

ETC



## An Interview with David Tomas Concerning his Recent Collaboration with Rosika Desnoyers, Part I

Marc James Léger

Number 93, June–July–August–September 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/64069ac>

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

### ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this article

James Léger, M. (2011). An Interview with David Tomas Concerning his Recent Collaboration with Rosika Desnoyers, Part I. *ETC*, (93), 42–46.



Rosika Desnoyers, *Millet Grid* (2006). Comprised of *After Jean-François Millet, Gleaners (1857)* (2002-2003), needlepoint, wool on canvas, 30.5 x 24.7 cm and 29.3 x 24.7 cm, and *After Jean-François Millet, Gleaners (1857)* (2006), needlepoint, wool on canvas, 30.7 x 23.9 cm and 29.9 x 23.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

# An Interview with David Tomas Concerning his Recent Collaboration with Rosika Desnoyers, Part I



In December of 2010, an exhibition titled *Millet Matrix I* was held in the apartment of Montreal-based artist Rosika Desnoyers. The exhibition presented a work titled *Millet Grid* (2006), which is comprised of two versions of *After Jean-François Millet, Gleaners (1857)*, one from 2002–2003 and one from 2006. *Millet Matrix I* was described as part one of “A two-part curatorial project by David Tomas.” This is the third of Tomas’ curatorial ventures, the first was a co-curated international fax exhibition (*Media, War and the New World Order*, CIAC Montréal and Artcite, 1991) and the second was coordinated with artist Tim Clark (*Reading the Limits*, Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 2008). *Millet Matrix I* acted as a kind of visual thesis, encapsulating the reasoning that structures Desnoyers’ needlepoint practice. It was accompanied by a text by Tomas titled “Programming and Reprogramming Artworks: A Case of Painting and Practicing Conceptual and Media Art by Other Means,” published in the Spring 2009 issue of *Intermédialités* (a journal produced by the Centre de recherche sur l’intermédialité at the Université de Montréal). The project also included an 18-hour video of Desnoyers working on a large needlepoint canvas.

Exhibiting her work only rarely (her MFA exhibition was held at Galerie Diagonale in 2005), Desnoyers is known to have invited people to visit her apartment studio, which is a kind of history research laboratory dedicated to the study of the development of pictorial needlepainting in the eighteenth century, and Berlin wool work, the nineteenth-century precursor of needlepoint. In the twentieth century, this became a commonly practiced hobby that in the past had been an exclusive and expensive medium, practiced mostly by middle-class women artists who were motivated by the efficiency and productive potential of an automated visual arts practice.

According to Desnoyers, Berlin work was only discredited in the late nineteenth century when the Arts & Crafts movement singled it out as hampering creativity and skill. Before that, it was part of a complex social matrix wherein questions of industrialization, class and gender ideology, and the development of an autonomous sphere of cultural production were undergoing rapid change. Desnoyers’ “genealogical” (Foucauldian) investigation into the advent and descent of Berlin work has been a means for her to chart a course of art production that is singularly different from most contemporary craft practices that are largely recuperative, on the one hand, and deconstructive or “subversive” of gender ideology, on the other. It also strays away from the fetishism of the medium—a craft oriented or “fiber arts” methodology—towards an intermedial para-practice of needlepoint.

David Tomas is a professor of visual arts in the École des arts visuels et médiatiques at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and is a science historian and anthropologist, specializing in the study of visual cultures. He is the author of *Transcultural Space and Transcultural Beings* (1996), *A Blinding Flash of Light: Photography Between Disciplines and Media* (2004), and *Beyond the Image Machine: A History of Visual Technologies* (2004). I interviewed David Tomas in the winter of 2011 about his collaboration with the artist and his experiments with curating.

