A Short History of Living Poetry

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A SHORT HISTORY OF LIVING POETRY

BY ANDRÉ MARCEAU*

The National Capital of Quebec City has a population of 493,000 people. That makes it the second city in demographic importance after Montreal. It reflects the situation of the vast territory of the province as a whole, with only 7 million people: a low density. One has to mention this “detail” because it is one of the major obstacle to the professional viability of the arts in the province. Let’s say that mathematically speaking, this small group of “art fanatics” in an population already small makes it more uncommon. It will become even more the case for disciplines of the arts which, despite the fact that they are considered major or prestigious (such as poetry), are directly interesting to only a small pocket of the population, while the percentage diminishes further when we are talking about innovating practices among these.

Furthermore, Quebec City which spreads out in multiples small urban nests, hides under its wing a somewhat conservative spirit (and preservative?), This is largely motivated by the fact that the City (indeed, the oldest city of European colonies in America) belongs to Unesco’s World Heritage. Within the bureaucracy, it has for a long time helped the tendency to limit artistic life to its heritage. Indeed, despite the fact that Quebec City is the National Capital, it could be considered as the self-victim of the fact that its artists often move to Montreal. This scenario is common to most cities remotely far from their northern metropolises. Let’s admit it: the National Capital belongs to the far regions.

During the last thirty years, if there was some attempts to create an association of professional authors, none of them have lasted significantly. That said, many writers and poets have made Quebec City their home, live and stay there. Indubitably, it creates some viable and reliable offsprings. The City has notably become, in the last thirty years, an ardent foyer for the arts actuels in the province, thanks to the diversity and dynamism of centers for artists. It is therefore not surprising that Le Tremplin d’actualisation de poésie was born there more than elsewhere like in Montreal, the metropolis, or Trois-Rivières even, the capital of poetry. It offered new grounds for poetry based on oral tradition, the scene and performance. In this respect, for the last ten years, TAP and its founder (the author of this present essay) proposed and defended an approach of poetry actuelle – mainly in Quebec City. It begins to be known all over the province. Two terms have been elaborated by TAP. First, there was a kind of I performed poetry where the writing process meets the partition in order to force the poet into a performance situation (where the body and the language are put to the test). Second, there is a form of living poetry which encompasses more generally all kinds of poetry performed in live scenarios (scene, audio and in situ). It also includes performed poetry, oral poetry (or the spoken word) and the slam. Since this article is part of a summary dedicated to the last thirty years in Quebec City, let’s start at the beginning, that is, thirty years ago.

Few Important Landmarks

1978 – and the future years – was a landmark moment on the artistic map of Quebec precisely because it has seen the births of centers for artists whom, while proposing new ways of functioning, were destined to one or the other in visual arts.

Many among these have become noteworthy institutions because of their thriving vitality and lasting commitment to the arts. That said, we will give importance to the ones that have given a space to living poetry in the city. Evidently, a number of events in poetry have been, at the same time, presented here and there and under diverse circumstances in Quebec City since the seventies. And they have contributed to promote poetry actuelle, in the heart of the National Capital.

Inter, art actuel and Le Lieu, centre en art actuel

The review Inter, art actuel began in 1978, first under the name Intervention (creating at the same time the Editions Intervention). That said, the active artists forming a group around it organised few events. As a result, following the philosophy of the review Inter, art actuel, Le Lieu (a center in art actuel) was born in 1982, offering a program that was radically opposed to the art traditions in Quebec City at the time. For instance, the Marathon d’écritures held for 16 hours in 1983, in the middle of the Mail Place-Fleur-de-Lys, which gathered a great number of writers (most particularly poets) and artists from the region and elsewhere in Quebec City. Then, in 1984, two international...
manifestations imposed an extreme approach to poetry, one which Quebec City's population was always allergic to (we have to remember how Claude Gauveau was welcomed by the public 15 years earlier). There were events such as Niçoisong) Cabaret: Festival d'Intervention (and in memoriam Georges Machin).

On the contrary, both events showed that the wind was changing in a province more open to various projects, including the augural "basque des arts actuels" in poetry. Both projects were catered to the same audience, the collective profile of Inter/Le Lieu is taking shape in various and images it creates. With time, festivals became interested in pure performance using almost no words and valorizing the body, images and objects which, once in action, transcends linguistic barriers. In return, most of the meetings following were counting on the presence of performers or poets coming from the same artistic world. And Inter/Le Lieu would continue with some events related to poetry. We can name here the performances of Lég, organized by Pierre-André Arcand (in 1987) or at the sixteenth edition of the prestigious Festival Polyphonix in Quebec City, in 1997. Over the years, it is also important to say that Le Lieu offered precious help to groups, by its active collaborations and by proposing poetry activities in sound and performance, like Obscure or Réparation de poésie.

