Art actuel in Quebec City: Some Elements to Understand Its Origin

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ART ACTUEL IN QUEBEC CITY
SOME ELEMENTS TO UNDERSTAND ITS ORIGIN

BY JEAN-CLAUDE ST-HILAIRE

If one follows the media related to the commemoration of Quebec City, the National Capital's 400 years of existence, one can at times be reminded of the glorious rivalry opposing, in a recent past, the Colisée and the Forum. The heartbreaks of the one are the deserts of the other. The Cap Diamant remains solid, navigates in troubled water and stays in control, for better or worse. I was listening recently to an interview with one of the organizers of the festivities, commenting on the prejudice which prevails towards the city, only by mentioning the term Old Capital, as if it was slightly behind if one compares it to the fast speed modernism of the metropole.

Everybody knows that barouches are slow pace vehicles. It is earlier, precisely in 1977, that Quebec's visual art community affirmed a will for change, an image shift. The attempt took the form of a manifesto signed by roughly 15 people, which was great. But it was seen as nothing happened for the people making decisions. This political action was following the creation of ARG, and witnessed the humble beginnings of La champe blanche. Since then, the energy and dynamic output deployed in the city has remained as the true response to this will for change launched by a group of few artists.

To remember this "taking charge" of Quebec City's visual and cultural spaces, it is not so much 400 years that we need to examine, but rather 30 years grounded in the solidarity of the various groups which have worked endlessly to build an artistic community. A community that has given, to this day, a place to all forms of expressions. The great collaboration between all agents, far from being perilous as elsewhere, is the way of an exciting new type of city making the city more dynamic. The international endeavors deployed by many artists centers allowed the milieu, earlier on, to see and to be seen, here as much as elsewhere. This irresistible opening culminated when Quebec City, under the leadership of mayor Jean-Paul L'Allier, used creativity as a Trojan horse to make sure that the whole St.-Roch area would be revitalized.

Few of the milestones of this adventure have such names: l'Atelier des réalisations graphiques (l'ARG, now called Enigramme), the galerie Jolliet, galerie Comme, La champe blanche, the review Intervention (now called inter, art actuel), CKRL-MF, Le Lieu, the gallery l'Anse-aux-Barques, the centers for artists UVI, obscure, L'Œil de Poisson, théâtre Repère, Opole/Culture, les Folies Alliées, La Bande Vidéo, La maison Jaune, Regart (in Lévis), the itol fleurie, radio basse Ville, Arbo Cyber theater (?), Recto-Verso, Avatar, and the gallery rouvau. It would be illusory to contemplate being exhaustive about these attempts and experiences in Quebec City, over the last 30 years. I will therefore only articulate what could be considered as the "genesis" of art actuel in Quebec City. That corresponds to the first 10 years of what has been above introduced.

It is important to add to this the fact that outside entities and groups, which are associated with particular spaces as such, a number of art collectives also practiced in Quebec City. Their group dynamics are important to mention a few of them: the collective Inter/Le Lieu, Doyon/Demers, réparation de poésie, Doyon-Rivest, les fermières obsédées, BGL or, namely, the causes perdus. The importance of the artists' collectives would deserve a full and exhaustive article.

It is as a participant and a witness of these changes that I write these lines. They cannot be neutral, because I was part of it. I have been a founding member of some of these groups, and I have participated to a few of these activities and manifestations. At the same time, I have been teaching aesthetics and history at the CEGEP Sainte-Foy, contributing further to the development of many artists which have, in their own way, nourished the milieu's dynamics. I will therefore not engage directly with the works, but rather with a few group of artists allowing the works to be seen, here and around the world.

At the beginning of the seventies, contemporary art in Quebec had the name galerie Jolliet. It was one of the rare private attempts daring to exhibit a different type of art. It was also far from Old Quebec's scene with its landscapes, châteaux and little cats by the thousands altogether epitomized by Tré sor's street. Staged directly at the center of the Place-Royale, the galerie Jolliet exhibited sculpture and abstract painting of all sizes. After trying for several years to seduce a difficult market, Montreal was considered as a step forward.