**Marc James Léger:** *The former member of Art & Language and now art historian Terry Smith has suggested that there are three main tendencies in contemporary art: the community-oriented “relational” practices of socially engaged artists, post-colonial trajectories that fall outside of the main trends of Western art, and thirdly, those practices that in some ways continue with the development of what one could call the singularly aesthetic logic of modern art, works that are concerned with the discourse of art production. It seems to me that Rosika’s work corresponds mostly to this third possibility and certainly your suggestion of an affinity with conceptual art supports this impression I have. Could you tell us about how you came to be interested in Rosika’s work and I would also be interested in knowing if this recent collaboration has anything to do with what you’ve discussed in terms of a sort of*

*“reconstructed” idea of authorship and originality.*

**David Tomas:** I’ve known Rosika since I taught at the University of Ottawa in the 1990s: I met her when she was a student in one of my classes. I can’t remember when I first saw her embroidery works but it must have been in a studio class as opposed to a theory class, although I distinctly remember her participation in the latter. At that time she was working on medical imaging and I think that she might also have done some research in this area for me because of my own interest at the time in the history of virtual reality technologies. So we first met and got to know each other in the context of research activities and studio practices. She struck me as a singular person and we remained friends when she left for Rochester with you and I left for Montreal to teach at UQAM. After you finished your term in Rochester, I encouraged her to come to UQAM to undertake a graduate degree. When she did, I acted as her director. It was here that I had an opportunity to follow her work and her development in a more systematic manner. I have to say that I never really considered her to be a student but rather a mature artist because of the sophistication of her work and its remarkable stability when considered from the viewpoint of its production method.

I think that you’re right to mention Terry Smith’s categorical distinctions and Rosika’s position in the last one, although *Millet Matrix I* pivoted from Rosika’s viewpoint on her interaction with visitors. You are also right to suggest that my interest in her work has, from the perspective of this exhibition project, to do with what you describe as a reconstructed idea of authorship and originality. This is quite clear from the choice of work that I presented, which was titled *Millet Grid*, a piece comprised of two versions of Rosika’s *After Jean-François Millet, Gleaners (1857)*.

The Millet piece foregrounds the notion of work that is so important to Rosika’s feminist and historical interests, as well as to her own method of production, since it is not only a painting about work, but it is also a painting about the work of women in the field. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the women in Millet’s painting are anonymous in form and character; their faces are hidden from the viewer because

of the way they engage with their serial and mechanical task. The two Millets in Rosika's work were bought on ebay and their authors are unknown. While Millet has signed his canvas, the artists of the two needlepoint versions of Millet's painting have not signed their work. This brings me to your second point concerning the "reconstructed" idea of authorship and originality. My interest in Rosika's work is, one might say, overdetermined because of its conceptual and historical complexity. While each work might appear to be a straightforward reworking of an original needlepoint based on the errors that Rosika has discovered in the original, which leads to the production of a second "monochrome" work punctuated with "holes" production created by the absence of one or more stitches, each work is *also* a kind of portal into the social and aesthetic history of the medium as well as a commentary on the *work* of art's theoretical place today. Each work is the result of an articulation of a double authorial logic (original and a copy that is also an original) as well as an exploration of the divided or differed nature of the original in each case (original *and* copy). Insofar as the copy is also an original work (because it is based on errors), it too is subject to the kind of logic of infinite regression that Derrida has championed through his notion of *différance*. Because of this ambiguity, the project calls attention to the original, which is itself a copy of a painting that is an original produced in another medium. It is through this double (painting, needlepoint copy), double (needlepoint copy, monochrome) logic of the original that Rosika's privileged position as author is called into question and negated. Her presence is subject to the eclipsing powers of anonymity that operate in Millet's original painting and the anonymous economy of the auction through which she obtained the two works in question, as well as most of the works she has in her collection. To me, the holes in her monochrome copies represent the absence of an author whose presence and individuality—whose *originality*—is registered not in the *original* aesthetic choice that might have motivated the purchase of a pattern for Millet's painting (since these patterns are mass produced), but, on the contrary, in the mistakes—the errors—that the amateur needlepoint artist made in the process of reproduction that brought the painting into visibility as both a copy and a secondary work of art. The mark of individuality, the author's signature, is encoded as a series of absences—a pattern of holes—in a monochrome field. By revealing its pattern, Rosika is replacing herself as author through the very process through which she creates her fiction as author of the final work. To me, *Millet Grid* is an exemplary

