

Postscript

La brûlure avant la voix

[The burning before the voice]

or Could this be a love letter?

Louise Lachapelle

Before the start of a community forum I attended in the Santhiaba quarter of Dakar, Sénégal, in April 2010, women celebrating an important step in a collaborative process invited me to join them for dancing.¹ It was such a pleasure to begin a work meeting with colours, music, laughter and movement! What a difference compared to my first involvement with LEVIER, for the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices*,² which had begun with a morning yoga session, as had other programs. My participation in these sessions added up to practicing a form of presence, of being close by. I found it impossible to do the movements together with the others, to move physically. The gestures seemed so intimate and, consequently, inaccessible in a collective and public context such as that one. The proposal clashed with my natural reserve, with my life experience. As I write these lines, I realize that the fact of being invited, as a woman, to join a group of other women – an experience of sisterhood which has seldom been mine, even in a context of cultural or socioeconomic proximity – is doubtless not extraneous to the significant and healing aspect of that Senegalese experience which I evoke here as a landmark in my own process.

With my mind's eye on that process, and inhabiting a highly personal stance, I would like to attest to my privileged relationship with LEVIER over the years. Be it through the design and co-animation of several training and exchange programs, as adjuncts or as companions to certain projects, or through interpersonal relationships, the critical practice of creation, reflection and action typical of LEVIER was rich in encounters, in opportunities to recharge and in mutual learning – all of this adding up to an abundant *matter* that continues to find its expression in me.

My initial involvement with LEVIER came at a time when my critical relationship to culture (as well as to my culture) was becoming more radical. I use the word in the sense of *root*, as I was taught by Maria-Theresia, a nun in the Carmelite convent of Berlin, in due respect of a friendship and an ongoing dialogue I have sometimes referred to, mainly in the introduction to the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program (2004)*. I do not have faith. Neither the faith that comes with the existence and daily life of the believer, nor even faith in culture. Nonetheless, several links seem to exist between the Carmelite convent and art, and these have often seemed to me to shed light on the paradoxes of these practices, including in their relation to ethics and community.³ At the time of that original involvement with the LEVIER process, I felt the need to respond to the present – how to live? How to live together?⁴ – but also of following through in my actions, relationships and lifestyles with a questioning of the fundamental issues raised within a reflection on gift, art and ethics⁵ that had just generated a new cycle of research-creations about living, inhabiting and coexistence.⁶ Since then, with *This should be housing / Le temps de la maison est passé*, I have been exploring the tensions between the need for dwelling, the joys of the hut and the inadequacy of the house. By this I mean the house as expression of a relation to habitat founded on physical and symbolic *domination*,⁷ and as a model dictating both a way of inhabiting, an ethics and a deficient cultural response to the issue of coexistence. My role in LEVIER's demanding and rigorous activities⁸ has provided me with many opportunities to share in these questionings, and to develop them in a context where my preoccupations with the creation and transmission of culture, and with the role of art in personal, social and community terms, could contribute to formulating shared working questions, while supporting diverse individual and collective practices, in a context where, in turn, my own practice is nurtured and sustained. The practices of questioning, reflecting and sharing are compelling forces in LEVIER's creative process and ethics. And so it is, once

Louise Lachapelle
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again, by sharing questions from my own workshop, as well as from my own work on the *house*, that I come back to LEVIER's ongoing activism.

In Our Lifetime, the designation that refers to all of LEVIER's current activities,⁹ focuses on the relationship between art and the struggle against poverty, along an intervention axis that encourages "artistic creation to confront the systemic causes of poverty" and of social exclusion. By choosing creativity as the driving force behind its activism from the outset, LEVIER partakes in and of this *rediscovery* – though recent – of the relationship between "art and community" through community art, a relationship that Western-world art had perhaps not so completely sundered, contrary to what a certain modern version of art history would have us believe.

Another tension for me that has to be better understood, explored and written about is the notion that community art (as I have described it) is really a Western construct and that non-Western societies produce culture (and art) in very different ways – ways that are community-based, rooted in traditions and sacred (world view) beliefs. In many Aboriginal societies, art is produced with a specific function within a community.