Obscure

This association has closed 10 years ago. It was dedicated to the production of artistic work. It believed in "variable geometry" in artistic explorations. It was also able, between 1992 and 1997 and despite its undisciplined spreading, to land few milestones in the establishment of Living poetry in Quebec City. Among the shows and multidisciplinary or multimedia events presented by Obscure, a place was occasionally reserved for poetry (mainly sound poetry and poetry in action). Otherwise, many of the association's propositions asked for the collaboration of other groups. They allowed to cover larger ground aesthetically. All of this while bringing together many of the milieu's artistic agents in the realization of a common projects - and to be part of one of the most stimulating operations.

Folie/Culture

Folie/Culture was born in 1984, bringing together two domains not as far apart as it would appear - Mental Health and Culture (or art) - thanks to the initiative of two passionate people: Paul Monin (part of the collective Autopsy, defending people who have spent time in psychiatric hospitals) and Gilles Arteau (from Obscure). This association was consequently devoted to mental health issues and their applications in society and art (or vice-versa) more than to a precise form of art. It has regularly integrated poetry evenings among the variety of discipline presented in its program. At first inclined towards the «festival» type of events until the mid-nineties, Folie/Culture presented events on a bi-annual basis. The association offered a diversified program over the period of a whole year. To this day, Folie/Culture presented about a dozen of poetry evenings in Quebec City, generally following an hybrid form between performance, music and visuals. On the other hand, the association has published nine opus of its Cahier folie/Culture over the years. The majority of its texts are dedicated to poetry, all of it amalgamated with visual works. Each issue of the Cahier forms a box object because it is printed with the most unexpected objects, such as kleenex boxes, hospital scrubs, bread bags or even First-aid kits.

Réparation de poésie

Founded in 1986 by Jean-Clauude Gagnon, Réparation de poésie was the first association in Quebec to be completely dedicated to poetry and its avatars, such as postal art. Its mandate consists of creating and stimulating relations between poetry and the visual arts while implementing postal art in Quebec City. Between the years of its inception and the beginning of 2000, Réparation de poésie was able to present (thanks to Le Lieu's support and other artists groups) a bi-annual festival called Réparation de poésie. This festival included an evening of poetry and performance, an exhibition of visual poetry and a workshop on nature poetry (an activity seeking to "confront nature and poetry"). Each of these activities regrouped an important number of participants. Evenings or other types of activities were sometimes organized by the association members. At the same time, for the last 10 years (and realized on a yearly basis) Jean-Claude Gagnon was the director of an artists' book also called Réparation de poésie.

This book published together the visual arts, poetry and postal art of about 40 artists coming from Quebec, Canada and around the world. Réparation de poésie has also presented few exhibits of postal art in one or the other of the many libraries in the city, particularly in the contexts of the Manif d'art. Since eight years, if Réparation de poésie has limited its activities to artists' books and postal art, it remains an essential vehicle working for the dissemination of both, living poetry and Quebec City.

Avatar

Active since 1993, this non-profit organization dedicated to research, creation and diffusion of audio and electronic arts has been working with poetry and poétic at one or the other of its events of installation, shows and radio programs (focusing on sound experiments). It also counts few sound or electronic poetry CDs in its growing discography. Even more, Avatar sometimes gives support to other organizations by realizing events or CDs of poetry related to audio and electronic arts. Even if it is not directly related to the poetry world, this organization is viewed as an allied center by contributing to living poetry's visibility.

Poets of French America

Since 1996, the corporation Poètes de l'Amérique française (Poets of French America), directed by the poet Guy Cloutier, presents eight concert/recitals during the whole year, every year, at the chapelle de l'Amérique française. This series produced in Quebec City was also presented in Montreal while few outstanding recitals are presented around the world or in the context of Quebec City's book Fair. This corporation has the mandate to offer authors "that have a body of work" (to understand here great authors) a place for their voices to be heard directly by a non-academic public. Each concert/recital offers readings (of about five to ten minutes) by the invited poet, for a total of thirty-five minutes. These performances are done in alternation with four pages of music (three segments for three songs and one segment which is instrumental) most generally chosen from the "classical" contemporary or past repertoire. Inspired by literary works from their guests, these shows are consequently far from living poetry. They offer nonetheless the advantage of sharing, by their recreation on the scene, great poetical works.

