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Aller au sommaire du numéro

Citer cet article
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 waters 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 easier, 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 or nothing happened for the people making decisions. This political action was following the creation of ARG, and witnessed the humble beginnings of La chambre blanche. Since then, the energy and dynamic output deployed in the city has maintained 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 not the way a different type of art makes the city more dynamic. The international endeavors deployed by many artists centers allowed the creation of a functional milieu to create and further control the diffusion of works on paper produced on site. 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. This vision of a type of workshop was to implement a functional milieu to create and further control the diffusion of art in Quebec City.

It is important to remember that engraving and etching require 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. This vision of a 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 Sainte-Foy Street, that all changes started to show their signs. In 1974-1975, third year students at École des Arts Visuels had imagined that engravings and etchings of this type of workshop, that would be "like a gallery", hence the name Galerie Jolliet. Each of the group had to give minimum funds (around $400, if my memory is correct), as if it was a cooperative. The space was available for each individual, for an exhibit and, in most cases, in a duum 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, Jolliette Bordeau, Douglas Derasp 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 Artistic Community was to be a space dedicated to production and exhibition. By production, we meant working on location, thanks to a small and rudimentary wood workshop in the basement of the galerie. There were also giving workshops in the same year in 1975, 1976, 1977. And to sum up, in the same year the CEGEP in Limoilou, a pedagogical organization was opened in Saint-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 Raymond April, Fabienne Bilodeau, Daniel Tremblay and François Lauzon. "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 Bécot. It is that same Bécot, 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 heart of this 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 Soleil. That was 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 confronting 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 do not necessarily later on about friendships, but 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 this painting with 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, and facing the lack of an infrastructure at the provincial level, to be sure, and the State had to play on Quebec City's milieu. This manifest was sent to the government. This text, reproduced in its totality in the appendix, was conscious of the role of the galerie Comme at the Quebec City's cultural sphere. In fact, it was the voice that claimed the importance of art in a city that did not yet have a world heritage. The poor coverage of contemporary art was a given. The manifest was probably a larger grouping of cultural organizations. At last, it was an attempt to integrate the art and the artist in the social reality. 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 naive. 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 autobiography of its failures, suggesting some ideas for the future, some ideas that were considering the institutional sides of 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 presentations possible. We could find it for all meetings, for all. This would end by not exhibiting, by going further towards something else. It is the links that create opening. And the problem of identification would be resolved by the same relations that created the movement.

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 real manifesto of the milieu.

June 23rd 1977 was the last memorable opening at the galerie Comme. It was dedicated to Jolliette Bordeau. The following year, all energies were now focusing, exclusively, or almost, towards La chambre blanche, in its second version, which was proposed by Jean Robillard on Chrisophe-Columb 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. This interview, it is said that the galerie Comme's post-mortem. This terms galerie parallèle was used abundantly at the time. It formed a more important grouping of artists, roughly 40, all motivated by the development of a lively artistic space in Quebec City. La chambre blanche took an important step forwards. The first years were intense because it was the only space in the city that was not interested in printing techniques. It was nonetheless opened to all forms of new art by putting together exhibitions, installations and performances — not to mention concerts of improvised music, video viewings and meeting with artists visiting the city.

La chambre blanche became the place in town. Bruit TIV did numbers of presentations there and many events and collective exhibits took place during these years as well. Please note that Objet fugitif (1979) and Feministes toi-même, féministe quand même (1980) were among the most successful.

In March 1978, the review intervention published its first issue.
Of the group involved in Galerie Comme, Mona Desgagné, Richard Martel and myself were among the founding members. Patrick Atkinson, François Bégic, Diane-Jocelyne Côté, Guy Durand and Jean-Claude Gagnon completed the team. Intervention was a direct response to the ideas put forward by the manifest of the Galerie Comme, namely the poor coverage of contemporary art in the Quebec media. The works were presented. The general orientation of the program stirred upheavals. Few occasions were caused and fractions in the group. New entities instantly developed. The group forming the review Intervention became conscious and started to act. Later on, it will be the moment of Obscure to come on the scene. It will be discussed later in this article.

