



Engrenage Noir /  
**LEVIER**

PRESENTATION DOCUMENT





## History

Engrenage Noir is an independent, non-profit artist organization based in Montréal (Québec, Canada). Between 2002 – 2007, Engrenage Noir / LEVIER supported Community Art and Humanist Activism projects responding to proposals from individuals and groups dealing with a wide array of concerns. LEVIER's desire was to nurture the conditions within which individuals could bring significant change to their own lives. Added to this was the will to implicate a greater socio-cultural, economic, and political intentionality related to just and sustainable resource sharing and peaceful coexistence.

While communities can be organized around a shared geographic location, traditions, or common interest, in its current discursive and practical usage, the term community has also come to stand for groups of individuals who share a social, economic, cultural, or political marginalization or inequality. Community art projects are most often motivated by the desire to celebrate creativity while addressing socio-political injustice using cooperative artistic processes as a means to invite personal change – often of a healing nature – and collective improvement.

The projects supported through the LEVIER Community Art section were co-directed by community groups and their artists who committed to a collaboration of no less than one year. Grassroots participation and cooperative decision-making were significant factors in all stages of such projects.

Humanist Activism projects, as defined by LEVIER, on the other hand, have been short or long term but nevertheless were required to have a significant communal component. While the definition of community was to some extent up to each applicant to determine, all potential projects were assessed based on their level of social implication. Projects have taken many forms: street performance, artistic gesture, public art interventions, networking, creation of spaces for dialogue, theatre production, the creation of an album of rap songs, the organization of a North-South solidarity tour, etc.



## *LEVIER supported* **COMMUNITY ART PROJECTS**

### **In Total**

20 artists and 65 members from 8 community organizations implicated since 2002

Artists in  
visual art  
photography  
video  
theater, etc.

and

community organizations  
dealing with issues of  
poverty  
homelessness  
water resources  
domestic violence  
criminalization  
etc.

## *LEVIER supported* **CREATIVE HUMANIST ACTIVISM PROJECTS**

### **In total**

49 artists and 91 community organizations implicated since 2002



THE SURPRISE OF CONSCIOUS AWAKENING

WONDER, JOY AND CURIOSITY



## IN OUR LIFETIME

Launched in 2008, LEVIER's new initiative is called *In Our Lifetime*. It is intended to focus entirely on the issue of poverty. This new initiative is meant to stimulate dialogue about healthy interdependence and encourage artistic creation that addresses the systemic causes of poverty while affirming the diversity of ecosystems, human rights, and ethical responsibility.

Within the framework of this initiative, LEVIER has been working in association with community organizations that share similar socio-political concerns and that wish to integrate new collaborative art projects fully into their operational activities. The aim is to work to create the possibilities for conjoined projects to emerge from the shared concerns of the organizations involved (including LEVIER). LEVIER's partners commit all the time and resources necessary in each stage of the projects' development – from preparation and the creative process to the dissemination and documentation. LEVIER is equally committed and supports the projects financially and by offering an ongoing critical framework of analysis in addition to coordinating the recruitment and training of the artists and other community members.

Here is a brief Engrenage Noir / LEVIER project listing:

# Agir par l'imAGinalRe

2008 – ongoing

The Société Elisabeth Fry du Québec (SEFQ) and Engrenage Noir / LEVIER are in the process of coordinating a pilot project being carried out in a spirit of collaboration between non-incarcerated artists and women caught up in the criminal justice system who may or may not also have artistic experience. Workshops in the following media have been held over a two-year period in four Montreal-area penal institutions (Joliette Institution, Maison Tanguay, Philippe-Pinel Institute, and the halfway house Maison Thérèse-Casgrain): photography, video, self-portraiture, sound, spoken work, voice/song, dance and performance art. The work of *Agir par l'imAGinalRe* is reflected in three aspects: creation, dissemination and documentation. A Training and Exchange Program was tailor made for the artists involved in this project.

SEFQ and LEVIER are also planning an exhibition of the work that emerged during the project. The exhibition will be scheduled in conjunction with workshops and roundtable discussions. Our intention with the exhibition and auxiliary activities is to focus on the celebration of creativity even as we critically engage with the problematics of the criminalization of poverty and the process by which women become impoverished within the prison system.

A publication is in progress under the auspices of Les Filles électriques (in association with SEFQ and LEVIER), which will document the entire project and highlight the work of the women involved. It will be released in the spring 2011 in time for the opening of the exhibition.



Photography of Geneviève.

# Affirming Collaboration: Community and Activist Art Projects in Québec and Beyond

One of issues that LEVIER has considered critically from the outset was how, why, when and by/for whom to document community, activist and humanist art projects. At this turning point in our history, as the *In Our Lifetime* project takes shape, the time has come for an accounting of what we've been up to. Thus we are preparing the publication entitled *Affirming Collaboration: Community and Activist Art in Québec and Beyond* that will include a history of LEVIER, our ethical approach, descriptions of projects we have supported, proceedings and analysis of the Training and Exchange Programs we've hosted over the years, as well as theoretical texts reflecting on this practice. A DVD compilation of five short videos created by five different community groups affiliated with LEVIER entitled *Documenting Collaboration* will accompany this book.

Les Éditions LUX has joined LEVIER as the co-publisher of this work (approximately 300 pages in English and as many in French).

Anticipated publication date: February 2011.