work in this regard because of its double x double structure where the two copies of *The Gleaners* are both the same and different, the product of one named author (Millet) and one common pattern but also of two *other* anonymous authors. With the addition of two complementary monochromes, the authorial matrix is rendered more complex and its system of differals or *différance* is augmented at the same time as it is refined, or stretched tight across four individual works presented in a two x two pattern and historical/conceptual matrix. And the beauty of this pattern and matrix, its elegance, consists in the fact that this dialogue with the history of work (workers in the field, anonymous needlepoint workers at home, the professional artist in her studio) and the history of theory (the artist as media historian, the artist as feminist and/or Derridean) takes place with the modesty of the anonymous worker, the person who has no real place in history, the pantheons of high theory, feminism, cultural studies, and contemporary art, etc. One might say that Rosika's modesty is programmed, like all those other anonymous needlepoint artists, in her work process (its systematicity, monotony, and temporality) and is displayed in the silent anonymity of the pattern of absences that are the marks of two authorial presences: the two workers that have engaged together anonymously across time and space in the systemic, programmatic manufacture of the copy of an original in another medium (therefore an original copy) and an original copy (errors) of an original copy. And let us not forget the role of the pattern: the authentic original painting and the mass-produced needlepoint pattern.

**M.J.L.:** *Your recent essay in the journal Intermédialités, which was presented as a part of Millet Matrix I, makes an interesting case for Rosika's practice as being connected to conceptualism, in particular through Sol LeWitt's definition of conceptual art, wherein "the idea becomes a machine that makes the work." I would agree with this also in the fact that in some ways the gesture of the readymade (not to mention the monochrome) exists in these error-based works; these are aspects of everyday life—originally, needlepoints were made to decorate homes—that are brought into the space of art discourse. The basic impulse of taking needlepoint seriously as an art medium is redoubled in the error works, however, adding a note of caution and implying that this is not a simple act of reclamation but one fraught with historical complexity, least of which is the history of the development of manufacturing. With industry, labour is made subservient to machines, and in fact, as Rosika's research has revealed, the Arts & Crafts movement, which emphasized manual skill and lamented mechanization, marks the time in which the precursor of needlepoint, Berlin wool work, was discredited as a legitimate cultural practice.*

*However, you also make a more contemporary link to media practices that investigate the histories of their own development. I'm wondering if you think that Rosika's alteration of needlepoint practice, this double x double structure, in some way relates to what has been defined as post-Fordism in which, arguably, work is defined in terms of automation and the collective productivity of the general intellect (mass intellectuality). If we look at it in terms of a sociology of art, Rosika's practice has an odd resemblance to the immaterial labour of people who spend countless hours at work on computers and whose symbolic productivity is in some regard in excess of capitalist productivity since it is difficult to recuperate. It's quite unlike the labour of agricultural workers or of factory workers since the end product does not imply a very determinate form of consumption. And here I think that Smith's classifications can be asserted but perhaps only to a certain extent. In other words, there might be some significant overlaps with the concerns of socially engaged artists, even if the way of going about it is completely different. Or am I being reductive?*

**D.T.:** Your question raises complex issues about artistic strategies of the 1960s–70s and the transforming culture of work in this period, not only because of the links that I made between Rosika's work and conceptual art, but also because of the question of a program of work that is built into the original needlepoint patterns and the pattern of errors in the finished needlepoint. Did the artists of the 1960s and 1970s also import alien, "counter-revolutionary" ideologies and systems of belief when they imported working methods from other disciplines and sectors of society to critique what they saw as outmoded manual practices in their discipline? Or were they able to strip them of these counter-productive ideological elements and replace them by others that were in line with their utopian and counter-cultural aspirations? These questions are also related to contemporary practices insofar as artists lay claim to working in a post-industrial economy where cultural activities are increasingly based on practices that are governed by information technologies and their logics. One sees this clearly in the case of media artists whose claims to novelty are uncritically clothed in the discourse of computer programs and their aesthetic effects, as if they represented a neutral, a-historical method of production. This is why Rosika's work interests me so much. Clearly it is engaged with the same type of programming logic and its culture as other media artists, but from a much more sophisticated and complex historical viewpoint. In other words, her work and working practice has more historical depth and therefore, its engagement with contemporary transformations in the history of labour is also more sophisticated. One sees this in the case of her engagement

with the question of immaterial labour. Her practice is doubly articulated in terms of labour practices. It is based on needlepoint work and its history, and also on academic research, which is the medium for accessing that history.