– Melanie Fernandez

Community Arts – Invitation to an Information Meeting, p. 29¹⁰

LEVIER has set itself the mandate to engage with artistic and socioeconomic issues characteristic of the reality and communities of Québec, while seeking to create links with local communities elsewhere, as well as with shared world-wide issues. To what extent does the development of these significant relationships between people and between groups, which is certainly conducive to increasing awareness and responsibility relative to such conditions of struggle, also succeed in generating a more comprehensive understanding of the issues themselves? This appears particularly difficult when these issues seem to express themselves *elsewhere* with a degree of urgency that can be perceived, *here*, as belonging to a political, cultural or socioeconomic context that is *different* or apparently remote from *ours*, yet without being identifiable to a crisis or a spectacular catastrophe, that is to say with a more immediately and massively rallying type of event. This being said, the different understanding created by a more comprehensive and transcultural perspective on persistent structural inequalities, on a culture of separation and on human habitat, generally transforms the (local) definition of the problems arising for *us*, while making it richer and more complex; but then, does this different kind of understanding not also convey the possibility of changing, sometimes radically, the way of facing these problems and of solving them together? From the feeling of guilt of the wealthy toward the poor to a sense of solidarity which, for some, *refreshes* the community experience, there exists, when engaging in holistic experiences or decolonization processes such as LEVIER's, a necessary passage where each person is continually called upon to situate the perspective from which she is creating the conditions of the *cum munia*. In other words, which forms of gift-sharing will be the basis of which community?

I realized that to be more radical in my commitment, I had to open my heart and have the courage to be visible.

– Suzanne Boisvert,

from the interview concerning the project *Il était une fois mon quartier*

[Once upon a time, my neighbourhood], p. 216

From one event to the other, the relationships established with an open network of collaborators and accomplices operate so that LEVIER's artistic, political and theoretical approach is defined and develops in a continuous and organic manner, along with fieldwork hinging on listening and adaptability, as well as by mutual training, dialogue and critical thinking. In my view, three main factors seem to promote LEVIER's approach: the flexibility and autonomy of this small team of co-directors; the development of projects that, like LEVIER itself, seek to empower the structures supporting them, as well as the people involved; the access to private funding which ensures core financing for various activities. To some extent, these factors are also what make the organization fragile. Over the years, this LEVIER-specific approach has contributed significantly to both practical and theoretical work on the issues inherent to the creative process as well as on those typical of community art and activist art as they relate to the existential, to citizen commitment and to individual and social transformation (in the sense both of change and of healing).

When it comes to community or cultural organizations, survival beyond the first five years of activity often depends on access to a space, an identity-specific location promoting networking and visibility. Although LEVIER, due to its origins, has never experienced such precariousness, the preparation of this publication made it necessary to have a place, a storefront

window on the world, so to speak, so that the book's production team could have a common workplace outside Devora or Johanne's domestic spaces.¹¹ Setting up in a shared physical location by renting a commercial space literally opening onto Saint-Jacques Street, in Montréal, signaled yet another phase in LEVIER's development.

The financial and critical support initially intended mostly for artists wishing to work with community organizations had, since 2008, begun to transform into support for community organizations who share with LEVIER the objective of fighting poverty (or of promoting healthy interdependence), and wishing to work with art and artists in realizing their own mandates.¹² Individuals or groups who join together around a collaborative creative project often seem to recognize one another in their identification with certain kinds of marginalization. Since this most recent developmental phase of LEVIER's, the artists and creative projects are finding their place in existing non-profit organizations, where new actions are emerging, as well as, from now on, new artists (and potentially, new organizations). Though that is surely a lovely way of coming full circle, this journey reveals that LEVIER is facing the challenge of negotiating one of the tensions inherent in the creative process (as well as in the collaborative process or in social change): the tension between asserting difference and the reproduction of the same. This tension is present both in LEVIER's programming and in the way the organization functions wherein transformation is not only a theoretical intention, it is also put into practice. That which is being challenged is itself an important agent of change, whether in the realm of personal transformation or at the level of countering certain dominant systems – values, social structures or power relations. What remains then from what is being contested in what is being renewed? To what extent is artistic responsiveness a carrier of *diversity and difference*?

A kind of cultural entrepreneurship is currently active in the urbanization (and Americanization) of the planet. Investments in infrastructures, numerous constructions – such as museums or the other cultural complexes dominating this trend – point to

an essentially commemorative relationship to art and culture (often meaning a Western or Euro-centred definition of art and culture), one which proves also to be a powerful strategy for cultural assimilation and homogenization (for example, see below the reference to the cultural mediation in *Cultural Development Policy for the Ville de Montréal*). By comparison, there is a clear coherence between the various steps of LEVIER's history and the "infrastructure" the organization has set up for itself, for a duration initially determined by the production of this publication. The LEVIER space consolidates collaborations already deeply rooted in a complex relational network and in the varied expressions of artistic and political activist practices aimed at social responsibility. Therein, collaborators enter a zone conducive to further interweavings and points of convergence. In addition, this *settling-in* process of LEVIER's may only be partial, given that a certain *internal nomadism* has set in, meaning that the office space and, more recently (for a short period of time), the adjoining studio, are not only frequented but also used by people and organizations originating from the open and mobile *community* that LEVIER is, so to speak. This settling into a physical space nonetheless raises the question of LEVIER's institutionalization and, at a time when the organization is producing a work "rememorizing" and historicizing its own narrative, the question of how LEVIER wishes to view its own continuity/durability, as well as that of its approach and achievements. Which ways and means for growth will LEVIER adopt from now on (different, in this context, from the progressive idea of expansion)? And, with the *In Our Lifetime* programming, what of its means of transformation / transmission? Will this process bring about a perspective that is both viable and sustainable? In other words, how will LEVIER's inscription in its own location allow the organization to keep on resisting, in the etymological sense of *to resist*, that is, continuing to "face" both the cultural en-closure of the "dead house"¹³ and the cultural utopia of a "house without walls?"



