *Emergent Publics* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2001), p. 34.
36. Francis Dupuis-Déri, "Féminisme et anarchisme au sein du mouvement altermondialiste: Vers un anarchisme radical?" paper presented at the *Colloque international Genre et militantisme* in Lausanne in November 2004, published online by the Université de Lausanne at [www2.unil.ch/liege/actus/pointfort2.html](http://www2.unil.ch/liege/actus/pointfort2.html) (site consulted on January 12, 2005), p. 6.
37. Raphaël Canet, p. 22 (see note 5).
38. Alberto Melucci (see note 7). Also Alberto Melucci, *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
39. Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). Grant H. Kester, "Ongoing Negotiations: Afterimage and the Analysis of Activist Art," in *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays of Afterimage*, Grant H. Kester, ed. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 1-22.
40. Tim Jordan, p. 13 (see note 14).
41. Caroline Désy, "Transgressions festives et pratiques de résistance altermondialistes," *Inter, Art actuel*, 92 (Winter 2006), p. 8.
42. Tim Jordan (see note 14).
43. Alberto Melucci (see note 38).
44. Tim Jordan, p. 11 (see note 14).
45. Tim Jordan, p. 90 (see note 14).
46. Among other things, the view of the artist as the sole possessor of genius and expertise, the universalist criteria of art and the dichotomy between professional and amateur practices.
47. Raphaël Canet (see note 5).
48. Jules Duchastel, "La démocratie entre la crise de l'État et la revanche des sociétés," in *Crise de l'État, revanche des sociétés*, Jules Duchastel and Raphaël Canet, Eds. (Outremont: Athéna éditions, 2006), pp. 205-218.
49. Jules Duchastel, p. 379 (see note 48).
50. Christine Couvrat, p. 231 (see note 29).
51. Jules Duchastel, p. 389 (see note 48).
52. Tim Jordan, p. 23 (see note 14).
53. Diane Lamoureux, p. 218 (see note 8).
54. Christine Couvrat (see note 29). Also Louis Maheu, "Les mouvements de base et la lutte contre l'appropriation étatique du tissu social," *Sociologie et sociétés*, 15:1 (1983), pp. 77-92; Michel Foucault, "Le sujet et le pouvoir," in *Dits et écrits 1954-1988, Tome 2: 1976-1988*, Daniel Defert and François Ewald, Eds. (Paris: Gallimard, 2001 [1982]) pp. 1041-1061.
55. Christine Couvrat, p. 224 (see note 29).
56. Louis Maheu, "Mouvements sociaux et politiques: Les enjeux d'une articulation entre les grandes problématiques du politique," in *Les formes modernes de la démocratie*, Gérard Boismenu, Pierre Hamel and Georges Libica, Eds. (Montréal and Paris: Presses de l'Université de Montréal and l'Harmattan, 1992), pp. 201-224. And Jules Duchastel (see note 48).
57. Jules Duchastel, p. 367 (see note 48).
58. Christine Couvrat (see note 29); also Diane Lamoureux (see note 8).
59. Diane Lamoureux, pp. 217-221 (see note 8).
60. Ian Angus, p. 49 (see note 35).
61. Diane Lamoureux (see note 8); Jules Duchastel (see note 48).
62. Christine Couvrat (see note 29).
63. Isabelle Sommier (see note 18).
64. Caroline Désy, p. 8 (see note 41).
65. Some qualification is needed here in order to take into account the recent election of left-wing governments in South America and the creation of alternative political parties such as Québec solidaire. However, these initiatives are still very much in the minority and encounter a lot of resistance in most social and alter-globalist groups.
66. Diane Lamoureux (see notes 31 and 8). Tim Jordan (see note 14).
67. Claude Lefort, *L'invention démocratique* (Paris: Fayard, 1981). This analysis of power as circulating is very present in Foucault (see note 54) but also, more recently, in John Holloway (*Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* [London: Pluto Press, 2002]), who offers a revolutionary vision that moves away from institutional power and the idea of "taking power."
68. Diane Lamoureux, p. 225 (see note 8).
69. Christine Couvrat, p. 240 (see note 29).
70. Jules Duchastel, p. 396 (see note 48).
71. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2009), p. 97.
72. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 102.
73. Further reading to complete the bibliography of this article: Caroline Désy, "La résistance transnationale: Quelle vision du monde?," in *Crise de l'État, revanche des sociétés*, Jules Duchastel and Raphaël Canet (Eds.) (Outremont: Athéna éditions, 2006). Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). John Jordan, "Une odeur de carnaval et de révolution," *Inter, Art actuel*, 80 (Winter 2002), pp. 22-24. Jean Charles Lagrée, "Société civile internationale, un concept à réévaluer," *Esprit critique*, 6: 2 (Spring 2004), pp. 52-69.



# Conclusion







## Postscript

# La brûlure avant la voix

[The burning before the voice]

## or Could this be a love letter?

Louise Lachapelle

Before the start of a community forum I attended in the Santhiaba quarter of Dakar, Sénégal, in April 2010, women celebrating an important step in a collaborative process invited me to join them for dancing.<sup>1</sup> It was such a pleasure to begin a work meeting with colours, music, laughter and movement! What a difference compared to my first involvement with LEVIER, for the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices*,<sup>2</sup> which had begun with a morning yoga session, as had other programs. My participation in these sessions added up to practicing a form of presence, of being close by. I found it impossible to do the movements together with the others, to move physically. The gestures seemed so intimate and, consequently, inaccessible in a collective and public context such as that one. The proposal clashed with my natural reserve, with my life experience. As I write these lines, I realize that the fact of being invited, as a woman, to join a group of other women – an experience of sisterhood which has seldom been mine, even in a context of cultural or socioeconomic proximity – is doubtless not extraneous to the significant and healing aspect of that Senegalese experience which I evoke here as a landmark in my own process.

With my mind's eye on that process, and inhabiting a highly personal stance, I would like to attest to my privileged relationship with LEVIER over the years. Be it through the design and co-animation of several training and exchange programs, as adjuncts or as companions to certain projects, or through interpersonal relationships, the critical practice of creation, reflection and action typical of LEVIER was rich in encounters, in opportunities to recharge and in mutual learning – all of this adding up to an abundant *matter* that continues to find its expression in me.

My initial involvement with LEVIER came at a time when my critical relationship to culture (as well as to my culture) was becoming more radical. I use the word in the sense of *root*, as I was taught by Maria-Theresia, a nun in the Carmelite convent of Berlin, in due respect of a friendship and an ongoing dialogue I have sometimes referred to, mainly in the introduction to the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004). I do not have faith. Neither the faith that comes with the existence and daily life of the believer, nor even faith in culture. Nonetheless, several links seem to exist between the Carmelite convent and art, and these have often seemed to me to shed light on the paradoxes of these practices, including in their relation to ethics and community.<sup>3</sup> At the time of that original involvement with the LEVIER process, I felt the need to respond to the present – how to live? How to live together?<sup>4</sup> – but also of following through in my actions, relationships and lifestyles with a questioning of the fundamental issues raised within a reflection on gift, art and ethics<sup>5</sup> that had just generated a new cycle of research-creations about living, inhabiting and coexistence.<sup>6</sup> Since then, with *This should be housing / Le temps de la maison est passé*, I have been exploring the tensions between the need for dwelling, the joys of the hut and the inadequacy of the house. By this I mean the house as expression of a relation to habitat founded on physical and symbolic *domination*,<sup>7</sup> and as a model dictating both a way of inhabiting, an ethics and a deficient cultural response to the issue of coexistence. My role in LEVIER's demanding and rigorous activities<sup>8</sup> has provided me with many opportunities to share in these questionings, and to develop them in a context where my preoccupations with the creation and transmission of culture, and with the role of art in personal, social and community terms, could contribute to formulating shared working questions, while supporting diverse individual and collective practices, in a context where, in turn, my own practice is nurtured and sustained. The practices of questioning, reflecting and sharing are compelling forces in LEVIER's creative process and ethics. And so it is, once

Louise Lachapelle  
(see p. page 51)

again, by sharing questions from my own workshop, as well as from my own work on the *house*, that I come back to LEVIER's ongoing activism.

*In Our Lifetime*, the designation that refers to all of LEVIER's current activities,<sup>9</sup> focuses on the relationship between art and the struggle against poverty, along an intervention axis that encourages "artistic creation to confront the systemic causes of poverty" and of social exclusion. By choosing creativity as the driving force behind its activism from the outset, LEVIER partakes in and of this *rediscovery* – though recent – of the relationship between "art and community" through community art, a relationship that Western-world art had perhaps not so completely sundered, contrary to what a certain modern version of art history would have us believe.

*Another tension for me that has to be better understood, explored and written about is the notion that community art (as I have described it) is really a Western construct and that non-Western societies produce culture (and art) in very different ways – ways that are community-based, rooted in traditions and sacred (world view) beliefs. In many Aboriginal societies, art is produced with a specific function within a community.*

– Melanie Fernandez

Community Arts – Invitation to an Information Meeting, p. 29<sup>10</sup>

LEVIER has set itself the mandate to engage with artistic and socioeconomic issues characteristic of the reality and communities of Québec, while seeking to create links with local communities elsewhere, as well as with shared world-wide issues. To what extent does the development of these significant relationships between people and between groups, which is certainly conducive to increasing awareness and responsibility relative to such conditions of struggle, also succeed in generating a more comprehensive understanding of the issues themselves? This appears particularly difficult when these issues seem to express themselves *elsewhere* with a degree of urgency that can be perceived, *here*, as belonging to a political, cultural or socioeconomic context that is *different* or apparently remote from *ours*, yet without being identifiable to a crisis or a spectacular catastrophe, that is to say with a more immediately and massively rallying type of event. This being said, the different understanding created by a more comprehensive and transcultural perspective on persistent structural inequalities, on a culture of separation and on human habitat, generally transforms the (local) definition of the problems arising for *us*, while making it richer and more complex; but then, does this different kind of understanding not also convey the possibility of changing, sometimes radically, the way of facing these problems and of solving them together? From the feeling of guilt of the wealthy toward the poor to a sense of solidarity which, for some, *refreshes* the community experience, there exists, when engaging in holistic experiences or decolonization processes such as LEVIER's, a necessary passage where each person is continually called upon to situate the perspective from which she is creating the conditions of the *cum munia*. In other words, which forms of gift-sharing will be the basis of which community?