The group around the review Intervention (which I have known since the beginning), Jean-Claude Gagnon was part of it) elaborated a strong commitment to cultural drive. It also gave a space for the personal expression of all. The learning processes of an integrated discourse, in the cultural and artistic news, is long to come and has its own rules. One of the most important moments for Intervention has been the Symposium international de sculpture environnementale, which took place in Chicoutimi in 1980. Richard Martel was intimately associated to it with his role at the coordination of the artistic content and the administrative aspects of the event. The team of Intervention was able to benefit from what was called "explorations projects," to finance the symposium. This project would become the number 9, altogether about the event and supplying a set of slides. The documents were viewed for free in various learning institutions in Quebec.

To be so close to such an important event meant that ultimately things would not stay this way. Networking was crucial and contacts were made (only to mention Montreal’s artistic intelligentsia, Hervé Fisher and Alain Snayers representing the Parisian school of sociology, Pierre Restany, Klaus Rinke and other artists and theorists from other countries). They helped, with the experience learned by the team of Intervention in Chicoutimi, to organize key events in Quebec City in the fall of 1981: Art et société. There was few exhibits happening at the Musée du Quèbec and at the Gallery du Quèbec. A number of performances was held at the Musée du Quèbec and at the Canadian Institute, some “performances-manoeuvres” were also taking place in the streets. At last, an international conference, a jazz festival and the issue no. 13 of Intervention was necessary to prepare the event and manage all these activities. A catalogue edited for the exhibit gave a summary of all social, political, more engaged practices in Quebec based on history. Of all the events which will take place later by Le Lieu, center for the review, Intervention was one of the most celebrated, surely because of its content, means and tools, but also for the diversity of its facets. It is fair to think that this event (and its direct offspring) had a real impact on the culture scene in Quebec City. It contributed to the repositioning of the city in terms of its international audiences. In this occasion, Hervé Fisher insisted on elaborating a sociological project that would send him to jail for few hours. Alain Snayers was also at the end of the month of the most interesting urban "manoeuvres". It is the same Fisher whom, in 1982, created the necessary conditions to ensure that six artists from Intervention would participate at documenta 7, taking place in Kassel, Germany, thanks to the Office franco-allemand de la jeunesse (OFAL). This project was to participate to the first ten days of documenta and taking part in discussion workshops and creation oriented towards political art. This group was formed by Diane-Jocelyne Côté, Chantal Gaudreault, Louis Haché, Richard Martel, Jean-Claude St-Hilaire et Guy Durand. Fisher was collaborating with the Caim group and other French artists. The Germans were under the guidance of Klaud Steack, close collaborator of Joseph Beuys. One can consider that this team of the review Intervention was the first step towards the creation of the collective Inter/Le Lieu, on a creation project. In fact, each of the participants had to create in Kassel: street performances, postings, manoeuvres involving road signs and publications’...
various auditoriums were known by all. The professors' participation kept the pedagogical teams alert, and, in poetry at F.X. Garneau (with Pierre-André Arcand and Jean-Yves Fréchette) in visual arts and photography in Sainte-Foy (with André Bécat, Jocelyn Gagnon, Lucie Lefebvre, Alain-Martin Richard and myself), in sound in Limolou (with Gilles Aréau and Louis Ouellet). Many professors of the Écoles des arts visuels, including Marc Dugas, Michel Labbé and Richard Mill, actively participated in this adventure from the beginning. Looking at it from a distance, the frictions that caused the break up of the first group of La chambre blanche enabled the opening of modes of diffusion and artistic productions. Each of these groups occupied a territory with well established boundaries. We saw that when the frictions disappeared, the maturity prevailing in the artists' communities and centers rapidly forced a collaboration that has since not ceased to grow. It is the most important aspect of this exercise in art activity in Quebec City: the friendships and collaborations between the diverse groups make viable this fascinating adventure. This adventure of the art movements in the beautiful city of Quebec.

And what if, instead of humming and hawing, we would get together to celebrate the civil birth of our country, in our big village?...?