Page excerpted from the *Cultural Development Policy for the Ville de Montréal 2005-2015*. The drawing of the house as well as the scribbled notes were added by Louise Lachapelle. She calls this new sketch *The cultural enclosure of a dead house*.

*Instead of a physical building,
the entire neighbourhood would become the Maison de la culture – albeit, one without walls.
The timing of this initiative [to create a community art urban zone]
was linked to the release of the Ville de Montréal's cultural policy
with the aim of inviting the local population to engage in a critical dialogue
about public and community art.
– description of the project *Urbaine urbanité III* [Urban urbanity III], p. 241.*

I would like to continue this reflection by introducing three images as a kind of anchoring outside oneself, a creative strategy, the burning before the voice [*La brûlure avant la voix*].

Though these images do not really belong together, their juxtaposition pulls something together for me. At this heady stage in the creative process, when writing is stumbling toward the text, I am trying to think (perhaps also to believe) that they will allow me to access the questions forming inside me at the end of the tremendous assessment that this book represents, and that they will help me turn my questioning towards you. The three images do seem to belong to vastly different historical, cultural and sociopolitical contexts, yet they appear to point to something akin to the fundamental challenges and choices discussed earlier; a few avenues, at least on the creative and cultural levels, leading to the formulation of the shared questions without which obtaining collective answers can only prove difficult. Among the numerous themes and problems that come out of my reading of material from the book made available to me by the editorial team, as well as my look back at my own practice in dialogue with LEVIER's, I would isolate the following elements: the matter of the gesture and the form of the gesture; the affirmation of creation and the questioning of our culture of sacrifice; the woman – house – community connection.

The matter of the gesture, the form of the gesture

When I first heard about LEVIER's publication project, in 2007, I made an offer to Devora and Johanne to write an article that would make use of the title of a painting by German artist Georg Baselitz, *Die Hand – Das brennende Haus* [The Hand – The Burning House] (1965). In it I would further develop certain issues introduced at the beginning of the report on the study day *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Art Practices*¹⁴ as regards LEVIER's various projects: the house as revealer of the uncertain place humans occupy in their “contemporary,” and a sense of ethics as *disposition*, that is to say as *position by default*. This critical stance allows me to suggest that the inadequacy of ethics, when it comes to *resolving* or *regulating* the complex proposals we receive from reality, constitutes a creative requirement in and of itself, a condition that is prerequisite to an open relationship to the living. The Baselitz painting shows an extended arm, the palm of the hand turned upward, holding, like an offering, a burning house. This image seemed to lead to writing. It spoke to me of the line of questioning I wanted to explore in connection with my involvement and critical interventions within the LEVIER framework, and with *This should be housing / Le temps de la maison est passé*. In other words, it spoke to me of this reflection on ethics in our cultural practices that also critiques *our* culture of sacrifice, a culture where separation and exclusion are the foundations of social cohesion as well as of the forms of reconciliation that would aim to safeguard community.

*After the launch of the Tuganire video on August 26, 2008, at Umurage,
one of the children fell down the stairs and cut his forehead open.
There was a lot of blood: he had to have stitches.
When the ambulance left, the older youth went elsewhere to party into the dawn.
In the early morning hours, there was a fight: one young man stabbed another to death.
The centre was conceived as a space for individuals and disparate groups
within the Montréal Rwandan community to come together.
All of us who had worked for years on the project felt terrible
that bringing people together resulted in murder,
especially considering our history.
– Lisa Ndejuru,
from the interview concerning the Tuganire project, p. 228*