*I realized that to be more radical in my commitment, I had to open my heart and have the courage to be visible.*

– Suzanne Boisvert,

from the interview concerning the project *Il était une fois mon quartier*

[Once upon a time, my neighbourhood], p. 216

From one event to the other, the relationships established with an open network of collaborators and accomplices operate so that LEVIER's artistic, political and theoretical approach is defined and develops in a continuous and organic manner, along with fieldwork hinging on listening and adaptability, as well as by mutual training, dialogue and critical thinking. In my view, three main factors seem to promote LEVIER's approach: the flexibility and autonomy of this small team of co-directors; the development of projects that, like LEVIER itself, seek to empower the structures supporting them, as well as the people involved; the access to private funding which ensures core financing for various activities. To some extent, these factors are also what make the organization fragile. Over the years, this LEVIER-specific approach has contributed significantly to both practical and theoretical work on the issues inherent to the creative process as well as on those typical of community art and activist art as they relate to the existential, to citizen commitment and to individual and social transformation (in the sense both of change and of healing).

When it comes to community or cultural organizations, survival beyond the first five years of activity often depends on access to a space, an identity-specific location promoting networking and visibility. Although LEVIER, due to its origins, has never experienced such precariousness, the preparation of this publication made it necessary to have a place, a storefront

window on the world, so to speak, so that the book's production team could have a common workplace outside Devora or Johanne's domestic spaces.<sup>11</sup> Setting up in a shared physical location by renting a commercial space literally opening onto Saint-Jacques Street, in Montréal, signaled yet another phase in LEVIER's development.

The financial and critical support initially intended mostly for artists wishing to work with community organizations had, since 2008, begun to transform into support for community organizations who share with LEVIER the objective of fighting poverty (or of promoting healthy interdependence), and wishing to work with art and artists in realizing their own mandates.<sup>12</sup> Individuals or groups who join together around a collaborative creative project often seem to recognize one another in their identification with certain kinds of marginalization. Since this most recent developmental phase of LEVIER's, the artists and creative projects are finding their place in existing non-profit organizations, where new actions are emerging, as well as, from now on, new artists (and potentially, new organizations). Though that is surely a lovely way of coming full circle, this journey reveals that LEVIER is facing the challenge of negotiating one of the tensions inherent in the creative process (as well as in the collaborative process or in social change): the tension between asserting difference and the reproduction of the same. This tension is present both in LEVIER's programming and in the way the organization functions wherein transformation is not only a theoretical intention, it is also put into practice. That which is being challenged is itself an important agent of change, whether in the realm of personal transformation or at the level of countering certain dominant systems — values, social structures or power relations. What remains then from what is being contested in what is being renewed? To what extent is artistic responsiveness a carrier of *diversity* and *difference*?

A kind of cultural entrepreneurship is currently active in the urbanization (and Americanization) of the planet. Investments in infrastructures, numerous constructions — such as museums or the other cultural complexes dominating this trend — point to

an essentially commemorative relationship to art and culture (often meaning a Western or Euro-centred definition of art and culture), one which proves also to be a powerful strategy for cultural assimilation and homogenization (for example, see below the reference to the cultural mediation in *Cultural Development Policy for the Ville de Montréal*). By comparison, there is a clear coherence between the various steps of LEVIER's history and the "infrastructure" the organization has set up for itself, for a duration initially determined by the production of this publication. The LEVIER space consolidates collaborations already deeply rooted in a complex relational network and in the varied expressions of artistic and political activist practices aimed at social responsibility. Therein, collaborators enter a zone conducive to further interweavings and points of convergence. In addition, this *settling-in* process of LEVIER's may only be partial, given that a certain *internal nomadism* has set in, meaning that the office space and, more recently (for a short period of time), the adjoining studio, are not only frequented but also used by people and organizations originating from the open and mobile *community* that LEVIER is, so to speak. This settling into a physical space nonetheless raises the question of LEVIER's institutionalization and, at a time when the organization is producing a work "rememorizing" and historicizing its own narrative, the question of how LEVIER wishes to view its own continuity/durability, as well as that of its approach and achievements. Which ways and means for growth will LEVIER adopt from now on (different, in this context, from the progressive idea of expansion)? And, with the *In Our Lifetime* programming, what of its means of transformation / transmission? Will this process bring about a perspective that is both viable and sustainable? In other words, how will LEVIER's inscription in its own location allow the organization to keep on resisting, in the etymological sense of *to resist*, that is, continuing to "face" both the cultural en-closure of the "dead house"<sup>13</sup> and the cultural utopia of a "house without walls?"



Page excerpted from the *Cultural Development Policy for the Ville de Montréal 2005-2015*. The drawing of the house as well as the scribbled notes were added by Louise Lachapelle. She calls this new sketch *The cultural enclosure of a dead house*.

*Instead of a physical building,  
the entire neighbourhood would become the Maison de la culture — albeit, one without walls.  
The timing of this initiative [to create a community art urban zone]  
was linked to the release of the Ville de Montréal's cultural policy  
with the aim of inviting the local population to engage in a critical dialogue  
about public and community art.  
— description of the project Urbaine urbanité III [Urban urbanity III], p. 241.*

I would like to continue this reflection by introducing three images as a kind of anchoring outside oneself, a creative strategy, the burning before the voice [*La brûlure avant la voix*].

Though these images do not really belong together, their juxtaposition pulls something together for me. At this heady stage in the creative process, when writing is stumbling toward the text, I am trying to think (perhaps also to believe) that they will allow me to access the questions forming inside me at the end of the tremendous assessment that this book represents, and that they will help me turn my questioning towards you. The three images do seem to belong to vastly different historical, cultural and sociopolitical contexts, yet they appear to point to something akin to the fundamental challenges and choices discussed earlier; a few avenues, at least on the creative and cultural levels, leading to the formulation of the shared questions without which obtaining collective answers can only prove difficult. Among the numerous themes and problems that come out of my reading of material from the book made available to me by the editorial team, as well as my look back at my own practice in dialogue with LEVIER's, I would isolate the following elements: the matter of the gesture and the form of the gesture; the affirmation of creation and the questioning of our culture of sacrifice; the woman — house — community connection.

### The matter of the gesture, the form of the gesture

When I first heard about LEVIER's publication project, in 2007, I made an offer to Devora and Johanne to write an article that would make use of the title of a painting by German artist Georg Baselitz, *Die Hand — Das brennende Haus* [The Hand — The Burning House] (1965). In it I would further develop certain issues introduced at the beginning of the report on the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices*<sup>14</sup> as regards LEVIER's various projects: the house as revealer of the uncertain place humans occupy in their "contemporary," and a sense of ethics as *disposition*, that is to say as *position by default*. This critical stance allows me to suggest that the inadequacy of ethics, when it comes to *resolving* or *regulating* the complex proposals we receive from reality, constitutes a creative requirement in and of itself, a condition that is prerequisite to an open relationship to the living. The Baselitz painting shows an extended arm, the palm of the hand turned upward, holding, like an offering, a burning house. This image seemed to lead to writing. It spoke to me of the line of questioning I wanted to explore in connection with my involvement and critical interventions within the LEVIER framework, and with *This should be housing / Le temps de la maison est passé*. In other words, it spoke to me of this reflection on ethics in our cultural practices that also critiques *our* culture of sacrifice, a culture where separation and exclusion are the foundations of social cohesion as well as of the forms of reconciliation that would aim to safeguard community.

*After the launch of the Tuganire video on August 26, 2008, at Umurage,  
one of the children fell down the stairs and cut his forehead open.  
There was a lot of blood: he had to have stitches.  
When the ambulance left, the older youth went elsewhere to party into the dawn.  
In the early morning hours, there was a fight: one young man stabbed another to death.  
The centre was conceived as a space for individuals and disparate groups  
within the Montréal Rwandan community to come together.  
All of us who had worked for years on the project felt terrible  
that bringing people together resulted in murder,  
especially considering our history.  
— Lisa Ndejuru,  
from the interview concerning the Tuganire project, p. 228*



Origins stories — be they narratives, fictions or myths — tell of the foundations of human culture. For French philosopher René Girard, culture finds its origins in a founding murder whose sacrificial rituals comprise the repetition aimed at reactivating, down through generations, the protection through sacrifice that these rituals re-actualize.<sup>15</sup> However, Girard defines the modern world as a world deprived of this sacrificial protection and, consequently, liberated from the lie of the single victim and the sacrifices resulting from that lie, in other words, the exclusion and “murder” of the scapegoat. It would appear that our reconciliatory mechanisms have lost their efficiency and the modern world is, in his view, “ever more exposed to an increasingly aggravated violence which is, of course, our own, the violence of us all.”<sup>16</sup> “In order to survive, [the consumer society] must constantly invent new gadgets. And the marketplace society consumes the earth’s resources, not unlike the Aztecs killing more and more victims. Over time, any and all sacrificial remedy loses its efficiency,” writes Girard.<sup>17</sup> By observing only the recent history of the human species, *we* should be able to *know* that not only does the culture of sacrifice not suffice to bring about reconciliation between or within communities, but that reconciliation itself is no longer enough. *Our* cultural practices remain based in the values and economy of sacrifice, be it of art, of gift or of war. This economy is the foundation of culture that this culture itself almost always succeeds in masking. It does so by *reconciling* us with the necessity of killing which is specific to a survival situation or to the exploitation of the *other*, one of its human aggravations. That need to kill has been excluded from culture and from what would define “the human.” Thus, culture — which continues to think of itself as a promise of reconciliation — apparently continues to define itself first through separation, by that “ultimate line of defense” between *them* and *us*, between the human and the living, between *house* and *habitat*.<sup>18</sup> How to inhabit the contemporary together?