Contemporary forms of education are invariably based on the computer and its programming systems. The computer is therefore the common interface between an information culture and today's educational systems. Insofar as the latter is based on the former, the question of the impact of immaterial labour on transforming labour can also be posed in the case of the relationship between contemporary education, its tools, and the production of academic knowledge. The computer and academic research practices are now intimately intertwined in the production of art. I think that there is a case to be made for the *Millet Grid*'s engagement with immaterial forms of labour, or more precisely, there are good grounds for making the claim that *Millet Grid* represents a particularly interesting interface between pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial cultures of work. The layout of *Millet Matrix I* points to this possibility insofar as the space is divided between an office space that is clearly devoted to academic research, and a hybrid exhibition space that explores the contemporary logic and possibilities of a form of meta-historical discourse on the cultural matrix of Rosika's work and its particular labour-based practices (academic research and manually based needlepoint labour practices). The presentation of the 18-hour video documenting of Rosika at work on one of the elements of *Millet Grid* on a computer screen in the office space was counterbalanced by the presence, in the other room, of a special issue of *Intermédialités* that was devoted to the theme of programming and that contained an essay on the place of programming and its significance in Rosika's work. A visitor to *Millet Matrix I* was invited to consult the essay because of the way that it was placed, in isolation, on its own table. The video documentation was also linked up to both spaces by the presence of reproductions of Mary Cassatt's *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame* (c.1881). The image was taken from a book by Griselda Pollock titled *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Women* (1998), a copy of which was placed next to the computer. This visual link and passageway between the two spaces was reinforced by the video since it was shot in such a way as to reproduce the painting's composition. One might say that the question of transforming labour practices was an important subtext of the whole exhibition, and indeed, that it also included the *work* of the curator insofar as the exhibition was also designed to explore

the important question of how an exhibition can address the similarities, distinctions and interactions between artistic and academic knowledge.

**M.J.L.:** *Could you tell us more about your thinking concerning this last issue—the development of curatorial projects that explore the interplay between artistic and academic knowledge. You mentioned previously that artists in the 1960s and 70s took the risk of deskilling their artwork by associating it with other disciplines and systems of belief. It seems to me that in some respects today's relational and politicized practices run a similar risk of abandoning the terrain or art discourse for activist work in the expanded social field, leading to theories of exodus from the institutionalized artworld. This makes a good deal of sense in the context of the privatization and vocationalization of educational institutions, the adaptation of knowledge to commercial markets and in the process, making education both more necessary for professional careers but also increasingly inaccessible. I personally think that it's nevertheless not all that easy to escape the "institution art," as Peter Bürger defined it, even if one decides to focus on grassroots politics, sustainable ecology or other praxiological fields. As well, there is a good deal of gallery-oriented art and museum curating that is completely out of touch with the need to politicize culture. What, in your estimation, do Millet Matrix I and your other curatorial projects seek to do in this context?*

**D.T.:** As you know my work has been 'engaged'—I use the word deliberately—since the mid-1970s with the question of the disciplinary transformation of knowledge in the visual arts as a consequence of their accelerated post-1960s integration in the university. At that time my approach was influenced by conceptual art practices, in particular the work of Bernar Venet and Robert Barry. However, in contrast to Venet, who imported various academic forms of knowledge into the artworld, I decided to actually pursue a series of academic careers initially through a process of education or disciplinary 'initiation' and to produce works from the viewpoint of these disciplines. This approach was fundamentally different from those of Venet, Art & Language or Joseph Kosuth because I was interested in importing into those other disciplines—the history of science and anthropology in particular—certain art-related approaches and issues such as the ostensibly outmoded question of style and authorship. I developed these issues in relation to technologies of representation in the history of science, limit cases, contact zones, and ultimately, *ideas* as alien forms of intelligence in the case of anthropology. Moreover, I was interested in producing works on the basis of a constant movement between disciplines, since this reflected my actual conditions of production at the time and continues to do so today, and therefore,