Origins stories — be they narratives, fictions or myths — tell of the foundations of human culture. For French philosopher René Girard, culture finds its origins in a founding murder whose sacrificial rituals comprise the repetition aimed at reactivating, down through generations, the protection through sacrifice that these rituals re-actualize.¹⁵ However, Girard defines the modern world as a world deprived of this sacrificial protection and, consequently, liberated from the lie of the single victim and the sacrifices resulting from that lie, in other words, the exclusion and “murder” of the scapegoat. It would appear that our reconciliatory mechanisms have lost their efficiency and the modern world is, in his view, “ever more exposed to an increasingly aggravated violence which is, of course, our own, the violence of us all.”¹⁶ “In order to survive, [the consumer society] must constantly invent new gadgets. And the marketplace society consumes the earth’s resources, not unlike the Aztecs killing more and more victims. Over time, any and all sacrificial remedy loses its efficiency,” writes Girard.¹⁷ By observing only the recent history of the human species, *we* should be able to *know* that not only does the culture of sacrifice not suffice to bring about reconciliation between or within communities, but that reconciliation itself is no longer enough. *Our* cultural practices remain based in the values and economy of sacrifice, be it of art, of gift or of war. This economy is the foundation of culture that this culture itself almost always succeeds in masking. It does so by *reconciling* us with the necessity of killing which is specific to a survival situation or to the exploitation of the *other*, one of its human aggravations. That need to kill has been excluded from culture and from what would define “the human.” Thus, culture — which continues to think of itself as a promise of reconciliation — apparently continues to define itself first through separation, by that “ultimate line of defense” between *them* and *us*, between the human and the living, between *house* and *habitat*.¹⁸ How to inhabit the contemporary together?



Georg Baselitz, *The Hand – The Burning House*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 135 x 39 cm (private collection).
Photo: Frank Oleski, Cologne. (c) Georg Baselitz

In the context of this reflection on the contemporary imaginary landscape, the Baselitz painting evokes the critical reversal of the meaning and the value of sacrifice: the gift of the burning home, nothing more to give than the destroyed house that will save nothing. It shows the inefficiency of gestures aimed at saving individual or community through sacrifice, at creating cohesion through separation and inclusion. Thus, when one recognizes the necessity to respond to the present, the necessity of making concrete gestures, there remains the question of the gesture that *one must* make and the uncertainty from which this *one must* proceeds: the question of choice and form of the gesture. This question has haunted me for years, and in my view it points to the dis-quiet space of ethics: how – in a gesture or in art as a gesture – to sustain the necessity to act and the uncertainty of action? How to imagine a non-sacrificial space?

Since working with Baselitz's painting, my attention has attached itself to this house in flames and to that hand extended into a space that seems to be exploding – expression of a relationship to a dis-quiet present that the creative gesture, or the sacrifice, might seek to appease? Gently, Devora points out something I had not noticed: the arm, the hand, the skin, are also burning. Indeed, my own skin had started burning again since the beginning of this work on the house. In addition, I had already integrated this skin reaction into my writing process, as well as into the exploration of new forms of relationships, intimate ones but also friendships, social and public relations. Although I *knew* that this *burning* was one of the terrains or intimately personal materials of this experience, I had not realized I was exposing myself to such a fundamental and complete folding back on myself. I did not think I would be exposing my skin to the same kind of uncontrollable and debilitating urges as when, in childhood, as a response to the irritation and danger from the mother crazed by past abusive assaults on her own body and memory, I would strip the skin from the soles of my feet. This may be where I am now: stop digging holes in my skin without en-closing (the) being.

Asserting creation and questioning our culture of sacrifice



Images by Louise Lachapelle after Agnès Varda's film entitled *The Gleaners and I* (2000).

When I began writing this text for LEVIER during the winter of 2009, a colleague asked me for a short article about the relationship between research and teaching from the point of view of my own practice.¹⁹ Another image then entered the picture: an excerpt from *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* [The gleaners and I], Agnès Varda's beautiful 2001 film. It comes from the passage where a woman's hand – the filmmaker's own aging hand, as she sits in the passenger seat of a moving car – plays at "catching" between her fingers the trucks speeding along the highway. At the start of the documentary, Varda explains her project to herself while manipulating a little digital camera, a relatively new technology for her at the time: "filming a hand while the other hand" is gleaning, picking up the remains, of oneself or of the world. "It's always a self-portrait," she concludes.

*Now I feel as if I were on a starting platform at the edge of a swimming pool.
I'm especially happy I did this exercise, that I took part in this interview,
because it validates my work as an artist and gives it official status.*

*I think that will take me in a new direction in my process.
It's a little as if I had just painted my portrait on a blank page.*

– Louis Perron

from the interview concerning the project *L'autre* [The other], p.208

Working with that image from Varda's film, I began to realize that that gleaner who is observing her hand while filming it with the other, is also speaking to that other text, the one still lying on my work table and for which I still haven't found a voice, although it is coming to me as an address, a gesture, the uncertain *towards* of ethics. Could this be a love letter?

Indeed, evoking the scene in the Varda film in that earlier reflection on teaching and research had allowed me to recognize that my "ambidextrous practice" is not defined by either one. At the same time as increasingly close connections are developing between my various teaching activities and the diversity of my research activities, their centre of gravity keeps shifting, toward the vicinity of the existential, of the living. In other words, I am realizing how important it is for me from now on to assert creation as a basic aspect of my practice, of my existence and of my vitality.