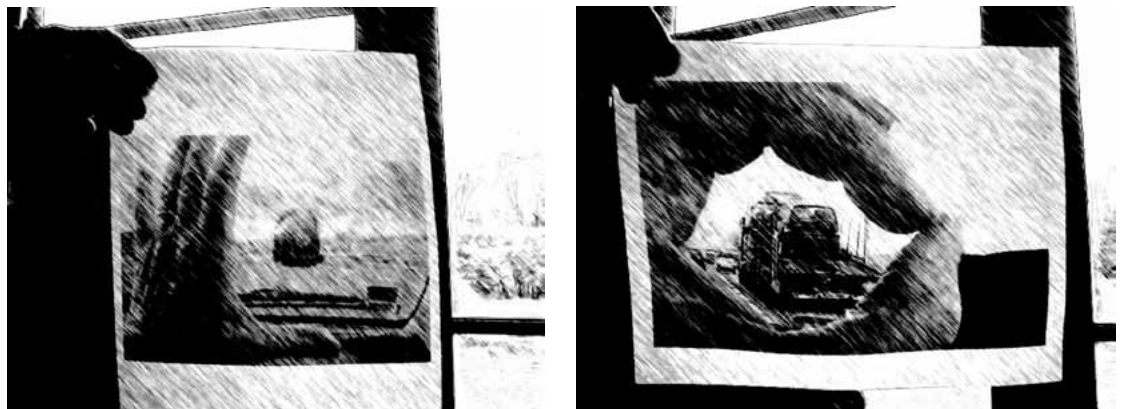


Georg Baselitz, *The Hand – The Burning House*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 135 x 39 cm (private collection).  
Photo: Frank Oleski, Cologne. (c) Georg Baselitz

In the context of this reflection on the contemporary imaginary landscape, the Baselitz painting evokes the critical reversal of the meaning and the value of sacrifice: the gift of the burning home, nothing more to give than the destroyed house that will save nothing. It shows the inefficiency of gestures aimed at saving individual or community through sacrifice, at creating cohesion through separation and inclusion. Thus, when one recognizes the necessity to respond to the present, the necessity of making concrete gestures, there remains the question of the gesture that *one must* make and the uncertainty from which this *one must* proceeds: the question of choice and form of the gesture. This question has haunted me for years, and in my view it points to the dis-quiet space of ethics: how – in a gesture or in art as a gesture – to sustain the necessity to act and the uncertainty of action? How to imagine a non-sacrificial space?

Since working with Baselitz's painting, my attention has attached itself to this house in flames and to that hand extended into a space that seems to be exploding – expression of a relationship to a dis-quiet present that the creative gesture, or the sacrifice, might seek to appease? Gently, Devora points out something I had not noticed: the arm, the hand, the skin, are also burning. Indeed, my own skin had started burning again since the beginning of this work on the house. In addition, I had already integrated this skin reaction into my writing process, as well as into the exploration of new forms of relationships, intimate ones but also friendships, social and public relations. Although I *knew* that this *burning* was one of the terrains or intimately personal materials of this experience, I had not realized I was exposing myself to such a fundamental and complete folding back on myself. I did not think I would be exposing my skin to the same kind of uncontrollable and debilitating urges as when, in childhood, as a response to the irritation and danger from the mother crazed by past abusive assaults on her own body and memory, I would strip the skin from the soles of my feet. This may be where I am now: stop digging holes in my skin without en-closing (the) being.

### Asserting creation and questioning our culture of sacrifice



Images by Louise Lachapelle after Agnès Varda's film entitled *The Gleaners and I* (2000).

When I began writing this text for LEVIER during the winter of 2009, a colleague asked me for a short article about the relationship between research and teaching from the point of view of my own practice.<sup>19</sup> Another image then entered the picture: an excerpt from *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* [The gleaners and I], Agnès Varda's beautiful 2001 film. It comes from the passage where a woman's hand – the filmmaker's own aging hand, as she sits in the passenger seat of a moving car – plays at "catching" between her fingers the trucks speeding along the highway. At the start of the documentary, Varda explains her project to herself while manipulating a little digital camera, a relatively new technology for her at the time: "filming a hand while the other hand" is gleaning, picking up the remains, of oneself or of the world. "It's always a self-portrait," she concludes.

*Now I feel as if I were on a starting platform at the edge of a swimming pool.  
I'm especially happy I did this exercise, that I took part in this interview,  
because it validates my work as an artist and gives it official status.*

*I think that will take me in a new direction in my process.  
It's a little as if I had just painted my portrait on a blank page.*

— Louis Perron

from the interview concerning the project *L'autre* [The other], p.208

Working with that image from Varda's film, I began to realize that that gleaner who is observing her hand while filming it with the other, is also speaking to that other text, the one still lying on my work table and for which I still haven't found a voice, although it is coming to me as an address, a gesture, the uncertain *towards* of ethics. Could this be a love letter?

Indeed, evoking the scene in the Varda film in that earlier reflection on teaching and research had allowed me to recognize that my "ambidextrous practice" is not defined by either one. At the same time as increasingly close connections are developing between my various teaching activities and the diversity of my research activities, their centre of gravity keeps shifting, toward the vicinity of the existential, of the living. In other words, I am realizing how important it is for me from now on to assert creation as a basic aspect of my practice, of my existence and of my vitality.

*That experience was a springboard for me in many ways,  
including getting in touch with my artistic side,  
which had been foreign to me. [...]  
Creating the birthing robe was a process of materializing  
what is often confined in our heads or in words.  
It was a strong, evocative experience that went beyond  
verbal or intellectual forms, and it speaks to me of our real creative power.  
I feel that this is one more door that has opened  
in me, and not only artistically.  
It's the transformation of thoughts and reflection into something concrete.  
And I understood that I was capable of creating beauty.  
—Manon Cantin,  
from the interview concerning the project *Opération : À nous les sarraus*  
[Operation: Let's put on the lab coats], p. 222*

Asserting creation: this is what I feel the need to name, first for myself but also in order to meet the exigency of the practices and of several of the texts gathered here. To do so I will have had to revisit something that, in my own relationship to creation, was refused, almost twenty years ago. Back then I had wished to experience writing and had set up the necessary conditions, including time and the means to do it. But at the end of that experience which generated a critical reflection about the creative process, various written materials and other forms of writing without words, a short narrative became the last work of fiction I would allow myself to write. That kind of writing (or perhaps writing itself?) was not enough. That text was, quite literally, *abandoned* — banished, in other words — the marginalization of a part of that which in myself, ever since childhood, has thought of itself and its relationship to the world in/as writing.

Thus the image from Varda's film, viewed through the lens of speculation and contemplation, joins the Baselitz painting among the raw materials of this article. From the image to the painting, the hand, the skin, the matter of the gesture and the form of the gesture; the offering gleaned, gift or sacrifice, a sacrifice that speaks more of self-destruction than of reconciliation; and yet, the assertion of creation.

I don't know to what I am reconnecting exactly. Over the years, creation has resurfaced everywhere in my various spheres of activity. However, I now understand differently the fact that refusing to write fiction is not equivalent to refusing to create, nor to killing the creative self. Asserting a stance as artist, woman, activist — words I would not have identified with, which I would even have avoided using about myself not so long ago — is yet another way of acknowledging the scope of my relationship with LEVIER.

*Refuse. Make of this refusal a gesture of love  
and thus find the skin of one's hands softer.*

*My hands are only half-open.<sup>20</sup>*

## The woman – house – community connection



An Israeli soldier wearing a t-shirt. Photo: Yanai Yechiel.

In March 2009, a third image found its way next to the other two. It is a photograph featured with an article by Uri Blau, published in *Haaretz*<sup>21</sup> following *Operation Cast Lead* conducted by Israel in the Gaza Strip in December 2008 and January 2009. The photograph shows an Israeli soldier standing, seen from behind, from buttocks to lower part of the head, so as to emphasize the illustration on this sniper's t-shirt: an oval target drawn around the image of a veiled, pregnant Palestinian woman holding a submachine gun. Printed below the target, these words in English: "1 shot 2 kills."

How many times, at events organized by LEVIER, have I looked at the persons present and noted, sometimes along with Devora and Johanne, sometimes with other collaborators or participants, that participation was almost exclusively composed of women? Troubled by this, we could not entirely explain the situation. Each of us indeed has some hypothesis about why this is so. Nevertheless, in my opinion, over the years we have not succeeded in understanding this situation nor in changing it. The same observations are to be made when it comes to the contents of this publication: it is mostly women who have written about their experiences here, and they, in turn, represent many other women, women with various levels of involvement in the collaborative creative projects and in the specific spaces where these collaborations occurred, or emerged from. Coinciding with this presence in the feminine, the profusion and diversity of the figures of the house found in this material and collaboration statements are just as remarkable: *houses* for immigrant women, for *homeless* women or

for young mothers, birthing *homes*; quest for a place appropriate for collaboration, militancy and/or creation; of a home (personal or professional), a space allowing freedom, empowerment or healing; places of exclusion, of marginalization or of hospitality; *maisons de la culture*, community centres, places for meeting and dialogue.

