

## A Short History of Living Poetry

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"abribus" to our extreme winter conditions; b) by raising the numbers of reserved lanes for buses to see a real advantage when using it, while improving the conditions and the continuity of pathways for bikers and pedestrians; c) to help with mixed development in order to reduce the needs in transportation for long distances and further develop narrower streets, better equipped to retain the rain water, etc.

Most projects presented here come from the cultural and institutional sectors. It is unfortunately not a deliberate choice: we would have loved to present a majority of projects coming from private orders or habitations, but the financial imperatives guiding these projects, most of the time, seem to limit their creators in the development of an architecture interested in creation and innovation. It is important to note that the originality of several of these projects is at times contentious. A case in point is the Saint-Roch area following its renaissance (with the development of La Falaise, Place-Charest parking lots, the Theatre La bordée, the *atelier de roulement a billes*). Fortunately, the architectural evolution doesn't stop with the celebration of the 400<sup>th</sup> year anniversary. Many great projects announced for the years to come create hopes for better and high quality programs, all susceptible to raise our built heritage. The initiative to launch an international contest to prepare for the enlargement of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec can only make us happy (in spite of the contentious plans presented at the beginnings and that wanted to demolish parts of the convent of the Dominicans), after its successful integration within the walls of the old jail in the Plains. We can only hope that this contest will be more fruitful than one of the Îlot des Palais, imagined as a gift from the Mayor Andrée Boucher to Quebec City, in the context of the 400<sup>th</sup> year anniversary, and stopped since by her successor. The resolutely modern proposition of laureate architects Bélanger, Beauchemin and Anne Vallières was meanwhile diluted, losing its frank dialogue with the remains and with the environment by coming closer to forms which were more historicists. At the core of the historical quarter of the city, the Hôtel-Dieu hopes to find an innovative architecture to complete and renovate its installations, taking also advantage of the project aiming to finish the area framing the côte

du Palais and what surrounds it. Above all, let's hope that the new architecture tendencies, taking at once advantage of the mixed usages and of a language well adapted to our time, open to sustainable concepts and principles, will appear all over the city. It would reinforce the qualities of the downtown area. It would also better develop our suburbs and the many entrances into the city, as we see it happening, on the Boulevard Laurier, today in full development. ■

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#### Note

1 See Tony Judt, *Après-guerre : Une histoire de l'Europe depuis 1945*, Paris : Armand Collin, 2005, p. 463.

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## A SHORT HISTORY OF LIVING POETRY

BY ANDRÉ MARCEAU\*

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

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

During the last thirty years, if there was some attempts to create an association of professional authors, none of them have lasted significantly. That said, many writers and poets have made Quebec City their home, live and stay there. Indubitably, it creates some viable and durable offsprings. The city has notably become, in the last thirty years, an ardent foyer for the *arts actuels* in the province, thanks to the diversity and dynamism of centers for artists. It is therefore not surprising that *Le Tremplin d'actualisation de poésie* (TAP) was born there more than elsewhere (like in Montreal, the metropolis, or Trois-Rivières even, the capital of poetry). It offered new grounds for poetry based on oral tradition, the scene and performance. In

this respect, for the last ten years, TAP and its founder (the author of this present essay) proposed and defended an approach of poetry *actuelle* – mainly in Quebec City. It begins to be known all over the province. Two terms have been elaborated by TAP. First, there was a king of *performed poetry* where the writing process meets the partition in order to force the poet into a performance situation (where the body and the language are put to the test). Second, there is a form of *living poetry* which encompasses more generally all kinds of poetry performed in live scenarios (scene, audio and *in situ*). It also includes performed poetry, oral poetry (or the spoken word) and the *slam*. Since this article is part of a summary dedicated to the last thirty years in Quebec City, let's start at the beginning, that is, thirty years ago.