*That experience was a springboard for me in many ways,
including getting in touch with my artistic side,
which had been foreign to me. [...]
Creating the birthing robe was a process of materializing
what is often confined in our heads or in words.
It was a strong, evocative experience that went beyond
verbal or intellectual forms, and it speaks to me of our real creative power.
I feel that this is one more door that has opened
in me, and not only artistically.
It's the transformation of thoughts and reflection into something concrete.
And I understood that I was capable of creating beauty.
—Manon Cantin,
from the interview concerning the project *Opération : À nous les sarraus*
[Operation: Let's put on the lab coats], p. 222*

Asserting creation: this is what I feel the need to name, first for myself but also in order to meet the exigency of the practices and of several of the texts gathered here. To do so I will have had to revisit something that, in my own relationship to creation, was refused, almost twenty years ago. Back then I had wished to experience writing and had set up the necessary conditions, including time and the means to do it. But at the end of that experience which generated a critical reflection about the creative process, various written materials and other forms of writing without words, a short narrative became the last work of fiction I would allow myself to write. That kind of writing (or perhaps writing itself?) was not enough. That text was, quite literally, *abandoned*—banished, in other words—the marginalization of a part of that which in myself, ever since childhood, has thought of itself and its relationship to the world in/as writing.

Thus the image from Varda's film, viewed through the lens of speculation and contemplation, joins the Baselitz painting among the raw materials of this article. From the image to the painting, the hand, the skin, the matter of the gesture and the form of the gesture; the offering gleaned, gift or sacrifice, a sacrifice that speaks more of self-destruction than of reconciliation; and yet, the assertion of creation.

I don't know to what I am reconnecting exactly. Over the years, creation has resurfaced everywhere in my various spheres of activity. However, I now understand differently the fact that refusing to write fiction is not equivalent to refusing to create, nor to killing the creative self. Asserting a stance as artist, woman, activist—words I would not have identified with, which I would even have avoided using about myself not so long ago—is yet another way of acknowledging the scope of my relationship with LEVIER.

*Refuse. Make of this refusal a gesture of love
and thus find the skin of one's hands softer.*

My hands are only half-open.²⁰

The woman – house – community connection



An Israeli soldier wearing a t-shirt. Photo: Yanai Yechiel.

In March 2009, a third image found its way next to the other two. It is a photograph featured with an article by Uri Blau, published in *Haaretz*²¹ following *Operation Cast Lead* conducted by Israel in the Gaza Strip in December 2008 and January 2009. The photograph shows an Israeli soldier standing, seen from behind, from buttocks to lower part of the head, so as to emphasize the illustration on this sniper's t-shirt: an oval target drawn around the image of a veiled, pregnant Palestinian woman holding a submachine gun. Printed below the target, these words in English: "1 shot 2 kills."

How many times, at events organized by LEVIER, have I looked at the persons present and noted, sometimes along with Devora and Johanne, sometimes with other collaborators or participants, that participation was almost exclusively composed of women? Troubled by this, we could not entirely explain the situation. Each of us indeed has some hypothesis about why this is so. Nevertheless, in my opinion, over the years we have not succeeded in understanding this situation nor in changing it. The same observations are to be made when it comes to the contents of this publication: it is mostly women who have written about their experiences here, and they, in turn, represent many other women, women with various levels of involvement in the collaborative creative projects and in the specific spaces where these collaborations occurred, or emerged from. Coinciding with this presence in the feminine, the profusion and diversity of the figures of the house found in this material and collaboration statements are just as remarkable: *houses* for immigrant women, for *homeless* women or

for young mothers, birthing *homes*; quest for a place appropriate for collaboration, militancy and/or creation; of a home (personal or professional), a space allowing freedom, empowerment or healing; places of exclusion, of marginalization or of hospitality; *maisons de la culture*, community centres, places for meeting and dialogue.

What light do the image worn by the sniper – the keeper of the territory – and the above observations about the presence and place of women (in the sense both of space and of stance) cast one upon the other in the context of this reflection about LEVIER's practice, and its artistic and political gestures? Together, that image and the woman-house-community link bring me back to a disturbingly beautiful book entitled *Women in a World at War*,²² by Québec poet Madeleine Gagnon, and to an observation by French feminist Benoîte Groulx in her preface to the book. In it, Madeleine Gagnon recounts her various encounters with women whose countries are at war, a journey she undertook with journalist Monique Durand, in an attempt to penetrate, "even in a very small way [...] the mystery of women's roles in relation to war." Gagnon wonders what women have to say about war, but also if "they have a stake in the death instinct in action," for, "if they, too, were not humble artisans of the death instinct in action, although in the background of the deadly conflicts, wouldn't they, in the time immemorial of war, have conceived powerful strategies for stopping the deaths of war, have conceived their sons differently and not reared them to be these little soldiers who dominate daughters, sisters and sometimes mothers?"

