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Editorial

The Artist as Educator?¹

On May 28, 2005, distinguished Québec artist René Dérouin² published, in the daily newspaper *Le Devoir*, an open letter that he addressed to the young visual artists of the “upcoming generation”. Dérouin’s letter was nothing short of a call to arms and to action: he urged young artists and visual art scholars to “renew with existing art publics and to work to create new publics in order to ensure [nothing less than] our survival as artists” [author translation]. Dérouin denounced what he saw as the younger generation’s unquestioned acceptance of attitudes inherited from previous cohorts of artists. With insight, he circumscribed the present-day situation: “From the previous generation, we have [inherited and] retained a haughty and scornful gaze with regard to the public and the population at large. In the [mistaken] belief that we are the guardians of a body of knowledge too complex to be shared with the [general] public, more often than not, we muddle up this body of knowledge with a type of fuzzy thinking and out of focus point-of-view that is very widespread in contemporary art” [author translation]. Dérouin’s point is simple yet perceptive: succeeding generations of artists have excluded, whether intentionally or not, the general public from the ongoing discussion on contemporary art. Sounding more and more like an art educator, Dérouin continues: “After 50 years of struggle as an artist [...] I now feel that it is urgent to forge links within society. I believe that art is not as impenetrable as we are led to believe; it is the presentation, the communication, and the very institutional framing of art that boxes it off and isolates it from the public” [author translation]. Dérouin concludes his editorial by sharing with the reader his dream for a society where the arts are integrated into everyday life. Dérouin’s coming out as a populist is not the result of some dramatic overnight conversion. In his own practice as an artist, Dérouin has been seriously attempting to forge links between the general public and contemporary art practices

since the creation, in 1995, of his charitable foundation. Each year or so, *Foundation Derouin* organizes an international symposium of in situ art in Val David, Quebec, a village located in the Laurentian mountains. Each time, in the context of this symposium, a dozen or so artists from Quebec, North and Central America come together to create temporary, site specific installations at designated points along two kilometers of walking trails that meander in the Laurentian forest. The Symposium is not only a celebration of land art but also the means for reaching out to the local community and well beyond, in the hope of fostering a greater and wider appreciation of contemporary art. The Symposium's organizers have developed a full array of educational strategies to ensure that all visitors enjoy and profit from their visit; previous knowledge about art is never a prerequisite for any of these activities. Educational offerings include: introductory orientations to the site; the sale of a passport that offers unlimited and repeated access to the exhibitions; a publication that includes relevant and insightful information about each work of art; an educational studio where adults and children learn about contemporary art by engaging in art making under the guidance of instructors; guided tours; talks by Derouin and some of the other artists; and, each year, the opportunity to participate in the creation of a collective work of art of some kind. Finally, every summer, a weekend forum addresses concerns related to contemporary art. In 2007, the forum focused on the theme of *art and the public*. These and the several other educational measures adopted by the Derouin Foundation are revealing signs of the importance that this organization has afforded to forging a good relationship with members of the public.

It is difficult to assess the potential impact, if any, of an action such as the open letter published in *Le Devoir* by René Derouin. However, there are other encouraging signs that, perhaps, point to the spreading of new attitude on the part of artists vis-à-vis their audiences and, as well, the public at large. SKOL is one of several Montreal artist-run centers where many members of the upcoming generation of artists tend to congregate; this is precisely the audience of young artists targeted by Derouin in his open letter. Surprisingly, in addition to exciting and cutting-edge exhibitions, SKOL is an artist-

run centre that, in recent years, has engaged in some bold educational initiatives. In collaboration with CEDA (Centre d'éducation des adultes de la Petite Bourgogne et St-Henri), SKOL undertook to use its exhibitions as a resource for adult literacy education. One can easily imagine the educational challenges inherent in bringing together these adults (with deficits in reading and writing) and contemporary art (with its often elusive and complex interpretive codes). However, with a professional art educator, Adriana De Oliveira, acting as an expert facilitator between the two institutions, the program has been an unqualified success. Participants in the program have engaged with contemporary art in meaningful ways and, in addition, they have responded in creative ways by producing, in collaboration with three artists, works of arts that, in turn, have been displayed in SKOL's galleries and elsewhere. Buoyed by this success, SKOL recently formed its very first education programming committee at its last annual general meeting. What is remarkable about this development is the general enthusiasm with which a half-dozen SKOL members (including 5 practicing artists) have volunteered to serve on this committee. However, it is still too early to assess whether or not this an important development and a turning point in SKOL's mission as an institution of contemporary art.