The Musée du Québec showed, on occasions, few local artists and rarely included in its program, art as it was happening. It is fair to acknowledge that the Musée du Québec opened a gallery in 1976 (La galerie du Musée de l'Anse-aux-Barques) solely dedicated to contemporary art where it was possible to see a variety of contemporary arts. Considering various aspects, this gallery has been the most important contribution to the Musée du Québec to Quebec City's art actual scene, even if it closed its doors twenty years ago. Many artists were able to exhibit there, and the space was one of the most visited by the artistic community.

The first attempt in Quebec City was meant to gather few artists under the initiative of ARG (Atelier de réalisations graphiques). In 1972, Marc Dugas (professor at Laval University) and a group of artists from Quebec City founded the Atelier de Réalisations Graphiques by gathering the necessary equipments to serve the creation of original works in etching. In 1973, by providing and creating a space to exhibit, the association becomes the first integrated center offering the diffusion of contemporary art in Quebec."

It is important to remember that etchings and etchings require and often large machines and tools. At the time, this economic consideration forced creators to be together in order to divide the expenses and costs of operations of such workshops. In Montreal, Graff was founded in 1966, for the same reasons. The idea of this type of workshop was to implement a functional milieu to create and further control the diffusion of works on paper produced on site.

At the time, the École des Arts visuels of Laval University played an important role, because a network of young practitioners was created around Marc Dugas. It is indeed in the Saint-Jean-Baptiste area, directly on Saint-Jean Street, that all changes started to show their signs. In 1974-1975, third year students at the École des arts visuels imagined the space. The mythical place would be "like a gallery", hence the name Comme galerie. Each of the group had to give minimum founs (around 405, if my memory is correct), as if it was a cooperative. The space was available for each individual, for an exhibit and, in most case in a due during the complete school year. The objectives were indeed very simple: breaking away from the university and manage to be able to exhibit in the "real" world. This opportunity was unique.
at Laval's University. It proved to be successful during 2 years. At the end of the school year 1975-1976, some of the graduating students decided not to give up on Comme Galerie, namely Odette Ducasse, Joelle Morosoli, Douglas Desnoes and Marc Morel. And because of common interests Mona Desgagné, Michel Labbé and myself decided to join them, all of us forming at last the core of Comme Galerie. Labbé was teaching painting at the École des arts visuels and was just finishing his master's degree at Pratt Institute in New York City. During that year, André Riverin and Richard Martel joined the team. It goes without saying that this second move of the galerie was completely autonomous from Laval's University and that Michel Labbé created a pressure free environment.

At her workplace, Odette Ducasse was able to get a little grant from Canada-jeunesse and some private sponsorship to pay for the artists' tools and materials. The new activity was to be a space dedicated to production and exhibition. By production, we meant working on location, thanks to a small rudimentary wood workshop in the basement of the galerie. There was also another room, much cleaner, at the back. Galerie Comme was also located on St-jean Street, just in from of the ARG. And we could find, few doors down the Galerie Comme, the first version of La chambre blanche, run energetically by Raymonde April, Fabienne Bilodeau, Daniel Tremblay and many other people. "North Canada at work" was a photography workshop with a small space for exhibitions. There were also giving photography classes. And to sum up, in the same year, the Atelier-Galerie opened few doors down by André Bécor. It is that same Bécor, who would occupy the space of the Galerie Comme, the following year. The Saint-Jean-Baptiste neighborhood suddenly became the place visited by many artists, as they were meeting regularly, according to the programs offered by these four centers for artists. In the spring of 1977, Yves Robillard authored a text focusing on Galerie Comme and the Saint-Jean-Baptiste area in Quebec City, in which he declared the following: "Rapidly understood that for them the neighborhood was essential, that they didn't want to have Quebec City transformed by sky-scrappers and that they wanted, above everything, to live collectively, also manifest by its contacts with the population. At last, they wanted to feel included when, in Montreal, they refer to art in the province of Quebec."