What light do the image worn by the sniper – the keeper of the territory – and the above observations about the presence and place of women (in the sense both of space and of stance) cast one upon the other in the context of this reflection about LEVIER's practice, and its artistic and political gestures? Together, that image and the woman-house-community link bring me back to a disturbingly beautiful book entitled *Women in a World at War*,<sup>22</sup> by Québec poet Madeleine Gagnon, and to an observation by French feminist Benoîte Groulx in her preface to the book. In it, Madeleine Gagnon recounts her various encounters with women whose countries are at war, a journey she undertook with journalist Monique Durand, in an attempt to penetrate, "even in a very small way [...] the mystery of women's roles in relation to war." Gagnon wonders what women have to say about war, but also if "they have a stake in the death instinct in action," for, "if they, too, were not humble artisans of the death instinct in action, although in the background of the deadly conflicts, wouldn't they, in the time immemorial of war, have conceived powerful strategies for stopping the deaths of war, have conceived their sons differently and not reared them to be these little soldiers who dominate daughters, sisters and sometimes mothers?"

Before we go any further, it is useful here to note that Canada is currently a country at war. I would also refer to the military police documents on *domestic violence* recently made public upon the request of the Canadian press in compliance with the Access to Information Act: these documents "paint a picture of the tensions and conflicts that regularly break out among the military throughout the country" within their own *domestic* space, "gestures consultants attribute to multiple missions in Afghanistan."<sup>23</sup> Gagnon and Groulx ponder what they term "the great war of all time," the one that seems destined to women; a war that would also be private (or intimate) and *domestic* in the sense that it takes place within the space and economy of the household (understood here on different scales, familial or national, for example). The two writers also question the connection between centuries-old warfare and this primordial war, the one waged by men against women inside houses.

In her preface, Benoîte Groulx pinpoints "the oppression of one sex by the other [...] at the root of all violence, all war,"<sup>24</sup> then immediately goes on to critique the link often made between pacifism and feminism. She, like Gagnon after her, denounces the myth of women's pacifism, an image constructed around motherhood which, in her view, could be "simply one aspect of their exclusion from the public sphere" and from forms of power: here Groulx lists the religious, the political and the military in a Western cultural context. This exclusion, she adds, is precisely what could compel us to "retreat to the values associated with the home." Therefore, when and in what conditions do spaces (public or not) invested by women, or created by them, remain spaces that, paradoxically, serve the cohesion of a *dominant* culture and of *domination*, sometimes simply because they reproduce the separation upon which this culture is predicated or yet again, the forms of exclusion, of self-exclusion and retreat denounced by Groulx? In other words, to what extent is the *house* women dream of another manifestation of the "master's house," a kind of extension that can be seen as its opposite, even though these houses are mutually necessary

to one another? In what conditions do the spaces imagined or created by women – be it LEVIER or some of the other figures of the house featured in this publication – become matrices (I use the term deliberately) of transformation, individual and collective, but also of diverse cultural responses to the demands of inhabiting and coexisting?

*With regard to the symbolism of Abondance et partage,  
I associated it with our project to save  
the factory and to spread the idea of renovation, expansion and the creation  
of a centre for developing creativity while saving Granby's industrial heritage.  
It was about creating something for the community, while in reality,  
the abundance was for me, I was the one who was experiencing it, since I received  
a better knowledge of myself from the others. [...] Through that community adventure,  
I learned the power of dream and fantasy. It was a creative, enriching adventure.  
I was able to imagine the future of a building based on its past,  
and it awakened in me the capacity to dream.  
— Suzanne Paré,  
from the interview concerning the project Abondance et partage  
[Abundance and sharing], p. 195*

The *art of siege warfare* targets a city's *outer walls*: "the breaching of the outer city wall signaled the destruction of the sovereignty of the city-state."<sup>25</sup> Modern urban warfare focuses instead on methods of transgressing limits, as Israeli architect Eyal Weizman, among others, describes in a study of Israel's architecture of occupation. He clearly establishes the link between those military practices and art practices such as (US-born) Gordon Matta-Clark's, or the manoeuvres and other methods elaborated by French theorist Guy Debord and the "Situationist International" from which they originate. Several emerging art practices inspired by these artists explicitly inscribe themselves into urban or *domestic* space (urban art, intervention art, furtive practices, swarming, diversion, manoeuvres, etc.) and in so doing, translate an extension of the territory of art by "transgressing" art's borders, or by "deterritorialization."<sup>26</sup> Hence these military practices and these forms of art both borrow some of their concepts from the same post-colonial (or neo-colonial?) and postmodern critical theories, as Weizman also points out. For example, he notes that "The reading list of some contemporary military institutions include works dating from around 1968 (in particular the writings of those theorists who have expanded the notion of space, such as Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Guy Debord), as well as more contemporary avant-garde writing [like Jacques Derrida's] on urbanism and architecture that proliferated widely throughout the 1990s and relied on post-colonial and post-structuralist theory."<sup>27</sup> Thus art (like culture) is thought and practiced by referring to the same language and concepts which, simultaneously, serve to develop military strategies of occupation and of *domestic* and urban warfare.

Other than this continuity and the mutual influence that necessarily sets in between differing cultural theories and practices belonging to the same "spirit of the times,"<sup>28</sup> including the continuities and inter-influences between artistic and military practices, and this despite the fact that there are sometimes important differences in ethical and political contexts, there is another aspect of Weizman's work that holds my attention here. Indeed, when he explains that the "military tactics consisting in smashing walls and breaking through them" are currently finding new expression and new means in the technologies making it possible "for soldiers to see, but also to shoot and to kill through the walls," he demonstrates that this imaging device operates like the ultrasound equipment used in, among other places, maternity wards. Even the three-dimensional image this system reproduces, the image of human bodies or "of the biological activity hidden behind the walls" of the *domestic* space is comparable, as he sees it, to the image of a foetus floating in a blurred abstract space (the solid elements disappear from the screen) while "the urban space virtually becomes as easily navigable as an ocean – or a video game."<sup>29</sup> In his analysis of the architecture of occupation (but is occupation not one of the expressions typical of our way of inhabiting: taking possession of a place, subjecting the environment, *dominating* the other?), Weizman is confirming what, in a way, the economies of exploitation<sup>30</sup> – mainly the enslavement of one human being by another – wars, *domestication* or patriarchy already claim: the boundary to be transgressed, "the limit par excellence [is] the outer wall of the *domestic* space."<sup>31</sup>

When it comes to the city or to *domesticity*, woman could potentially be both the spoils of war and its matrix. Her womb, (enemy) territory to be conquered or wherein to sow self-hatred,<sup>32</sup> a weapon when, even pregnant, she girds her body with explosives (I am thinking of Chechen women). What women sometimes seem to gain from waging war alongside men, they lose in times of peace, as Groulx reminds us. Journalist Barbara Victor's analysis of *shahidas*<sup>33</sup> – Palestinian women-matrices of the nation "liberated" from their traditional role by Yasser Arafat, who coined the feminine form of the Arabic word *shahid* [martyr]<sup>34</sup> – demonstrates this in an extreme and exemplary way. According to Victor, the sense of exclusion



some Palestinian women feel within their own society could be a significant motivating factor influencing their wish to die as martyrs, a gesture which, according to her investigation, gives them back a “legitimate” place inside a project shared by the community and, at times, by family. This process perfectly reproduces the scapegoat mechanism as analyzed by René Girard, which we discussed above. For Victor, this sacrifice could even be one of the “ultimate forms of exploitation of women in the contemporary world.” Thus the death of these women does not seem to grant them equal value, no more than their lives. According to information collected by Victor, when it comes to the martyrdom of women, the family may receive only half the state pension awarded for a male martyr.<sup>35</sup>

*[...] if I owned my own house, for example, I would not be a victim of this stigma.*

— Tessa Margreff,

interviewed in the video *Raising Mom*<sup>36</sup>

On the sniper’s t-shirt, the pregnant woman is contained inside an oval-shaped target evoking female genitals, with its focus-matrix centred directly on the mother’s belly. Above the image is written, in Hebrew: *machloket tz’laim*. *Machloket*: a debate about the interpretation of the Torah, the sacred book of Judaism; and *tz’laim*: a sniper trained to aim at and hit a target. These words, translated with Devora’s help, likely refer to the sniper’s conflict: friend or enemy?<sup>37</sup> Even outside the military context, that is a relatively common way of posing the relationship to the other and, by extension, to *dominant* ethics that imposes the terms of choice: *one must choose* between killing and being killed. In a way this model brings us back to the life-and-death cycle and to a certain ecology, the ecology of the living who must kill in order to live. Are we not basically “world-eaters?”<sup>38</sup> However, this common circumstance of survival is aggravated whenever the culture favours or justifies the exploitation of humans by humans, like the one of animals or of habitat. Given this aggravation, there could not be a more cultural question than: *who* to kill in order to live (better)?

*However unintentional,*

*there is a tendency amongst artists involved with community art  
to take a colonialist approach.*

*I can see how easy it is to assume the identity of the one who has the tools:*

*in holding the tools, the artist wields a different level of power.*

*The attitude is, “I have something you need.”*

— Sara Bessin,

from the interview concerning the project *Raising Mom*, p. 176

The sniper’s choice appears under the target: *1 shot 2 kills*. A warrior slogan that could also be read *I shot to kill*. It even suggests that there is added value in killing a pregnant woman. But isn’t the fact of wearing such a target on one’s back the most merciless illustration that, ultimately, the cycle of violence is always self-destructive? It begins and ends in self-hatred and the ruin of the *house* — genocide, *domicide* and suicide: humans, furiously rising up against humans, living and *sharing* one and the same habitat.