#### Few Important Landmarks

1978 – and the future years – was a landmark moment on the art scenes in Quebec City, precisely because it has seen the births of centers for artists whom, while proposing new ways of functioning, were destined to one or the other in visual arts. Many among these have become noteworthy institutions because of their their vitality and lasting commitment to the arts. That said, we will give importance to the ones that have given a space to *living poetry* in the city. Evidently, a number of events in poetry have been, at the same time, presented here and there and under diverse circumstances in Quebec City since the seventies. And they have contributed to promote poetry *actuelle*, in the heart of the National Capital.

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

The review *Inter, art actuel* began in 1978, first under the name *Intervention* (creating at the same time the Éditions Intervention). That said, the active artists forming a group around it organised few events. As a result, following the philosophy of the review *Inter, art actuel*, Le Lieu (a center in art actuel) was born in 1982, offering a program that was radically opposed to the art traditions in Quebec City at the time. For instance, the *Marathon d'écritures* held for 76 hours, in 1983, in the middle of the Mall Place-Fleur-de-Lys, which gathered a great number of writers (most particularly poets) and artists from the region and elsewhere in Quebec City. Then, in 1984, two international



manifestations imposed an extreme approach to poetry, one which Quebec City's population was always allergic to (we have to remember how Claude Gauveau was welcomed by the public 15 years earlier). There were events such as *Néoson(g) Cabaret: Festival d'In(ter)vention 1* and *In memoriam Georges Maciunas*. On the contrary, both events showed that the wind was changing in a province more open to various projects, including the augural « *bascule des arts actuels* » in poetry. Both events were tapped on video and on a disc, respectively. As it was the case for the whole collective, the general profile of Inter/Le Lieu is taking shape along the projects and images it creates. With time, festivals became interested in pure performance using almost no words and valorizing the body, images and objects which, once in action, transcends linguistics barriers. In return, most of the meetings following were counting on the presence of performer/poets coming from the francophone world. And Inter/Le Lieu would continue with some events related to poetry. We can name here the performances of *Le 9*, organised by Pierre-André Arcand (in 1987) or at the sixteenth edition of the prestigious *Festival Polyphonix* in Quebec City, in 1991. Over the years, it is also important to say that Le Lieu offered precious help to groups, by its active collaborations and by proposing poetry activities in sound and performance, like *Obscure* or *Réparation de poésie*.

### Obscure

This association has closed 10 years ago. It was dedicated to the production of art actuel. It believed in « variable geometry » in artistic explorations. It was also able, between 1982 and 1997 and despite its undisciplined spreading, to land few milestones in the establishment of *living poetry* in Quebec City. Among the shows and multidisciplinary or multimedia events presented by *Obscure*, a place was occasionally reserved for poetry (most particularly sound poetry and poetry in action). Otherwise, many of the association's propositions asked for the collaboration of other groups. They allowed to cover larger ground aesthetically. All of this while bringing together many of the milieu's artistic agents in the realization of a common projects – and to be part of one of the most stimulating operations.

### Folie/Culture

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

### Réparation de poésie

Founded in 1986 by Jean-Claude Gagnon, *Réparation de poésie* was the first association in Quebec to be completely dedicated to poetry and its avatars, such as *postal art*. Its mandate consists of creating and stimulating relations between poetry and the visual arts while implementing *postal art* in Quebec City. Between the years of its inception and the beginning of 2000, *Réparation de poésie* was able to present (thanks to Le Lieu's support and other artists groups) a bi-annual festival called *Réparation de poésie*. This festival included an evening of poetry and performance, an exhibit of visual poetry and a workshop on *nature poetry* (an activity seeking to "confront nature and poetry"). Each of these activities regrouped an important number of participants. Evenings or other types of activities were sometimes organised by the association members. At the same time, for the last 19 years (and realized on a yearly basis) Jean-Claude Gagnon was the director of an artists' book also called *Réparation de poésie*.