Notes
1. Extract from Engramme, see on website www.meduse.org/engramme.
2. These two years have seen the emergence of a generation of artists. Many artists involved at Comme Galerie became known in Quebec City, to mention Raymond April, François Joly, Jean Lantier, Raymond Lavoie, Jean-Marie Martin, Joëlle Morosoli, Serge Morphy and Michèle Waquaunt. Also, two professors at the Écoles des arts visuels also exhibited at the Galerie Comme, namely Claude Giraud and Michel Labbé.
3. The Comme Galerie became Galerie Comme to make the name more 'French'. This was one of the conditions to obtain the right to incorporate as a non-profit organization.
4. André Bécat is a sculptor who taught at the Arts Department of the CEGEP Sainte-Foy. He is now retired and still owns a space in Saint-Rock.
5. See Yves Robillard in Lejouer, Montreal, April 15th 1977.
9. Côté and Gaudreault were interested in the masculine majority at documenta. Marcel was questioning Beyer's importance and performed a kind of détour. Haché performed inside the museum by sleeping in a corner. St-Hilaire rectified traditional German tales in the streets, turning the scope to more political international issues. At last, Haché, St-Hilaire and Vandergor (one of the French participants) were making fun of documenta, nailed on the left, of the Frédéricianum Museum. At last, Durand was busy observing and watching. If one wants to know more on this issue, see number 10 of the review intervention.

Jean-Claude St-Hilaire has been teaching art history for 20 years at the CEGEP Sainte-Foy, and communications and multimedia design for the last 5 years in Quebec City and elsewhere. He pursues his artistic research in the field of performance and art installation. He has observed the cultural milieu all his life. He has been a contributor to the collective Inter/Lieu (ill707) for many years. He is one of the founders of the review In situ, curated (1978) and of the artist center Le Lieu (ill78). He collaborates with these two entities by writing articles and by his own artistic practice.

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.

THIRTY YEARS OF LIVING ART IN QUEBEC CITY
A DIALOGUE BETWEEN YOU AND I
BY LISANNE NADEAU AND GUY SIoui DURAND* 
Banff, Tuesday January 22* 2008
Dear Lisanne,
From my window, I observe the tops 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 actual » in Quebec City, in 2008? Furthermore, how to be up for the challenge of writing, in a narrative which relates its artists to the City?

First, it seems wise to start with a kind of remembrance of things past, going back in time... until, maybe, 1978, isn’t it? I have always given some importance to transition periods, shifts from one time to another. In this case a decade to another. Also, as we start this correspondence and for clarity purposes, I suggest that we keep in mind these chronological blocks as landmarks: from 1978 until 1988, from 1988 until 1998, and from 1998 until 2000. I know, and there I will not teach anything to an art historian like you, all divisions are arbitrary. It is however important that we remember that this history of friendly agents is also ours.

What do you think? Regards,
Guy

Banff, Thursday January 24* 
Guy,
I am glad that you wish to look at this history from the point of view of our personal experience. Before you left, when we discussed it together, I was suddenly aware that our first encounter with « art actual » was determinant in our respective itinerary. 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.

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 documenta. It is however important that we keep the traces and elements of our personal experience. This sensation of being IN troubled waters past, going back in time... until, maybe, 1978, isn’t it? I have always given some importance to transition periods, shifts from one time to another. In this case a decade to another. Also, as we start this correspondence and for clarity purposes, I suggest that we keep in mind these chronological blocks as landmarks: from 1978 until 1988, from 1988 until 1998, and from 1998 until 2000. I know, and there I 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, 2008
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 540, 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 Lajeunesse made of this open wound in the city his Trilogy's catalyst... It is indeed in this quaint 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 François 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 walls, floors and all. And they could turn the scope to more artistic things past, going back in time... until, maybe, 1978, isn’t it? I have always given some importance to transition periods, shifts from one time to another. In this case a decade to another. Also, as we start this correspondence and for clarity purposes, I suggest that we keep in mind these chronological blocks as landmarks: from 1978 until 1988, from 1988 until 1998, and from 1998 until 2000. I know, and there I 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

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 be the start of a correspondence which will also be the opportunity to fill in the blanks of my knowledge, with your experiences. I will tell you my story. We will see if yours meets mine on the way...

Guy

Banff, Saturday January 26th, 2008
Lisanne,
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 be the start of a correspondence which will also be the opportunity to fill in the blanks of my knowledge, with your experiences. I will tell you my story. We will see if yours meets mine on the way...