Le Tremplail d'actualisation de poésie (TAP)

Beginning its activity in 1998 with living poetry evenings presented monthly (known as The Fridays of Poetry) and a «manœuvre-fléau» of poetry (by Le Front de l'appropriation locale des poteaux), the collective has operated a transdisciplinary unfurling of poetry: living poetry (oral, performed and audio), visual poetry, and evidently literary poetry. As its name indicates, TAP is dedicated to poetry's actualization (actual meaning in this case "which relates to the act"). It is a type of poetry that implicates a performative aspect. This organization has put forward the notions of living poetry and performed poetry in order to designate a type of poetry solely created for oral events (on the scene or on CDs or in situ). The association is proud to be its best advocate in Quebec City.

Each second Friday of the month (ten months per year), The Fridays of Poetry produce evenings dedicated to poetry's actualization, in partnership with TAP, the center Jacques-Cartier and the Tam Tam Café. They have reach their 10th anniversary in 2008 (and their 100 evenings). Each edition happens in two parts: a short first segment of the show with included five poetry points, each selected by institutions and each of them giving a five minutes performance (they welcome about 50 established poets, yearly). This is followed by spontaneous performances where fifteen people give their names, in average, in the night of the evening, the (they are known poets or poets that are at their beginnings). Each time the room fills up of people of all ages and backgrounds. Many of them are gradually initiated to poetry. Furthermore, this monthly happening was secured for the last ten years and greatly contributed to make poetry known to people in Quebec City. It helped demystify by breaking the wall of prejudices haunting it.

Since 1999, thanks to the same collaboration, TAP organized elevenths of the series "Urban Sinecur", They are part of The Fridays of Poetry. These evenings are proposed in situ, in public spaces outside in the heart of the Saint-Roch area, located downtown. Amplification systems, lighting and the installation of a scene are taking over the space, altogether making one with it in order to reach a precise objective: to create the occasion to live a poetic experience in the context where these poets are performing. This is one of the
editions of "Urban Sinecure" offering the first poetry evening at the Ilot Fleurie, under the access roads to the highways called: "La poésie se pète les bretelles". Other evenings took place in the stairs of La Chapelle Street (the access road to walk up or down between the Upper and the Lower City), in parking lots, on the streets, on the steps of the Church Saint-Roch, at the Saint-Roch marina, in the interpretation center of the Saint Charles river... just to name a few.

Le Front de réappropriation locale des poteaux (FRPL) is a branch of TAP. Between 1998 and 2002, it performed poetic manoeuvres encompassing many aspects: political, urban and informative (communication). It has also been involved in poetic actions and activities realized in downtown Quebec City. The final objective of the manoeuvre was to promote the agents' rights and local residents to post information about their local activities in their respective areas such as wall surfaces viewed as "urban objects" (telephone boxes, streetlights, light poles, barricades, and panel wood fences). All of these manifestations were for a local reappropriation of them. An article on the birth of the FRPL was published in the review inter, art actuel ("L'oeil à la coupe: Pour une écologie des poteaux et la Procession des poteaux") (1998, p. 65).

Among the branch's activity, we can mention the four editions of Exposition Saint-Roch (happening before the refurbishing of the old commercial area downtown) and two Walks for Poetry (Pélerinage des poteaux and the Procession des poteaux in 1999 and 2000).

More recently, Le Tremplin d'actualisation de poésieimported Slam de poésie in Quebec City, by getting together with the Ligue québécoise de Slam (IQS) and also with the help of Slam cap, which was in its second year. One game was presented monthly according to the customs and rules of the various leagues in the United States, English Canada and France.

Over ten years, TAP has proposed more than 200 poetry activities to Quebec audiences: evenings, shows, exhibitions, publications, conferences, concerts, tours and events which contribute to raise poetry's visibility and vitality. Aside, TAP created two small publishing houses of the "zine" type, cumulating twenty small books (each of them representing one poet) as well as a printing house for CDS (oral, performed or audio living poetry). It's now producing its 50th publication.