*Launched in 2008, LEVIER’s new initiative is called In Our Lifetime.*

*In Our Lifetime is intended to focus entirely on the issue of poverty.*

*This new initiative is meant to stimulate dialogue about healthy interdependence  
and encourage artistic creation that addresses the systemic causes of poverty  
while affirming the diversity of ecosystems, human rights, and ethical responsibility.*

— Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon,

What does LEVIER do?<sup>39</sup>

In the context of a global capitalist liberal economy, the collusion of the corporate powers of the masters of the house appropriates and transforms the human habitat, multiplying spaces of exclusion (internal and external), of forced displacements and of marginalization (prison, camp, reservations, suburbs and other sites of banishment). This reveals a mode of human inhabiting distinguished by an ethics, an economy and an ecology<sup>40</sup> of separation and of *domination* where codependence and exploitation mark the relationship between one’s house and the other’s house; where humans live alternately, or all together, in the *big house* and the *slave quarter*,<sup>41</sup> the camp and the house.<sup>42</sup> How, then — other than by

seeking again to appropriate the “house” — to address the question of the continuity of the living, meaning the question of the relationship between culture and humans (and habitat)?

For example, in an essay entitled *Help Us to Divorce*,<sup>43</sup> dealing with the relationship between Israel and Palestine (linked, in this title, to conjugal ties), Israeli writer and essayist Amos Oz deplores the ignorance and indifference of each side concerning the other’s traumas. He also acknowledges the legitimacy of the “desire for home” in all refugees, exiles, deportees, victims of social and familial violence. “You no longer have to choose between pro-Israel or pro-Palestine,” he writes. “You have to be pro-peace.” Not choosing between friend and enemy, between one boundary of the Wall or another, unity of the desire for peace. Nonetheless, here is how Oz describes the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians: it is “not a civil war between two segments of the same population, or the same people, or the same culture. It is not an internal but an international conflict.” He adds: “Not a religious war, not a war of cultures, not a disagreement between two traditions, but simply a real-estate dispute over whose house this is.” Whose house is this? Doesn’t the fact of posing the problem this way add up to both reproducing and prolonging it?

Resonating here are Audre Lorde’s words in *Sister Outsider*, as well as her call for creativity and sisterhood, and the potential for change that women seem to carry. If indeed, as she writes, evoking, notably, the *domination* of the pro-slavery patriarchal system, the master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house:<sup>44</sup> “Sister outsider, what different tools do we need to create something else than another (master’s) house?”

*Standing on the platform, repeating this,  
There will be no more waiting.*

*Deepen the need for a well-wrung floorcloth,  
Wholly applied to loving from this place only.*

*But never sing matins.*

*Breath suspended ever since the burning before the voice.  
For during that mid-night prayer  
It happens that one believes,  
make the gift of one’s faith.*

*Useless in the choir of nuns,  
go back to pacing the ramparts.*

*Without taking a brown apple nor eating  
it happens that one believes,  
hearing oneself say here I am.*

*Let matins end,  
Without walking to an encounter.*<sup>45</sup>

Several years after writing the text cited above, the narrative of the contemplative woman and of the woman who walks, I am in the Carmel convent in Berlin. Compline, the last office of the day, according to the rules, takes place inside the cloister. Sister Nicola opens the gate; there is another woman — she will spend the night in the meditation hall. The office begins with a beautiful song, in a graver tone than the others. And a beautiful long moment’s silence. The entire day comes to rest. Some readings. More singing. Then the nuns rise and walk towards the *pietà* at the back of the crypt. Maria-Theresia signals, I go with them. In a semi-circle in front of the *pietà*, “the mother who brings death,”<sup>46</sup> for the last song, twelve Carmelites, the other woman, and myself not singing. After the office, crossing the courtyard of the Carmel again, I hear birds singing and feel I am retracing my own steps.

In November 2008, at Atwater métro station in Montréal, gathering place of many urban nomad Inuit, a song circle forms at the invitation of Devora Neumark and Deborah Margo, *Why Should We Cry? Lamentations in a Winter Garden*.<sup>47</sup> Moe Clarke (Métis), Lisa Gagné (Saulteaux) and Émilie Monnet (Anishinabe) lead the learning of three songs: a *call and response* featuring women’s voices calling out to each other from one mountain to another while the hunters are away; a song for Mother Earth, composed by Lisa after her mother’s death; and a *moon song*, a traditional women’s healing song. I find a voice inside myself to join the circle.

I would like to thank Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon for commenting on the various versions of this article, and Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood for the translation into English from the original French.

## NOTES

1. See my participation in *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Arts Practices*, p. 51, and my text, *Community Art, or Finding the Way Back Home?* written following that event, pp. 52–61.
2. Thank you to Jessica Gagnon, MA candidate in "Sciences de l'architecture" at Université Laval, for her invitation to that forum.
3. I first heard Sister Maria-Theresia in a film by Harriet Wichin, *Silent Witness / Les gardiens du silence* (Montréal, Wichin/York Film, videocassette, sound, colour, 1994, 74 mins). She was talking about the Carmelite nuns' presence in a cloister located in "a place of horror and guilt." She had lived in the Karmel convent of Dachau and now lives in Berlin, close to the former prison of Plötzensee, where resistance fighters were executed during World War II. In the film she was talking about the questions raised by the nuns' presence in that community. Listening to her talk, I felt that the connections between the Carmel and art were being translated in a concrete way through the words uttered from inside the cloister. That is what first took me to Berlin and to the Karmel Regina Martyrum, where I have since returned.
4. See also the text by Caroline Alexander Stevens, "How Shall I Live?," pp. 276–289.
5. *La Clôture et la faille* (unpublished), Montréal, Université du Québec à Montréal, doctoral thesis, 2001. Several parts or partial versions of that essay, elements of which I have also used here, have been published in, among other publications, *Liberté, Éthica and Trois*.
6. This should be housing / *Le temps de la maison est passé* receives support from Collège de Maisonneuve and from the Fonds de recherche sur la société et la culture in the context of the activities conducted by l'Équipe de recherche sur l'imaginaire contemporain, Centre Figura, Université du Québec à Montréal. The present article refers to material being used in an essay-in-progress, *Le coin rouge: l'angle de beauté* (working title; The red corner: the angle of beauty), which will give an account of this cycle of research-creation.
7. Italics will emphasize the root dom- (house) throughout this article.
8. See note 1. See also my participation in the Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004), p. 66, the Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program, pp. 100–101 and in the training and exchange program, *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 121. I acted as collaborating editor for this book.
9. See [www.engrenagenoir.ca/blog/ce-que-fait-levier](http://www.engrenagenoir.ca/blog/ce-que-fait-levier).
10. All the quoted sections presented in this indented form are excerpted from the current publication.
11. About the relationship between house and book, see, among others, "L'intérieur est l'asile où l'art se réfugie," also part of the cycle of works titled *This should be housing / Le temps de la maison est passé*. See [brocku.ca/brockreview/index.php/voixplurielles/article/view/369](http://brocku.ca/brockreview/index.php/voixplurielles/article/view/369).
12. Note that during LEVIER's first brainstorming session, when the question came up about the administration of funds and who they should be awarded to, Kim Anderson had already suggested to "Give the money to the communities, they know who their artists are."
13. The expression is from Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The House of the Dead* (1862) (also published as *Notes from the Dead House and Memoirs from the House of the Dead*). The first chapter, which covers Dostoyevsky's years in a Siberian prison, opens with a description of the prison from inside its walls and closes with an act of generosity: the gift of a kopek to a prisoner. That gesture represents a rare crossing of the boundaries of that world-apart which nonetheless (re)structures itself according to the model of that other world, the world of the civil house, of which prison is the condition of possibility and that, in a sense, it protects.
14. See my text *Community Art, or Finding the Way Back Home?*, pp. 52–61.
15. I am referring here to the work of French philosopher René Girard and of German theorist Heiner Mühlmann: René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: Continuum, 2008 [2004]); René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987[1983]); Heiner Mühlmann, *MSC Maximal Stress Cooperation: The Driving Force of Cultures* (Wien: SpringerWienNewYork, 2005), 71 p.
16. René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: Continuum, 2008 [2004]).
17. René Girard (see note 16).
18. "Everything indeed occurs as if over there [in the world of houses, as opposed to here, the camp] as though there were species—more specifically as though belonging to the species were not a certainty, as if it were possible to enter and exit [...] the division into races or into classes being the canon of the species and entertaining the ever-ready axiom, the ultimate line of defense: 'Those people are not like us.'" Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, translated by Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Vermont: Marlboro Press, 1992 [1947]).
19. "Research and teaching: an ambidextrous practice, or self-portrait of a teacher-researcher," in *Pédagogie collégiale*, special issue "Histoire de la recherche au collégial," Éd. Sébastien Piché, 22:4, Summer 2009, p. 28–32. Available on-line at [www.aqpc.qc.ca/en/research-and-teaching-ambidextrous-practice-or-self-portrait-teacher-researcher](http://www.aqpc.qc.ca/en/research-and-teaching-ambidextrous-practice-or-self-portrait-teacher-researcher).
20. Excerpt from my still-untitled abandoned text, the narrative of the contemplative and the walker, one woman in expectation of the other. The title of this text, *La brûlure avant la voix*, is also from that unpublished fiction (1992).
21. "Dead Palestinian Babies and Bombed Mosques — IDF Fashion 2009," article by Uri Blau, March 20, 2009 available on-line at [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1072466.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1072466.html). Page consulted on March 23, 2009. The article is no longer accessible via that URL link but has been reproduced on several websites where it can still be consulted.
22. Madeleine Gagnon, *Women in a World At War*, translated by Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2004 [2000]), p. 17.
23. See "La violence conjugale fait des ravages dans l'armée", *Le Devoir* (Montréal), July 19, 2010.
24. Benoîte Groulx in Madeleine Gagnon, pp. 6–7 (see note 22). Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in the remainder of this paragraph are taken from those pages. According to Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, this social violence against women is inscribed in the French grammatical system of gender identification: "The grammatical rule, which assumes that the masculine form overrules that of the feminine is not the result of chance, nor the expression of a natural order. Rather, it reflects the situation of socioeconomic, political, legal and symbolic inferiority of women. [...] French is not only anti-democratic (the majority does not prevail) but fundamentally unfair." Freely translated from *Re-Belle et Infidèle: La traduction comme pratique de réécriture au féminin / The Body Bilingual: Translation as a Rewriting in the Feminine* (Montréal: Les Éditions du remue-ménage, Toronto: Women's Press, 1991), pp. 14–15.
25. Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London/New York: Verso, 2007). Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in the remainder of this paragraph are taken from this book.
26. See for example: Paul Ardenne, *Un art contextuel: Création artistique en milieu urbain, en situation, d'intervention, de participation* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), Nathalie Heinrich, *Le*