Before we go any further, it is useful here to note that Canada is currently a country at war. I would also refer to the military police documents on *domestic violence* recently made public upon the request of the Canadian press in compliance with the Access to Information Act: these documents "paint a picture of the tensions and conflicts that regularly break out among the military throughout the country" within their own *domestic* space, "gestures consultants attribute to multiple missions in Afghanistan."²³ Gagnon and Groulx ponder what they term "the great war of all time," the one that seems destined to women; a war that would also be private (or intimate) and *domestic* in the sense that it takes place within the space and economy of the household (understood here on different scales, familial or national, for example). The two writers also question the connection between centuries-old warfare and this primordial war, the one waged by men against women inside houses.

In her preface, Benoîte Groulx pinpoints "the oppression of one sex by the other [...] at the root of all violence, all war,"²⁴ then immediately goes on to critique the link often made between pacifism and feminism. She, like Gagnon after her, denounces the myth of women's pacifism, an image constructed around motherhood which, in her view, could be "simply one aspect of their exclusion from the public sphere" and from forms of power: here Groulx lists the religious, the political and the military in a Western cultural context. This exclusion, she adds, is precisely what could compel us to "retreat to the values associated with the home." Therefore, when and in what conditions do spaces (public or not) invested by women, or created by them, remain spaces that, paradoxically, serve the cohesion of a *dominant* culture and of *domination*, sometimes simply because they reproduce the separation upon which this culture is predicated or yet again, the forms of exclusion, of self-exclusion and retreat denounced by Groulx? In other words, to what extent is the *house* women dream of another manifestation of the "master's house," a kind of extension that can be seen as its opposite, even though these houses are mutually necessary

to one another? In what conditions do the spaces imagined or created by women – be it LEVIER or some of the other figures of the house featured in this publication – become matrices (I use the term deliberately) of transformation, individual and collective, but also of diverse cultural responses to the demands of inhabiting and coexisting?

*With regard to the symbolism of Abondance et partage,
I associated it with our project to save
the factory and to spread the idea of renovation, expansion and the creation
of a centre for developing creativity while saving Granby's industrial heritage.
It was about creating something for the community, while in reality,
the abundance was for me, I was the one who was experiencing it, since I received
a better knowledge of myself from the others. [...] Through that community adventure,
I learned the power of dream and fantasy. It was a creative, enriching adventure.
I was able to imagine the future of a building based on its past,
and it awakened in me the capacity to dream.
– Suzanne Paré,
from the interview concerning the project *Abondance et partage*
[Abundance and sharing], p.195*

The *art of siege warfare* targets a city's *outer walls*: "the breaching of the outer city wall signaled the destruction of the sovereignty of the city-state."²⁵ Modern urban warfare focuses instead on methods of transgressing limits, as Israeli architect Eyal Weizman, among others, describes in a study of Israel's architecture of occupation. He clearly establishes the link between those military practices and art practices such as (US-born) Gordon Matta-Clark's, or the manoeuvres and other methods elaborated by French theorist Guy Debord and the "Situationist International" from which they originate. Several emerging art practices inspired by these artists explicitly inscribe themselves into urban or *domestic* space (urban art, intervention art, furtive practices, swarming, diversion, manoeuvres, etc.) and in so doing, translate an extension of the territory of art by "transgressing" art's borders, or by "deterritorialization."²⁶ Hence these military practices and these forms of art both borrow some of their concepts from the same post-colonial (or neo-colonial?) and postmodern critical theories, as Weizman also points out. For example, he notes that "The reading list of some contemporary military institutions include works dating from around 1968 (in particular the writings of those theorists who have expanded the notion of space, such as Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Guy Debord), as well as more contemporary avant-garde writing [like Jacques Derrida's] on urbanism and architecture that proliferated widely throughout the 1990s and relied on post-colonial and post-structuralist theory."²⁷ Thus art (like culture) is thought and practiced by referring to the same language and concepts which, simultaneously, serve to develop military strategies of occupation and of *domestic* and urban warfare.