Rhizome Productions

Founded in 2000 by Marc Doucet (a sound creator) and Simon Dumas (an author) — and that many other creators in literature, media arts and audio arts have since joined — Rhizome Productions "is motivated by the desire to give a place to the author in public more completely than traditional venues of presentations of authors and texts (done mostly by conventional poetry recital or with music)" (source: Rhizome Productions). During their last six years of experience, the team developed three series of shows, all different in the way they engage. You have respectively Formes, Phonèmes et Syllepse. Formes is the oldest. That said, if productions were seduced at the beginning by "multimedia theatre", their shows have moved more and more after media technologies performatively during the last years. They have brought literary events closer to art actuel. They are real literary events because, on each occasion, the whole show is about an author (or more) and his or her "world of poetry" (directly or not). Since 2000, this enterprise realized no less than fifty literary activities — for the most part, in one or the other of the mentioned series — in Quebec City and in other cities of the province (like Montreal) or in few cities of Europe and Mexico.

The Editors...

Only fifteen publishing houses (licensed) are operating in the greater Quebec region. Even if there was few attempts during the last 30 years, only one publishing house can be dedicated to poetry and was able to survive significantly: Le Loup de Gouttière. Born in 1989, Le Loup de Gouttière always gave priority to poets from the Quebec City region. It was sold in 2008 (after almost 20 years of existence) and became Cormor Editions. For editors in the margins, publishing reviews or small books of the "zine" type, there has been many attempts, but in less numbers were the ones essentially dedicated to poetry. We can mention here the most recent. As far as the reviews are concerned, we have L'œil de l'œil (about six issues) and L'œil (about 15 issues), for the poetry collections. We have the publishing group Poésie Combattante (with five publications, mostly collective, since 2002) and the ones of Le Tremplin d'actualisation de poésie since 2001 that Tail (short poetry such as haikus and snerys) with nine publications) and Les croquemots (poetry in verse with ten publications) and La Revue des invisibles (poetry books focusing on oral tradition with two publications).

Although they are not distributed in the libraries, 200 copies (on average) of these publications are sold each time, yearly. This is a satisfying result if we compare it to sales of official editors which are often lower. That said, in all these cases we are talking about literary poetry more than living poetry. In this respect and considering what would be the closest, examples are rare. We have to remember the yearly publications or more occasional publications of artists books such as Réparation de poésie (with 19 issues) and the Cahiers Folio/Culture (with 9 issues). On CDs, Intervention, Avatar and Obscure have occasionally released sound poetry, most of the time with publications covering more ground. We will have to wait the annual Le Tremplin d'actualisation de poésie with its label Réserve phonique to see the appearance of exclusive CDs of living poetry (spoken, performed, audio and sound) as follows: Mots amarassés du corps: Anthologie de la poésie vivante de Quebec city poets (of the region, 2004); Des Montres dans la gorge: Poésie transmissible radiophoniquement (double CD which includes 30 poets from Quebec City, 2005); Urbine n°: Informe (pilot issue of a review still to be born, 2006); Pop osc-30 (solo CD of living poetry and slam, 2007). A double album is currently in production and will promote thirty poets coming from three different regions in Quebec (Quebec City, Montreel and Gatineau), thanks to the organizations holding living poetry events in their respective regions.

On the radio, since 2001, TAP makes sure that living poetry is heard on a weekly basis (on radio frequency 89,1 of CKRL, in Quebec City) with a program about "poetry transmitted by radio" and produced by the authors of these stations.

To conclude, we can mention that at the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ), poetry is always solely perceived as a literary discipline. The needs for a scene aesthetic (because of oral, sound and performance elements) are considered mostly the way to promote books. There is still a lot of work to do to make sure living poetry gets the recognition it deserves as a discipline in itself amongst the arts, and to make sure it remains alive in Quebec City and the province. In this regard, Le Tremplin d'actualisation de poésie is a pioneer because it promotes what I have called living poetry and performed poetry through its various activities.

* As one of the founding member of Tremplin d'actualisation de Poésie (TAP) and as a driving force of the famous Vendredi de poésie and Slam de poésie in Quebec City, André Marcoux developed the idea of living and performed poetry. He is its ultimate advocate. For the last fifteen years, he has practiced poetry in its cross disciplinary fashion. He has been involved in more than 100 performances in the province. He published visual poetry and has participated at many collective events. Since 2001, he creates and produces a program dedicated to "poetry on the radio". He has also participated in round table discussions on poetry and performance at various universities, and produced, with other artists, two c.d's of live poetry as well as one solo c.d. Pop osc-30. He has published in many reviews (such as Études, Moribus, Cahiers Folio/Culture and poetry books or halks, but not mention few essays on today's poetry, in the review Inter, art actuel.)