- triple jeu de l'art contemporain : Sociologie des arts plastiques (Paris: Minuit, coll. Paradoxe, 1998).
27. Eyal Weizman, p. 187 (see note 25).
  28. This continuity recalls the way in which art and artistic activity are reintegrated in the life of the community under the Third Reich by the Nazis' use of art. Indeed, the Reich gives art back a function that is barely different from the one claimed by some European art movements since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a function founded on a concept of art not entirely unlike the ideas and the art of its time. It is, among other things, in their common acknowledgement of the power and the potentialities of art that the relationship to art under national-socialism entertains a rather troubling proximity with the collectivist movements of historical avant-gardes, as well as with modernist artistic ideology.
  29. Note that the Israeli government likes to present this technological material—developed essentially for military purposes by Israeli research and development firms—as technological tools designed to preserve and save human lives in situations of humanitarian catastrophe such as the events of January 12, 2010, in Haiti. Canada and the United States are currently clients of these “security” technologies and of the various “protection” and surveillance methods developed by Israel.
  30. See, including on LEVIER' site, the documentation linked to the training and exchange program that Devora and I co-animated, entitled *How Many Slaves Do You Own? Art and the Economies of Exploitation, Past and Present*, held on March 12, 13 and 14, 2010, at the MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels)—Meena Murugesan, Project Coordinator.
  31. “In this context the transgression of domestic boundaries must be understood as the very manifestation of state repression,” in Eyal Weizman, p. 210 (see note 25).
  32. See *War BABIES... nés de la HAINE*, documentary by Raymonde Provencher, produced by Macumba International Inc., in collaboration with Télé-Québec, TV5 and the National Film Board of Canada, 2002, approx. 92 mins.
  33. Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*, (London: Robinson, 2004).
  34. Speech delivered by Arafat in Ramallah on the morning of January 27, 2002, and quoted by Victor: “Shahida, shahida, all the way to Jerusalem [...]” Victor, p. 18 (see note 33). That very afternoon, Wafa Idris, a 26-year-old Palestinian, carried out a suicide bombing in Jaffa Street in Jerusalem. She is considered the first Palestinian woman martyr.
  35. Barbara Victor, p. 264 and p. 123 (see note 33).
  36. See this video in the compilation, *Documenting Collaboration*, inserted in the centre of this publication.
  37. Irish writer Liam O'Flaherty's short story *The Sniper* (1923) describes a similar conflict: at the end of the story, the sniper realizes he has just killed his own brother.
  38. Valère Novarina, *Devant la parole* (Paris: P.O.L. 1999), p. 13.
  39. See [www.engrenagenoir.ca/blog/en/ce-que-fait-levier](http://www.engrenagenoir.ca/blog/en/ce-que-fait-levier).
  40. Note that the three terms are, in a sense, related to the house or to inhabiting/dwelling: *êthos*, meaning lair or dwelling place; “economy,” from *oikos nomos*, the law of the house; and *oikos logos*, “ecology,” dealing with the basic relationship between culture and human habitat.
  41. See Chapter 3, “The ‘big house’ and the ‘slave quarters,’” in Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the American Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: MIT Press, 1981).
  42. It is, among other things, by asserting the unity of the categories “camp” and “house,” and therefore the unity of the systems of exploitation of humans by humans, that Robert Antelme's thinking in *The Human Race* (see note 18), upholds the impossibility of separating us and them, and according to me designates the house as domination.
  43. Amos Oz, *Help Us to Divorce. Israel and Palestine: Between Right and Right* (London: Vintage, 2004).
  44. I am paraphrasing here the title of Audre Lorde's essay, “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.” I am also referring to the following excerpt, taken from another essay in the same anthology: “For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.” (*My italics*), *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press Feminist Series, 2007 [1984]).
  45. Excerpted from my still-untitled abandoned text, the narrative of the contemplative woman and of the woman who walks (unpublished, 1992).
  46. I am borrowing this expression from Angela B. Moorjani, in “Sacrifice, Mourning and Reparation: Käthe Kollwitz,” in *Aesthetics of Loss and Lessness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 107–121. The *pietà*, or figure of the mother with dead child, is prominent in the work of German artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) and this is true much before the First World War, as is the theme of sacrifice and regeneration. However, Moorjani shows that the theme loses its relevance as the artist begins to question the sacrificial credo, the powerful ideology of sacrifice armed with superior values typical of its era and tradition. At the beginning of the First War, Kollwitz—torn between her concern for the life of her sons and her respect for the spirit of sacrifice, expressed in the religious and social as well as artistic realms—considers sacrifice a strength, a gesture that puts the individual in the service of a cause, be it social, national or revolutionary. But in 1914, the death, in battle, of one of her sons, launches her into a lengthy and profound questioning of this mystique of sacrifice. Moorjani even talks of a “conversion to pacifism” in Kollwitz, whose commitment from then on will translate as an encouragement to resist the sacrificial ideology.
  47. This was one of many singing lessons given between the fall equinox and the winter solstice by various people invited because they had personally lived forced displacements, or experienced them via their family history. These lessons were part of the public event *Why Should We Cry? Lamentations in a Winter Garden*, a project by Devora Neumark and Deborah Margo, within the programming of *Dis/location: projet d'articulation urbaine, phase 3* (in Cabot Square) by DARE–DARE Centre de diffusion d'art multidisciplinaire de Montréal, September 21 to December 21, 2008.





## Closing Words

## In Our Lifetime

Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon

What conclusions can we draw from the past 10 years of co-creative activity? What have we learned that will contribute to furthering LEVIER's critical engagement with community and humanist activist art addressing salient sociopolitical issues facing us now as we enter the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

After nearly four years of working to bring this publication to print, one thing is clear: the network that has grown out of the many LEVIER-supported art projects and public encounters — and that has become LEVIER in so many significant ways — is a vibrant and living connective force. The emergence and sustained presence of this network is one of LEVIER's major accomplishments. It was a privilege to participate in creating this enlivening sense of relatedness and the conditions in which we could all explore and articulate our different visions for a more equitable and responsible world.

As is evident in the testimonies offered in this publication, the collaborative process has been rewarding: despite the creative and interpersonal frustrations — and perhaps even on account of them — individuals have experienced profound personal growth. Certainly we can testify to the transformation within LEVIER and our own personal changes. Our conversations with many network members have confirmed that the community and humanist activist art projects, as well as the LEVIER-supported public encounters, have been life-altering in one way or another. Even if the initial project goals were not met or had to be altered in the process, as was the case in several instances noted elsewhere in this book, community members (artists included) benefited from the experience insofar as they were able to experiment with collaborative ways of thinking and doing.

Many of the artists found that they had to reconsider their motivations for getting involved in collaborative art processes. The more they were able to come to terms with their own personal needs and political aspirations, the less they tended to think that others required their "help." This proved to be a lengthy process for some who were convinced of their "altruism" and couldn't see the inappropriateness of projecting their own unacknowledged longings onto others.

For the community organizations — including LEVIER — the collaborative art process challenged assumptions about effective mobilization and opened new opportunities for engagement. Many of the community groups took advantage of the LEVIER support to develop and enhance their activist strategies through the integration of artistic means. As LEVIER's mandate is



embodied in its name — that is, to provide a lever of sorts — caution was exercised to not create dependency of a financial nature nor one associated with the critical accompaniment. What actually became apparent in the process was the dearth of information about these activities circulating between community groups, and by extension, a paucity of alliance-building on a larger scale that could potentially strengthen everyone's efforts. Indeed, this lack of networking combined with a limited contextualization of the different projects within a larger history of artistic activism was, and continues to be, a major concern for LEVIÉR. The more that individuals and groups exercise greater self-reflexivity about their contributions to community and humanist activist art and link their own work to that of others, the more everyone's achievements will enrich the practice and potentially alter the ways in which creativity-inflected activism is effective.