in a space between disciplines as opposed to importing ideas from other disciplines into the artworld as preconditions for the production of new works of art. This is why I am more comfortable with the labels 'visual worker' and 'visual works' than that of 'artist' and 'artworks' to describe what I have produced over the years. The approach I explored and exploited was clearly opposed to Venet's inverse transfer of knowledge paradigm. I talked about these strategies in a 1984 interview in which I noted some of the consequences of the adoption of a mobile and ambiguous position between disciplines through which to produce works that were effectively 'deterritorialized' in terms of the disciplinary formation of knowledge and the academic knowledge matrix that is concretized in the model that is represented and promoted by the contemporary Anglo-American university. This alternative model has influenced all of my work, including my 'curatorial' activities.

Most contemporary art practices that engage with the issue of the disciplinary formation of knowledge operate within the artworld and are constructed in its disciplinary terms, as Kosuth, Art & Language and Venet originally did. They test its boundaries from the inside. In the early 70s, Kaprow was one of the first university-educated artists to explore the consequences of positioning oneself within or outside of the artworld in his well-known articles "The Education of the Un-Artist-Parts I, II and III." But this exploration also took place from within the system and it was therefore subject to the contradictions created by this position. It is not only the education of the artist that takes place in the university, it is now the complete discourse of art and its political and social alternatives that are governed by this social institution, which is itself subject to change and socio-economic processes of control and normalization. In the 1960s and 1970s the education of the artist, even if it took place in the university, was still subject to the tensions and contradictions created by conflicting bohemian, vocational and professional models, as well as being subject to the utopian aspirations and violent contradictions of the counter-cultural movements of the time. Today the artist is a university-educated professional with a clear career plan.

It seems to me, however, that the quest for a simple and efficient solution to the art/life question—a false one, if ever there was one, but one that nevertheless continues, paradoxically, to exist as a viable question—and the socio-political aspirations that artists might have for their artworks is so completely neutralized by the university environment and its continued compartmentalization of disciplines that artists still consider

themselves to be artists, artist-engineers, artist-technologists or artist-scientists who are basically flirting aesthetically and formally with the visual products of other disciplines as opposed to engaging in the socio-political examination of the nature and functions of knowledge production in the universities and in its disciplines. Someone might argue that the importation of ideas and methods from Marxist studies, semiology, structuralism and post-structuralism or communications, film, post-colonial and cultural studies have basically liberated the artist from archaic practices and modes of thinking and have therefore changed the artist's working practice and environment, and I would agree with them. But I would also say that these ideas and methods have served to integrate and acculturate the artist into a specific form of working environment and its related set of discourses.

The artist is now a professional *academic* artist because he or she is university educated and is now in a position to discuss his or her work with other like-minded academics on the basis of highly specialized languages and theories. So much for a real democratization of art where the artist could work hand in hand with the public. The work of art can now only be understood, in my opinion, as an *academic* work of art. In this world, the objective is to eliminate opaque areas and to map out terra incognita. There are, moreover, no risky or dangerous ventures in this academic world devoted as it is to the transparency of knowledge and of the world and to the development of efficient economies of ideas that are able to function as vehicles of communication between social, political, economic and aesthetic domains of human activity. This world is the mirror of the one that exists outside of every university with its networks of surveillance systems and discourses of normalization.