## The Art Entr'Elle Collective

In October 2009, following her engagement in *Agir par l'imAGinAIRE*, Jessica MacCormack, multidisciplinary artist, created a project connecting criminalized women and professional artists who have already worked in the carceral milieu. The collective of women artists who say NO to violence, poverty and intolerance has named this initiative Art Entr'Elle.

Supported financially by LEVIER, the group is in its third project of artistic creation. In past works, a series of post cards was created with the goal of distributing them for free in the city and making Montrealers happy. The collective also created a stop-motion animation film dealing with the roadblocks encountered by women upon release from prison. Today the participants are working on a visual art project concerning itinerance and hope to form a new group in June to create a new street performance (gumboots dance and slam).

Long term, the collective hopes to become autonomous and receive regular financial support to become an artistic non-profit organization that will employ women who have had problems with the criminal justice system. For the moment, the Société Elisabeth Fry du Québec and LEVIER who support this collective, have been solicited for the opening of a second group of women. If everything goes as planned, the work of this new group will begin in August 2010.

# Participation in the Montreal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy NETWORK

Since 2008, Engrenage Noir / LEVIER has been involved with the development of the Montreal Urban Aboriginal Community Strategy NETWORK – and has been a core member of the ART \* CULTURE Working Committee since its inception. The ART \* CULTURE Working Committee is one of the six working committees that make up the NETWORK – the others being: Communication, Health, Social Services, Youth, and Education, Training & Employability. The vision of the NETWORK is to improve the quality of life of Aboriginal people who live in the greater Montreal area. Currently LEVIER is covering the costs (i.e. salary, office space, communications, etc.) associated with the position held by Amélie Girard as the part-time Coordinator of the ART \* CULTURE Working Committee.

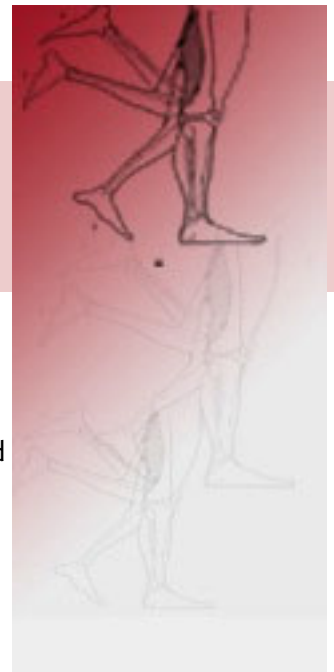
## Participation in IDEA 2010

Within the framework of IDEA 2010, LEVIER is supporting Norman Matchewan's research trip. Norman is a member of the Barrier Lake Algonquin community (in Northern Québec). Barrier Lake has been leading a decades-long with the Canadian government for acknowledgement of its ancestral form of governance and its acquired right to territory, culture and traditional language. The participation of the Barrier Lake community is the result of a collaboration with artists Moe Clark (Métis) and Émilie Monnet (Algonquin), both of whom will also be present in Belém (Brazil) for the IDEA 2010 event.

While in Brazil Norman Matchewan will have the opportunity to interview and engage in a discourse with various Indigenous community members from Brazil to share in the struggle as well as the strategies they have taken to overcome these political and cultural conflicts. He will also have the opportunity to conduct interviews that will be recorded for eventual diffusion through the Barrier Lake community radio program. The interviews will eventually be shared amongst other community radio programs (Aboriginal and not) across Québec and Canada.

With the aim of exploring how art can be a useful tool to protect the traditional way of life for the Aboriginal communities in Québec (including the people of Barrier Lake) the following questions are amongst the ones to be explored:

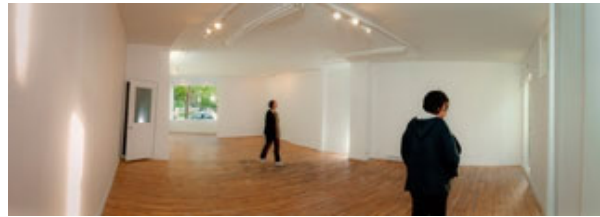
- how can artistic practices act as a bridge between defending traditional/land rights and presenting the struggles to a broader audience?
- how can artistic practices serve as a means for transmission between elders and youth within communities as well to support a transmission of knowledge between members of various Indigenous cultures?



# Different Services

## Studio LEVIER

Since 2009, LEVIER has opened a studio space available for community rental at low cost.



## Documentation Centre

LEVIER's relevant books and audio-visual materiel about community and activist art – as well as social engagement in general – are available for consultation

## Blog and listserve

The LEVIER blog and listserve are two additional means aimed at contributing to the practice of community and activist art in Québec and beyond.



RESSOURCES RCES



## Training and Exchange Programs offered on a regular basis

The last program was entitled *How Many Slaves Do You Own? Art and the Economies of Exploitation, Past and Present*. This was a 3-day event held in March 2010 addressing the following question: How do the systemic forces of late Capitalism create and sustain coercive economies relative to the impact of the historical trans-Atlantic slave trade, the prison industrial complex in North America, the plight of domestic, immigrant and migrant workers in Canada, the sex trade and trafficking, and the history of Aboriginal slavery in Québec.



While approaching the question analytically, a significant space for performance works was also created. With these works an inquiry about how art might contribute to creating awareness or sometimes even erase historical facts related to past and current forms of slavery and coercive economies was elicited.

Documentation of this event is available on LEVIER site, at :  
<http://www.engrenagenoir.ca/blog/en/archives/category/combien-desclaves-avez-vous>.

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