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

### Avatar

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

### Poets of French America

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

### Le Tremplin d'actualisation de poésie (TAP)

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

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

Since 1999, thanks to the same collaboration, TAP organized eleven editions of the series "Urban Sinecure". They are part of *The Fridays of Poetry*. These evenings are proposed *in situ*, in public spaces outside in the heart of the Saint-Roch area, located downtown. Amplification systems, lighting and the installation of a scene are taking over the space, altogether making one with it in order to reach a precise objective: to create the occasion to live a poetic experience in the context where these poets are performing. This is one of the



editions of "Urban Sinecure" offering the first poetry evening at the îlot Fleurie, under the access roads to the highways called: « La poésie se pète les bretelles ». Other evenings took place in the stairs of La Chapelle Street (the access road to walk up or down between the Upper and the Lower City), in parking lots, on the streets, on the steps of the Church Saint-Roch, at the Saint-Roch marina, in the interpretation center of the Saint-Charles river... just to name a few.

*Le Front de réappropriation locale des poteaux* (FRLP) is a branch of TAP. Between 1998 and 2002, it performed poetic manoeuvres encompassing many aspects: political, urban and informative (communication). It has also been involved in poetic actions and activities realized *in situ*, downtown Quebec City. The final objective of the manoeuvre was to promote the agents' rights and local residents to post information about their local activities in their respective areas such as wall surfaces viewed as "urban trash" by the FRLP (telephone posts, barricaded, and panel wood fences). All of these manifestations were for a local reappropriation of them. An article on the birth of the FRLP was published in the review *Inter, art actuel* (« L'oeuf à la loupe: Pour une écologie des poteaux » n° 71, p. 60). Among the branch's activity, we can mention the four editions of *Expoésie Saint-Roch* (happening before the refurbishing of the old commercial area downtown) and two Walks for Poetry (the *Pèlerinage des poteaux* and the *Procession des poteaux*).

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

Over ten years, TAP has proposed more than 200 poetry activities to Quebec audiences: evenings, shows, events, exhibitions *in situ*, all of which contributing to raise poetry's visibility and vitality. Aside, TAP created two small publishing houses of the "zine" type, cumulating twenty small books (each of them representing one poet) as well as a printing house for CDs (of oral, performed or audio living poetry).

It's now producing its 50<sup>th</sup> publication.

### Rhizome Productions

Founded in 2000 by Marc

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

### The Editors...

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

*invisibles* (poetry books focusing on oral tradition with two publications). Although they are not distributed in the libraries, 200 copies (on average) of these publications are sold each time, yearly. This is a satisfying result if we compare it to sales of official editors which are often lower. That said, in all these cases we are talking about literary poetry more than living poetry. In this respect and considering what would be the closest, examples are rare. We have to remember the yearly publications or more occasional publications of artists books such as *Réparation de poésie* (with 19 issues) and the *Cahiers Folie/Culture* (with 9 issues). On CDs, *Intervention*, *Avatar* and *Obscure* have occasionally released sound poetry, most of the time with publications covering more ground. We will have to wait the arrival of *Le Tremplin d'actualisation de poésie* with its label *Réserve phonique* to see the appearance of exclusive CDs of *living poetry* (spoken, performed, audio and sound) as follows: *Mots arrachés du corps: Anthologie de la poésie vivante de Québec* (17 poets of the region, 2004); *Des Montres dans la gorge: Poésie transmissible radiophoniquement* (double CD which includes 30 poets from Quebec City, 2005); *Urbine n°: Informe* (pilot issue of a review still to be born, 2006); *Pop sac-à-vie* (solo CD of *living poetry* and *slam*, 2007). A double album is currently in production and will promote thirty poets coming from three different regions in Quebec (Quebec City, Montrel and Gatineau), thanks to the organizations holding *living poetry* events in their respective regions. On the radio, since 2001, TAP makes sure that living poetry is heard on a weekly basis (on radio frequency 89.1 of CKRL, in Quebec City) with a program about "poetry transmitted by radio" and produced by the authors of these stations.

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

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