Other signs that possibly points to a changing tide are actions by individual artists that clearly signal a renewed interest and a commitment to forging links between their artistic production and a sustained educational practice. While this is not necessarily a new or novel phenomenon—several members from the Group of Seven and the Beaver Hall Group, for example, maintained successful careers in both realms of endeavor—since the advent of modernism, contemporary artists have, more often than not, discounted and devalued their educational activity in terms of its contribution to the overall growth of their careers. Jon Knowles is the artist whose work is featured in this issue of *Canadian Review of Art Education*. He was among the group of emerging artists chosen for inclusion in the first *Quebec Triennial* held at the *Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art* this past summer. Interestingly, in addition to his work as an artist, Jon Knowles is also graduate student in art education. Of his motives for undertaking graduate

studies in art education, he says:

I chose to be involved in art education at the graduate level for a number of reasons. [The first reason was] to have the time and space to examine over three years of experience teaching at both public school and exhibition settings, places that I think are important settings for thinking about (and sometimes producing) art. I hit a wall in these “real-life” settings because I saw a fundamental problem in [the] ways art (and artists) was instrumentalized for its supposed practical uses, often violently torn from its context, intention, and meaning. This education related work was parallel to my activities in making art and, at a point, I started to see some correspondences and conversions take shape in terms of how I ‘tended’ to the artwork, both my own and others. Tending to the art object (and its context) is an important aspect in my work, both in teaching and art making. Another reason was due to my curiosity about how contemporary art has sometimes been distrusted (for better or worse) by the public, both historically and contemporaneously. I have not arrived at a conclusion, but my feeling at the time of entering the [art education graduate] program was that it was an educational dilemma, an issue of understanding and misunderstanding, not at all an issue of faulty artwork (J. Knowles, personal communication, October 9, 2008).

Do the events discussed here point to the tip of an iceberg? Do they bear witness to the first few shoots to emerge in a growing new awareness? Or, do they simply represent another flash in the pan? It is difficult to assess whether or not these developments reveal a new trend or whether they are simply singular peculiarities of no wider social significance. This is certainly not be the first time that artists have ventured into the realm of education. Often, such incursions are the results of governmental programs that provide incentives, in the form of funding, for artists to connect with particular target groups under the aegis of education. Past experiences such as, for example, provincially funded *Artists-in-the-Schools* programs have often produced mixed results. A common problem with

such programs is that they tend to ignore or underestimate the very significant educational challenges that must be addressed in order to ensure the success of any encounters between artists and new audiences. It is never enough to simply bring artists and audiences together; there is no guarantee that such encounters will constitute real learning experiences. Yet, the solution to this problem is simple. The educational expertise required for ensuring optimal outcomes in such situations already exists in the considerable knowledge and experience of specialized art educators. True partnerships between artist and art educator—those based on mutual respect and on the acceptance and acknowledgment of each other's realm of expertise—are far more likely to succeed in developing new audiences for contemporary art. Art educators understand the need of learners. They are trained and skilled in the ways in which art-world concepts can be best be transposed into language and conceptual representations that non-expert audiences can understand and appreciate. A good art educator also knows how to make such transpositions without sacrificing the integrity of the art in question. Strong artist/art educator partnerships have the potential to be a formidable force in developing new audiences for contemporary art. It's may finally be the time for artists and art educators to work together in collaboration

On the Electronic Distribution of Review articles

Finally, on an entirely different topic, I wish to conclude my editorial by reporting on two recent developments that will impact, in a positive way, on the articles published in this research journal. First, thanks to the efforts of the previous editor, Boyd White, full text articles from the *Canadian Review of Art Education* are now included in EBSCO's data bases in education research. EBSCO distributes these databases worldwide and its clients include countless university libraries. Second, the *Canadian Review of Art Education* has renewed its agreement with ERIC for the indexing of the articles that we publish. However, in addition, ERIC will also be providing Internet access to full text articles six months after the publication date of each issue of the Review. For researchers, these new developments will guarantee easier and faster access to

the articles that we publish while, for authors, the changes will mean a longer shelf life for their articles and the potential of reaching a much wider international audience. These are but two more good reasons for considering the *Canadian Review of Art Education* as the journal where to submit your next research manuscript. We certainly hope to read you soon.

Richard Lachapelle

Dérouin, René (2005, mai 28). Lettre aux artistes et intellectuels de la jeune génération. Gagner sa vie ici, prendre sa place ici. *Le Devoir*, p. B5.

Footnotes

¹I wish to acknowledge **Adriana De Oliveira**'s contribution to the development of several of the ideas expressed in this editorial.

²René Derouin was the recipient of the Paul-Emile Borduas prize in 1999. The Borduas prize is the Government of Quebec's highest award for lifetime achievement in the visual arts.