On the one hand, Jean Royer dared mentioning the Galerie Comme, on one occasion, in the newspaper Le soir. That is surprising considering that this daily newspaper was the only one covering the arts in the city at the time. "The Galerie Comme is not a galerie like others, there is no commercial endeavors but only a taste for creativity, research and composition with the world." One comment appeared in the review Vie des arts on my first solo exhibit and was signed by Jean Tourangeau. These texts by Yves Robillard, Jean Royer and few other little texts were the only traces in the media, left by the Galerie Comme during its lifetime. And needless to say, none of the texts were making the distinction between the two stages of the center for artists. This shift in the Galerie's finality was motivated by common links which were not aesthetic, but more about friendships and a need to change the structures. It was obvious that the Galerie took the place of a driving force. The members organized one event. It was a thematic exhibit named Velourama, designed to make fun of these painting with it that exhibit turned out to be a real happening on its opening night.

Other close relationships were formed in parallel with another group of artists, generating an important phenomenon in Quebec City. Left by the Galerie Comme a philosophy professor at the CEGEP Limoilou, a pedagogical enterprise having no equivalent took place in the creation of an interdisciplinary department opened to music, collage, photography, media and cinema studies. This unique experience captured an irresistible energy and new contacts based on the usage of various mediums. After few years of somewhat risky and radical experimentations (if one look at the institutional criteria) the administration decided to close it. From this "multi-department" came out the sounds of Bruit TV, a group exploring deconstructive music as an aesthetic, playing improvised jazz as much as alternative and avant-garde music. We will discuss this issue later on.

During these years, there was an uncommon drive in the music world. Three CEGEP of the area and Laval University had strong programs. Jazz, blues, as much as rock and experimental music were common and presented for no money. It is for sure that the success of CKRL-MF, the very first francophone student radio in North America resulted from this creative output.

The Conservatoire d'art dramatique was also prolific, forming actors and set designers; creating theatres, a number of theater groups, experiments and collective creations. Quebec City imposed itself for a long time in this respect, which I don't know much about. One would need a specialist to write about the end of this milieu.

We can add to this, the importance of cinema and of the Cinema Quartier, which was simply a must. We could see everything there. It seems as if all was very good and coming from all over the world. In Limoilou, "La boîte à films" was proposing a movie for only a dollar, movies that would be on again and again. We were witnessing a cultural bulimia, particular to the generation that put the Parti Québécois in power. That beautiful youth was ready.

In the winter of 1977, meetings were abundant at the Galerie Comme, and the idea of a manifest was the evidence. This text, reproduced in its totality in the appendix, was conscious of the role the center for artists was supposed to play in the City's cultural sphere. In fact, it was the voice that claimed the importance of art actual in a city that did not yet have a world heritage. The poor coverage of contemporary art was a given. The manifest was proposing a large grouping of cultural organizations. At last, it was an attempt to integrate the art and the artist in the social realm. This manifest was sent to the media and to Pierre Lachapelle, then the director of the Arts at Ministry of Cultural Affairs in Quebec. Today, when I think of this action, it seems to me really naïve. Nothing changed at the provincial level, to be sure, and the grant coming from the federal was cancelled.

The lamented review dérives has an interview realized by Jean Tourangeau with Odette Ducasse and myself. It recalls the Galerie Comme's post-mortem. This interview was doing an autopsy of its failures, suggesting some ideas for the future, some ideas that were considering the institutional sides. The experience at the Galerie Comme, discussed as follows:

J.C. S-H: We are thinking more in terms of a network – to inform in particular – based on a cooperation between visual artists and more diversified possibilities. The local aspect is important, but so is publishing in the constant hopes to open it and make people know about it. Artists produce. This discussion allows them to come out of the closet. The underground is over. O.D. We think of a more organized core, and from that, an opening at the periphery. A center, very effective, would give full freedom to its members. The costs contingencies would be eliminated by rotation. We would not have a limited group, but identical formations making all types of work. We would dare mentioning the possibility of a must. We could see everything there. It seems as if all was very good and coming from all over the world. It is for sure that the Quebec City's milieu has not tried to interfere with the Galerie Comme, because of its fear to enter politics. The manifest, at first written to give a sense of wholeness to Quebec city's artistic community ended up being the reasoning of those days.