After a decade of community and humanist activist art advocacy and funding, the questions before LEVIÉR are now about an even more profound implementation of sociopolitical and economic change: beyond the personal and individual organizational transformations documented within this publication, what is the influence of collaborative art practice relative to systemic change? As people empower themselves and their communities, they become more skilled at changing the conditions in which they live: the dependency inherent in the consumer culture, for example, can give way to an exercise of responsibility and agency. The difficulty of assessing the meaning and scale of the impact of LEVIÉR-supported projects and public encounters within the political, economic, juridical and other social structures might well be explained by the generally held assumption that it is only after a period of 20 years or more that significant systemic change can be implemented and measured.<sup>1</sup>

## The Limits of Collaboration

Exploring the limits of collaboration within a co-creative artistic framework is a way to experiment with community democracy and citizenship while examining the tensions between individual and collective responsible decision-making. By emphasizing process (and not simply the "result") within community and humanist activist art practice, the aesthetic, ethical and political challenges of collaborative creation not only become apparent, they become activated as part of a response to these very same challenges in both the cultural and socio-political realms.

One particularity of LEVIÉR-supported art projects is the choice to favour collaboration over participation. This is not simply a semantic difference. The shift from participation to collaboration is articulated precisely by the difference in the project members' degree of involvement — to the extent of their availability and interest — in the decision-making process (in all stages from conception and implementation to dissemination), hence their sense of self-representation and status as co-authors. Collaboration brings into question the role of the "expert" and implores us to equitably honour each person's capacity and contribution. Horizontal power relationships forged and strengthened through the co-creative process are emotionally and politically charged. The reciprocal relationship between personal empowerment and community-building, as well as the multiplicity of voices that is characteristic of the power-sharing process, are both distinct markers of collaboration.

All too often the professional artists are the ones who represent the project and speak on behalf of the other "participants." Paradoxically, organizers of public conferences about engaged art often invest a lot of resources to bring together practitioners in order to share "best practices" and theoretical reflection without inviting community group members. More than once, we have heard the rationale for such a policy: "We can't invite community members to speak, we need articulate project representatives." One time, we actually heard this coming from a Montréal city official responsible for organizing a study day about community art and democracy. Implicating non-professional artist members of community and humanist activist art projects in their public presentation at conferences or elsewhere (as LEVIÉR does) is rather counter to the "tradition" at such events, in academic contexts or otherwise. It seems that even within the activist and progressive cultural milieus there still lingers an arrogant, or even condescending, attitude about certain people being more important and having more to

contribute than others.

Community art, in all its myriad forms, has become fashionable. Professional artists with funding from different levels of government – and even private corporations – are increasingly associating themselves with projects identified by terms such as “participatory,” “relational,” “cultural animation” or “cultural mediation.” There is a danger that in the name of “democratization of culture,” art that is already sanctioned by the elite becomes the dominant cultural model and funding for the arts is made accessible for what ultimately is “public educational programming” or results in cultural assimilation. There is also a risk associated with the instrumentalization of communities to further the personal and cultural agendas of individual artists and funding bodies. The communities in such cases can – and have – often been reduced to nothing more than providers of artistic “subject” matter or, worse, the object of artistic exploration. Elsewhere in this publication we have pointed to some of these problematics related to co-creative art practice in order to raise awareness about the unsettling powers of collective creativity and the ethics of collaboration. Are the stakeholders (artists, communities, funders, theorists, etc.) paying enough critical attention to what is involved in community and humanist art practice? Who really profits from the increased cultural funding apparently meant to benefit the communities? Are the art projects merely *about* the communities or are they developed *with* and *emergent from* them?

### *In Our Lifetime, What Is Possible?*

*Affirming Collaboration* concentrates on LEVIER’s activities through 2007, which was a significant turning point in the history of the organization. The desire to challenge the systemic forces of oppression and social exclusion more directly has necessitated a recent consolidation of LEVIER’s objectives. The new initiative – *In Our Lifetime* – continues to be concerned with individual and collective well-being, focusing however on the disparity between “the wealthy” and “the poor.” Artistic collaborations that confront the systemic causes of poverty – while celebrating the healthy diversity of ecosystems, human rights and ethical responsibility – are currently prioritized.<sup>2</sup>

There are some elements of LEVIER’s actual programming that have continued since before the implementation of the *In Our Lifetime* initiative, including a web presence and the resource library containing a variety of references relevant to the practice of community and humanist activist art, which are available for on-site consultation. Equally important is the ongoing LEVIER commitment to furthering the critical reflection about the practice of sociopolitically-engaged art. We continue to host and participate in training and exchange programs, dialogue circles, roundtables and workshops, and make every attempt to be identified as an activist organization (and not “only” one associated with art and culture).

After all of the time and effort put towards this publication – which has become a co-creative project itself involving many of the LEVIER network members – we are poised to begin the second decade of programming. While the orientation of *In Our Lifetime* is clearly drawn, we are nevertheless still grappling with a number of questions. Why is the large majority of community and humanist activist art practitioners women? Under what circumstances would men be more inclined to get involved? How best to encourage collaborations between LEVIER and organizations whose infrastructure is not conducive to develop and maintain long-term co-creative projects? How can LEVIER respond effectively to current needs of the network members, now that the *Affirming Collaboration* project has been launched?

Beyond the questions, we are also experimenting with a different set of structural elements, choices that have emerged from the past 10 years of experience and associated critical reflections. Amongst these changes is the reconfiguration of who gets paid, and for what, within the art projects. Indeed, currently, LEVIER-supported project members receive the same wage whether they have professional artistic experience or not. Such an engagement is a challenge to the cultural norms in Québec and elsewhere, which have habitually honoured the contributions of the artists (by virtue of naming them in the promotional material associated with the public exhibition of the artwork and paying them artists’ fees), while expecting the community collaborators to work for free, because the project, after all, “is *for* them.” This equitable reallocation of resources effectively

redefines “expertise” in the context of community and humanist activist art projects.

In an attempt to achieve a greater coherence between our values, intentions and actions, LEVIER has been developing partnerships with non-profit organizations and community groups who share similar preoccupations and whose mandates are resonant with our commitment to counter the pervasiveness of the corporatist state and neo-liberal capitalism. What we offer is our experience with artistic collaboration – including the advancement of a critical discourse about what’s at stake relative to community and humanist activist art – as a means of addressing and engaging with the problematics of individual and collective empowerment and social change. What our partners bring to the table is their capacity for analysis and experiential know-how relative to the sociopolitical and economic realities facing their members, who deal with the hidden rules of class on a daily basis. By uniting our different skills and linking our different means of mobilization, the efforts we collectively make seem to be simultaneously more anchored and more expansive. In addition to the potential for significant impact on the individual level, these alliances create the conditions in which art diversifies the work of the anti-poverty groups with which we collaborate. At the same time, they bring us to work with a more nuanced and concrete analysis of the issues.

Another important aspect of the *In Our Lifetime* initiative is the emphasis on nurturing links between the local and the international. Through a series of collaborative exchanges, LEVIER is seeking to interrogate – and learn from – the ways in which grassroots creative responses to poverty are similar to and different from each other.

Since the initial brainstorming meetings 10 years ago, LEVIER has striven towards living our intentions and values to the fullest. We have been encouraged and challenged to do so by the inspiring network of people that continues to burgeon within Québec and elsewhere.

NOTES  
1. See for example, François Matarasso, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*, 1997 (2003). This document is available on-line.

2. For more information about LEVIER’s activities since 2007, consult the blog at: [www.engrenagenoir.ca/blog](http://www.engrenagenoir.ca/blog).





# Acknowledgements

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Martin Renaud  
Paul Grégoire  
Philomène Longpré

With gratitude,  
Devora and Johanne

# Documenting Collaboration

## Introduction

*Documenting Collaboration*<sup>1</sup> was produced by Engrenage Noir / LEVIÉR in association with the National Film Board of Canada's Parole Citoyenne program and Vidéographe, a Montréal-based centre for the creation, presentation and distribution of media work. This video compilation includes five 15-minute documentaries co-created by members of LEVIÉR-supported projects: *L'art est vaste* [Art is vast]<sup>2</sup>; *Corps parlants* [Speaking bodies]<sup>3</sup>; *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors* [See inside ourself in order to better live outside]<sup>4</sup>; and *Raising Mom*<sup>5</sup> by members of community art projects; the fifth documentary, *Tuganire*,<sup>6</sup> by members of a humanist activist art project.

In order to assemble the creative conditions aligned with our values and objectives, LEVIÉR provided the necessary technical, critical and financial resources to members of the *Documenting Collaboration* project. For example, production fees were paid to the project members who distributed the funds according to their own allocation criteria. Furthermore, in addition to ensuring access to the equipment needed for the videotaping and post-production phases, LEVIÉR, in partnership with Vidéographe and Parole Citoyenne, offered free technical training to all project members. Additionally, LEVIÉR, in collaboration with Louise Lachapelle, encouraged the analytical viewing of video documentary case studies and the development of a visual language adapted to each project during a two-day training and exchange program focused specifically on documenting community and humanist activist art.<sup>7</sup> In a manner similar to all LEVIÉR-supported projects, members also benefited from Devora Neumark's critical accompaniment throughout the process.

The many different community and humanist activist art project members who were involved in this time- and labour-intensive venture shaped this co-creative documentary project. Altogether, from beginning to end, it took more than four years to complete. However unwieldy the process felt at times, *Documenting Collaboration* project members have affirmed that the sustained efforts, which have gone into finishing the video compilation, have been well worth it. Besides learning new technical and critical viewing skills, they have enjoyed experimenting with the power of self-representation. Moreover, considering LEVIÉR's initial goal of integrating community and humanist activist art projects into the narrative of Québec culture — and to do so using a collaborative approach that challenges the ways in which the history of co-creative projects most frequently get shaped — LEVIÉR is satisfied with the collectively-achieved results.