Other than this continuity and the mutual influence that necessarily sets in between differing cultural theories and practices belonging to the same "spirit of the times,"²⁸ including the continuities and inter-influences between artistic and military practices, and this despite the fact that there are sometimes important differences in ethical and political contexts, there is another aspect of Weizman's work that holds my attention here. Indeed, when he explains that the "military tactics consisting in smashing walls and breaking through them" are currently finding new expression and new means in the technologies making it possible "for soldiers to see, but also to shoot and to kill through the walls," he demonstrates that this imaging device operates like the ultrasound equipment used in, among other places, maternity wards. Even the three-dimensional image this system reproduces, the image of human bodies or "of the biological activity hidden behind the walls" of the *domestic* space is comparable, as he sees it, to the image of a foetus floating in a blurred abstract space (the solid elements disappear from the screen) while "the urban space virtually becomes as easily navigable as an ocean – or a video game."²⁹ In his analysis of the architecture of occupation (but is occupation not one of the expressions typical of our way of inhabiting: taking possession of a place, subjecting the environment, *dominating* the other?), Weizman is confirming what, in a way, the economies of exploitation³⁰ – mainly the enslavement of one human being by another – wars, *domestication* or patriarchy already claim: the boundary to be transgressed, "the limit par excellence [is] the outer wall of the *domestic* space."³¹

When it comes to the city or to *domesticity*, woman could potentially be both the spoils of war and its matrix. Her womb, (enemy) territory to be conquered or wherein to sow self-hatred,³² a weapon when, even pregnant, she girds her body with explosives (I am thinking of Chechen women). What women sometimes seem to gain from waging war alongside men, they lose in times of peace, as Groulx reminds us. Journalist Barbara Victor's analysis of *shahidas*³³ – Palestinian women-matrices of the nation "liberated" from their traditional role by Yasser Arafat, who coined the feminine form of the Arabic word *shahid* [martyr]³⁴ – demonstrates this in an extreme and exemplary way. According to Victor, the sense of exclusion

some Palestinian women feel within their own society could be a significant motivating factor influencing their wish to die as martyrs, a gesture which, according to her investigation, gives them back a “legitimate” place inside a project shared by the community and, at times, by family. This process perfectly reproduces the scapegoat mechanism as analyzed by René Girard, which we discussed above. For Victor, this sacrifice could even be one of the “ultimate forms of exploitation of women in the contemporary world.” Thus the death of these women does not seem to grant them equal value, no more than their lives. According to information collected by Victor, when it comes to the martyrdom of women, the family may receive only half the state pension awarded for a male martyr.³⁵

[...] if I owned my own house, for example, I would not be a victim of this stigma.
 – Tessa Margreff,
 interviewed in the video *Raising Mom*³⁶

On the sniper’s t-shirt, the pregnant woman is contained inside an oval-shaped target evoking female genitals, with its focus-matrix centred directly on the mother’s belly. Above the image is written, in Hebrew: *machloket tz'laim*. *Machloket*: a debate about the interpretation of the Torah, the sacred book of Judaism; and *tz'laim*: a sniper trained to aim at and hit a target. These words, translated with Devora’s help, likely refer to the sniper’s conflict: friend or enemy?³⁷ Even outside the military context, that is a relatively common way of posing the relationship to the other and, by extension, to dominant ethics that imposes the terms of choice: *one must choose* between killing and being killed. In a way this model brings us back to the life-and-death cycle and to a certain ecology, the ecology of the living who must kill in order to live. Are we not basically “world-eaters?”³⁸ However, this common circumstance of survival is aggravated whenever the culture favours or justifies the exploitation of humans by humans, like the one of animals or of habitat. Given this aggravation, there could not be a more cultural question than: *who to kill in order to live (better)?*

*However unintentional,
 there is a tendency amongst artists involved with community art
 to take a colonialist approach.*
*I can see how easy it is to assume the identity of the one who has the tools:
 in holding the tools, the artist wields a different level of power.*
The attitude is, “I have something you need.”
 – Sara Bessin,
 from the interview concerning the project *Raising Mom*, p. 176

The sniper’s choice appears under the target: *1 shot 2 kills*. A warrior slogan that could also be read *I shot to kill*. It even suggests that there is added value in killing a pregnant woman. But isn’t the fact of wearing such a target on one’s back the most merciless illustration that, ultimately, the cycle of violence is always self-destructive? It begins and ends in self-hatred and the ruin of the *house* – genocide, *domicide* and suicide: humans, furiously rising up against humans, living and *sharing* one and the same habitat.

Launched in 2008, LEVIER’s new initiative is called In Our Lifetime.
In Our Lifetime 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.*
 – Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon,
 What does LEVIER do?³⁹

In the context of a global capitalist liberal economy, the collusion of the corporate powers of the masters of the house appropriates and transforms the human habitat, multiplying spaces of exclusion (internal and external), of forced displacements and of marginalization (prison, camp, reservations, suburbs and other sites of banishment). This reveals a mode of human inhabiting distinguished by an ethics, an economy and an ecology⁴⁰ of separation and of *domination* where codependence and exploitation mark the relationship between one’s house and the other’s house; where humans live alternately, or all together, in the *big house* and the *slave quarter*,⁴¹ the camp and the house.⁴² How, then – other than by

seeking again to appropriate the “house” – to address the question of the continuity of the living, meaning the question of the relationship between culture and humans (and habitat)?