June 23rd 1977 was the last memorable opening at the Galerie Comme. It was dedicated to Joëlle Morosoli. The following year, all energies were now focusing, exclusively, or almost, towards La chambre blanche, in its second version, which was presented independantly at Place du Christophe-Colomb Street E., at the bottom of the hill in Saint-Roch. The popular vocation of animation in photography, defended in the first place by La chambre blanche, was further transformed into self-management. In this interview, it is said that the Quebec City's milieu has not tried to interfere with the Galerie Comme, because of its fear to enter politics. The manifest, at first written to give a sense of wholeness to Quebec city's artistic community ended up being the reasoning of those days.

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The experiences of these first years of group work inevitably forced us to open a space, a physical space that could visually support what the review Intervention would defend and put forward. After we came back from Germany, such a space was much needed. It is in the fall of 1982 that the first Lieu, center in art actual, opened its doors in a very small room located at 83 Saint Jean Street, apartment 1 (and we liked the coincidence that it was the same space as the radio station CKRL-MF). The size of the room was decisive in orienting types of exhibits: installations and visual poetry. The review Intervention was produced in the same rooms. Gradually, it is during these years that the general idea defended by the group of artists collabo­rating to the review shifted from the political to the poetic. It is also important to mention the influence of Fluxus Robert Filliou in this historical moment. Filliou stayed for two years in Quebec City, between 1979 and 1981. He was a key element of the team. Pierre-André Arcand and Jean-Yves Fréchette, both of them teachers in literature and poetry at the CEGEP François-Xavier Garneau, became closer to the group of Intervention.

In 1983, Alain-Martin Richard, who had recently joined Intervention, guided the event Le Marathon d’écriture, which happened in the heart of Place-Fleure-Lys mall, during seven hours. Alain-Martin was the first to honor what would become the collective Lieu Le Lieu. And during this time, not too far from Le Lieu, the organization Obscure appeared. This new group of artists emerged at La chambre blanche and was composed of members of the interdisciplinary department of the CEGEP Limoilou. Gilles Arteau and Louis Ouellet were also on Bruit TTV. Obscures’s actions were focusing mostly on the media aspects of sound expressions. This niche was still to be discussed and Obscure took this opportunity. By experimenting with codes, Obscure opened the way to the use of technology.

It is important to mention how important CKRL-MF was, at the turn of the eighties. This student radio had an organizational structure that was the first of its kind. It allowed an infinite range of propositions and opened the door to a discourse serving as an alternative cultural agent. For a long time, CKRL was the place to explore discoveries and experimentations on the radio. Their programming and shows of cultural interests have given a voice to collaborators involved in the milieu.

It was perfect in promoting new artistic activities in the media. CKRL cut all ties with Laval University in 1984, Gilles Arteau was taking the station’s command. Its move to Old Quebec also opened the way to few years of radio experimentations challenging the codes. It did so to the point of having no regular programming, radio programs moving from one time to the next on the programming schedule.

The last centers in the network interested in art actual arrived on the scene. They were VU and L’Œil de Poisson, both of them dedicated to photography.

In 1982, the center VU began its activities. Composed of many photo-graphers, its promotion of photo-graphy became well known in Quebec City. The works done by VU were also well respected because of their numerous catalogues, published early in the center’s existence. L’Œil de Poisson emerged in 1985, by the will of young artists to find a space for production and exhibition of their works in photography. Very rapidly, the direction was oriented towards varied productions, combining installations, performances and collective events. There was a special energy in that small space at the limit of Saint Roch. All events, no matter how absurd, would have people come and participate.