*A collective story to be told collectively...*



THE FOLLOWING TIMELINE DESCRIBES THE PROCESS THAT HAS RESULTED IN THE DOCUMENTING COLLABORATION VIDEO COMPILATION:

**November 2004:** LEVIER, in collaboration with Louise Lachapelle, hosts the four-day *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)* during which Jill P. Weaving (of the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation and the director of the Documenting Engagement Institute) screens videos from the *Documenting Engagement* project and facilitates a discussion about the ethics of documenting community art projects.

**January–April 2005:** After discussing the value and limitations of the *Documenting Engagement* video suite, Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon extend invitations to nine community groups whose projects have been funded during the first five years of LEVIER's activities. This selection of projects is based on the possibility of implicating a wide range of members in the documentary process. The groups are asked if they would be interested in participating in a collective video project — *Documenting Collaboration* — and thus implementing a collaborative approach to documentation. Of the nine groups approached, seven groups accept the invitation, while two groups turned it down — citing lack of time and energy to get involved in such an ambitious endeavour.

**November 15, 2005:** LEVIER presents an application to the Inter-Arts Office of the Canada Council for funding support for *Documenting Collaboration*. Unlike the Vancouver-based Documenting Engagement Institute, LEVIER does not receive funding from the Canada Council for this video compilation.

**November 18 and 19, 2006:** LEVIER, in collaboration with Louise Lachapelle, hosts the two-day *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program* in partnership with the National Film Board of Canada's *Parole citoyenne* program. The event is open to the public, bilingual and free of charge. Members of the seven community and humanist activist art projects involved in *Documenting Collaboration* take part in this program. They present their projects and preliminary documentation to the training and exchange program participants while engaging in a critical conversation with each other, the general public, and other invited guests: Patricia Bergeron, Sophie Bissonette, Patricio Henriquez, Bob W. White<sup>8</sup> (who are otherwise not directly implicated in LEVIER's programming).

Following this event, members of two of the seven projects exercise their right of refusal: after a period of discussion within their own groups, they inform LEVIER of their decision to not continue with the *Documenting Collaboration* project because of the significant amount of time and resources it would take to bring the project to fruition.

**November 24–27, 2006:** LEVIER, in partnership with Vidéographe, hosts the first of two four-day video technical training sessions (Final Cut Pro-5) for half the *Documenting Collaboration* project members.

**November 30–December 3, 2006:** LEVIER, in partnership with Vidéographe, hosts the second of two four-day video technical training sessions (Final Cut Pro-5) for the remaining *Documenting Collaboration* project members. In addition to this training, free access to the Vidéographe editing suites — complete with technical assistance — was made available for up to five weeks for the groups needing these resources.

**December 2006–July 2007:** Ongoing video recording and post-production along with critical discussion and individual project screenings of video-documentaries-in-progress in close collaboration with Devora, on behalf of LEVIER.

**June 6, 2007:** LEVIER, in collaboration with Louise Lachapelle, hosts a collective critical visioning of the video works-in-process. Members of the five community and humanist activist art projects featured in *Documenting Collaboration* are reunited to workshop their documentaries (in whatever stage of completion they happened to be in). In addition to feedback received from project members other than their own, each of the groups benefit from comments offered to them by specially-invited guests

including: Patricia Bergeron and Claire Brunet from the National Film Board of Canada; Liz Miller, director of *Beneath the Seams: Making the Parkville Millennium Quilt* — an excerpt of which was shown during the 2006 *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*; and Bob W. White, who was one of the resource people back in this same program. This check-in process is instrumental for the groups as they push forward to complete their collective narratives. Following this encounter, each group continues to work on their documentary videos.

**June 13 and 14, 2007:** Inaugural screening of the pre-final versions of *Corps parlants*, *Raising Mom* and *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors* at the two-day training and exchange program, *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, that Devora Neumark, Louise Lachapelle and Johanne Chagnon co-facilitate in the context of Concordia University's Institute in Management and Community Development Summer Program.<sup>9</sup>

**August 24, 2007:** Inaugural screening of *Tuganire* and the first public presentation of the final version of *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors* at the Québec Social Forum in Montréal during the workshop *L'art communautaire comme un outil dans la lutte à la pauvreté et à l'exclusion sociale* [Community art as a tool in the struggle against poverty and social exclusion] facilitated by LEVIER. Devora and Johanne co-moderate a roundtable presentation in collaboration with Louise Martin, Maryse Conti and Nicole Saint-Amour, members of the *Voir son intérieur* community art project and Lisa Ndejuru, Neal Santamaria and Sandra Gasana, members of the *Tuganire* humanist activist art project. Here again, as with the entire *Documenting Collaboration* project, the emphasis is put on collective representation. *L'art est vaste* and *Raising Mom* are screened at the LEVIER information booth set up at the Université du Québec à Montréal during the two-day forum.

**September 2007:** The five 15-minute videos are completed. Each group begins translation of their own documentaries (with financial assistance from LEVIER), so that both French- and English-speaking individuals can have access to the work.

**November 2007:** With the participation of Anhtu Vu of Vidéographe, and in consultation with the *Documenting Collaboration* project members, Devora and Johanne complete the post-production for the video suite.

**Ongoing:** Members of the different community groups implicated in the *Documenting Collaboration* project continue to be funded by LEVIER to participate in the public presentation of their work. For example, in late January 2009, Maria (one of the *L'art est vaste* video project members) and Laea Morris (a member of the *Raising Mom* video project) present their respective documentaries at the World Social Forum held in Belém, Brazil. Johanne Chagnon presents *Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors*. More recently, in May 2010, Devora accompanies Sara Bessin and Laea Morris as they present their *Raising Mom* video during the two-day conference *Connect: Towards a Socially-Engaged Aesthetic*, hosted by Common Weal Community Arts (Regina, Saskatchewan). Paradoxically, of all the conference presenters, Laea is the only non-professional artist speaking publically about her experiences as a community member involved in a community art project.

## NOTES

1. See the presentation of this project in the introduction to the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, pp. 100–101.
2. See the description of *Rentrer chez soi*, the community art project whose members co-created this video, pp. 184–185.
3. See the description of *Corps parlants*, the community art project whose members co-created this video, pp. 179–180.
4. See the description of *Ouvrez votre coffre à trésors*, the community art project whose members co-created this video, pp. 154–158.
5. See the description of *Raising Mom*, the community art project whose members co-created this video, pp. 168–171.
6. See the description of *Tuganire*, the humanist activist art project whose members co-created this video, pp. 224–225.
7. See the program schedule, pp. 102–106.
8. See the references about these guests, p. 101.
9. See the description of the program, pp. 121–122.

**Corps parlants**

Women's Centre of Montréal  
French, Spanish and English with French and English subtitles  
2005-2007  
*This video explores creative expression through the body, movement and dance in order to address some of the more significant personal and social challenges experienced by women of various cultures, most of whom are new immigrants to Canada. "We always come back to celebration, to beauty and to the joy of movement for ourselves and with others."*

Claire Laforest	Marites Carino
Daniela Repetto	Mathilde Saint-Amour
Diana Obregon	Patricia Lazcano
Elizabeth Duplaa	Shermine Sawalha
Hélène Hauspied	Reena Almoneda Chang

**Raising Mom**

Head and Hands, Montréal / Young Parents' Program  
English with French subtitles  
2005-2007  
*This video promotes creativity as a means towards independence. "By sharing our stories, we wanted to renew our sense of respect and mutual understanding. By communicating our desires, we hope to find strength and courage to achieve our dreams."*

Alana Richards	Kali
Alexis Richards	Katania
Anita Schoepp	Laea Morris
Angela Campeau	Leigh
Annie Hickey	Lina Gonthier
Ashley	Louisa Neill
Caroline	Melanie Fournier
Carrie	Michelle
Cassandra	Nadia
Diana Neill	Nafeesa
Elena	Saleema
Gabriela Richman	Sara Bessin
Iryna Gorbova	Sarah Côté
Jasmine Bliss	Tatiana
Jenni Lee	Tessa Margreiff
Joani	Zarlasht

**Tuganire**

The Montréal Rwandan community  
French with English subtitles  
2004-2007  
*This documentary emerges from the Rwandan diaspora and the inability to accept the reality of the human extermination project that was the 1994 Tutsi genocide. "This video, which speaks of love and empowerment, has waited 10 years to come to light in its current form."*

Lisa Ndejuru	Sandra Gasana
Neal Santamaria	and other members
Patrick Dongier	named on p. 224

**Voir son intérieur pour mieux vivre dehors**

Le CARRÉ (Comptoir Alimentaire de Rencontres, de Références et d'Entraide [A centre for food, encounters, references and mutual help])  
French with English subtitles  
2003-2007  
*This documentary is the work of four women experimenting with community art. "You'll find colourful, humorous scenes and the testimonies of dynamic and warm people." They speak of collaboration, solidarity, and growth; how they have overcome obstacles; and the concrete results that motivate them to press onward.*

Johanne Chagnon	Maryse Conti
Louise Martin	Nicole Saint-Amour

**L'art est vaste**

Montreal Herstreet in collaboration with Groupe Intervention Vidéo, Montréal  
French with English subtitles  
2005-2007  
*This video presents brief profiles of women who speak of their participation in a photography workshop. The celebration of artistic and human achievement that the women are willing to share with us does not conceal the difficulties they encountered. "In life as in photography, light and shade are never far from each other..."*

C. Laflamme	Ma Deva Eshana
Diane Trépanière	Maria
Isabelle	Thérèse
Léonie Couture	Yana
Louise	