Someone might say that I am being too negative, too pessimistic or deductionist in my analysis or that I am abdicating my responsibility as an artist and educator when I make these kinds of comments and observations. But that person would have to take account of the position that I have attempted to occupy within the intersystem of academic knowledge and its information economies. One must not forget that this strategy is based on the realization that advanced art and the so-called progressive artist are now the products of the university and its intersystems of ideas, and that each is defined in its terms. One also has to realize that ideas that were once liberating are now attached to or cling to their sites of domestication in ways that were not even possible in the 1960s and 70s because they were new, potentially

revolutionary and therefore considered to be either exciting and exotic or dangerous and iconoclastic. Today, simplicity of approach and egalitarianism or populist forms of democracy have eclipsed the brashness of revolutionary aspirations. Counter-revolutionary intentions and practices—third or fourth generation mutations of earlier radical forms of knowledge—masquerade as novel ideas and methods. When one adds privatization, commercialization and technocratic rationalism to this whole equation, the effects are compounded. Any counter-practice and corresponding site of resistance must, in my opinion, take account of these new environmental conditions of production and they must do so not only in a reflexive way but they must also propose positive alternatives. Tim Clark's *Reading the Limits* and Rosika's *Millet Matrix I* attempted to function in this way to propose alternative models to the current conditions of art production and reception based on the realization that art is now an academic social product and that academically defined disciplines of knowledge can be engaged in liminal or transcultural forms of movement.

When considered from this point of view, one can approach these two exhibitions in different, yet complementary ways. First, they raise questions about the disciplinary and academic foundations of contemporary art production. These questions can be highlighted and explored through different strategies of display. In this sense, they can be considered to be *exhibition works* in the sense of visual works that take the form of an exhibition that explores the strategies that can be used to discuss the conditions of academic art production. However, they are also “exhibition works” in another complementary sense. They question and explore alternative modes of displaying knowledge through the development of meta-discourses that can take account of the *possibilities* of entering into a dialogue with the disciplinary and non-disciplinary foundations of an artwork's conditions of existence, in particular, when these conditions are defined as encompassing the here and now of the artwork's contemporary possibilities of presentation as well as the there and then of its historical, social and political roots or cultural matrix.

From this viewpoint, the artwork presented is turned inside out, so to speak, and is redefined and disseminated in another form. One doesn't have to be literal about the visibility of its form, its roots or matrix. They can be invisible or oblique. They can be built *into* the visual logic of the exhibition in relation to its location and the artwork can be situated in such a way as to retain its original form, as in the case of *Millet Matrix I*. But there is another

way of approaching these exhibitions that also interests me. They can function as *visual works* that have adopted an exhibitionary form. By this I mean that the curatorial process, understood as a creative process of questioning and exploring possible answers to an initial question or an hypothesis about the nature and functions of knowledge as defined by an artist's practice and *oeuvre* (Tim Clark) or the way that the logic of a particular work operates in relation to an artist's practice and domain of academic research (the Tim Clark retrospective or Rosika's *Millet Matrix I*), are built into the exhibition and crystallized as an alternative or different type of knowledge matrix.

In the case of *Millet Matrix I*, we find a meta-matrix that exists in relation to the original matrix or common work pattern of the two Millets in *Millet Grid*. There is no question here of adopting the position of curator-as-artist or artist-as-curator. I would like to think of this practice as that of a transcultural visual worker, or more precisely, as that of a visual worker who is navigating in the unknown spaces that separate one artist's practice from someone else's and who is operating with an alternative—transcultural—viewpoint on the world, disciplines and knowledge. If the word alternative sounds too bland or parochial, and is not tainted with enough exoticism, then this is perhaps because it respects the complex and contradictory relationship between similarity and difference that is the hallmark of any situation or potential condition of radical contact. I also like the word because it is a simple index of a displacement in habitual forms of thought while omitting to refer to the violence and shock of some contact situations, thereby paving the way for the preservation of some of this violence, radical disruption, and the ejection of a spectator's consciousness from the confines and comfort of conventional systems of belief, however unconventional they might appear to be. It is in this violence process that I would locate the political, social and cultural aspirations and transformative potential of these exhibitions. The fact that they are ultimately ephemeral events that are also conditioned by certain conventions associated with the culture and economy of Western art exhibitions should not detract from the fact that the models they explore and promote can persist and exist in other forms such as this interview.

Marc James Léger

**Marc James Léger** is an artist, writer and educator living in Montreal. He is editor of *Culture and Contestation in the New Century* and author of the forthcoming *Brave New Avant Garde*.