For the group of La chambre blanche proposed events, exhibits with themes, evenings with performances, conférences and the likes...The organization lived through important changes. Many of its founders left Quebec City to pursue their careers in Montreal. The departure of Raymond April, Fabienne Blodeau, Serge Murphy, Jean Tourangeau, Cyril Reed and others created a void at this center trying to cope with this new situation. This mission will then allow various event productions in Quebec City. The gallery moved in 1988. This will mark the end of this first adaptation period.

The scale of Quebec City was perfect for this kind of collabora­tion. The critical mass of individuals that made this milieu possible was limited. For a better circulation of ideas and activities at a superior and more professional level, the energy had to be more focused. At the beginning, institutions were a few, but their impact was real. Before its face-lift, and its obsession with ratings, the Musée du Québec, thanks to L’Arse Aux-Barques, had a strong hold on the city. The CEGEP’s
THIRTY YEARS OF LIVING ART IN QUEBEC CITY
A DIALOGUE BETWEEN YOU AND I

BY LISANNE NADEAU
AND GUY SIOLI DURAND

Banff, Tuesday January 22nd 2008
Dear Lisanne,

From my window, I observe the top of the Rockies. The tremendous drifting snow, lifted by the wind, works to amalgamate the sky to the valley in a milky fog. It is very cold. Even this far out, this horizon liberates my reflections: how to tell the story of living art which has now 30 years with the City as its real subject? What can we say about «art actuel» in Quebec City, in 2008? Furthermore, how to be up for the challenge of writing, in duo, a narrative which relates its artists to the City?

First, it seems wise to start from the top. The «art actuel» of Quebec City, was a way of questioning the status of the work of art as an object, and the architectural walls, floors and all. And they could be made today's milieu possible. A basic Google search confronts us to the terrible reality that centers like Obscure are for many a memory of a distant past.

You start all of this with 1978, and that speaks to me directly. It was the year of the founding of La chambre blanche, a center for artists where I have been active for many years, as you know. This sectioning of time, in decades, is very productive because I think they were moments of distinct developments with distinct objectives. Going back and revisiting mentally this trajectory makes me realize that we are coming from very far, coming out of the seventies' formalism to multidisciplinary approaches, even the interdisciplinary of today's world.

I will tell you my story. We will see if yours meets mine on the way...

Lisaane

Banff, Saturday January 26th

Lisaane, With this e-mail, I am telling you that I utterly accept your proposition. I like this idea of beginning with the «first experiences». Even better, during this exchange, such «confidences» will do nothing else but stimulate. I catch a glimpse of this lived experience. It will sometimes be an encounter, a reading, a street, a work of art, and the tale is born, curiosity starts something... and the imagination is at work. Let's go for it!

Guy

1978-1988

Sunday January 29th

Guy, I am going along with this game. I am now in 1978. I have to say that haunting to me is this image of the hole that was Saint-Roch. We could see it from my office window at La chambre blanche, located at number 549, on Charest. The urban development was in crisis at the time, in this area. This area will become the core of the city's art scene. You remember, Robert Lepage made of this open wound in the city his Trilogy's catalyst... It is indeed in this quiet little space, an old office space with terrazzo flooring(!) that I fell in love with art actual for the first time. I had not seen anything like this. Someone had invited me to write on an exposition of artists' book, in 1982. They also presented an installation by Françoise Girard in a space exclusively allocated to residences in situ. I have no idea if you remember this, but in this space artists were free to intervene as they pleased, on the wall and from our complementary point of view of our personal experience.

I was telling myself that it would be interesting to talk about these experiences, in the first place. What do you think? And this history would then emerge from our complementary point of views, similar yet different: two voices testifying to the distinct angles of this development of art actual in Quebec City. Of course, it is important to fulfill our mission and look back at these important dates, because it seems that we have the responsibility to revisit this trajectory which might vanish into oblivion at any moment. Already, younger people are completely unaware of the important actors that have made today's milieu possible. A basic Google search confronts us to the terrible reality that centers like Obscure are for many a memory of a distant past.

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