For example, in an essay entitled *Help Us to Divorce*,⁴³ dealing with the relationship between Israel and Palestine (linked, in this title, to conjugal ties), Israeli writer and essayist Amos Oz deplors the ignorance and indifference of each side concerning the other’s traumas. He also acknowledges the legitimacy of the “desire for home” in all refugees, exiles, deportees, victims of social and familial violence. “You no longer have to choose between pro-Israel or pro-Palestine,” he writes. “You have to be pro-peace.” Not choosing between friend and enemy, between one boundary of the Wall or another, unity of the desire for peace. Nonetheless, here is how Oz describes the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians: it is “not a civil war between two segments of the same population, or the same people, or the same culture. It is not an internal but an international conflict.” He adds: “Not a religious war, not a war of cultures, not a disagreement between two traditions, but simply a real-estate dispute over whose house this is.” Whose house is this? Doesn’t the fact of posing the problem this way add up to both reproducing and prolonging it?

Resonating here are Audre Lorde’s words in *Sister Outsider*, as well as her call for creativity and sisterhood, and the potential for change that women seem to carry. If indeed, as she writes, evoking, notably, the *domination* of the pro-slavery patriarchal system, the master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house:⁴⁴ “Sister outsider, what different tools do we need to create something else than another (master’s) house?”

*Standing on the platform, repeating this,
There will be no more waiting.*

*Deepen the need for a well-wrung floorcloth,
Wholly applied to loving from this place only.*

But never sing matins.

*Breath suspended ever since the burning before the voice.
For during that mid-night prayer
It happens that one believes,
make the gift of one’s faith.*

*Useless in the choir of nuns,
go back to pacing the ramparts.*

*Without taking a brown apple nor eating
it happens that one believes,
hearing oneself say here I am.*

*Let matins end,
Without walking to an encounter.⁴⁵*

Several years after writing the text cited above, the narrative of the contemplative woman and of the woman who walks, I am in the Carmel convent in Berlin. Compline, the last office of the day, according to the rules, takes place inside the cloister. Sister Nicola opens the gate; there is another woman — she will spend the night in the meditation hall. The office begins with a beautiful song, in a graver tone than the others. And a beautiful long moment’s silence. The entire day comes to rest. Some readings. More singing. Then the nuns rise and walk towards the *pietà* at the back of the crypt. Maria-Theresa signals, I go with them. In a semi-circle in front of the *pietà*, “the mother who brings death,”⁴⁶ for the last song, twelve Carmelites, the other woman, and myself not singing. After the office, crossing the courtyard of the Carmel again, I hear birds singing and feel I am retracing my own steps.

In November 2008, at Atwater métro station in Montréal, gathering place of many urban nomad Inuit, a song circle forms at the invitation of Devora Neumark and Deborah Margo, *Why Should We Cry? Lamentations in a Winter Garden*.⁴⁷ Moe Clarke (Métis), Lisa Gagné (Saulteaux) and Émilie Monnet (Anishinabe) lead the learning of three songs: a *call and response* featuring women’s voices calling out to each other from one mountain to another while the hunters are away; a song for Mother Earth, composed by Lisa after her mother’s death; and a *moon song*, a traditional women’s healing song. I find a voice inside myself to join the circle.

I would like to thank Devora Neumark and Johanne Chagnon for commenting on the various versions of this article, and Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood for the translation into English from the original French.

NOTES

1. See my participation in *Ethics? Norms? Questioning Community Arts Practices*, p. 51, and my text, *Community Art, or Finding the Way Back Home?* written following that event, pp. 52–61.
2. Thank you to Jessica Gagnon, MA candidate in “Sciences de l’architecture” at Université Laval, for her invitation to that forum.
3. I first heard Sister Maria-Theresia in a film by Harriet Wichin, *Silent Witness / Les gardiens du silence* (Montréal, Wichin/York Film, videocassette, sound, colour, 1994, 74 mins). She was talking about the Carmelite nuns’ presence in a cloister located in “a place of horror and guilt.” She had lived in the Karmel convent of Dachau and now lives in Berlin, close to the former prison of Plötzensee, where resistance fighters were executed during World War II. In the film she was talking about the questions raised by the nuns’ presence in that community. Listening to her talk, I felt that the connections between the Carmel and art were being translated in a concrete way through the words uttered from inside the cloister. That is what first took me to Berlin and to the Karmel Regina Martyrum, where I have since returned.
4. See also the text by Caroline Alexander Stevens, “How Shall I Live?,” pp. 276–289.
5. *La Clôture et la faille* (unpublished), Montréal, Université du Québec à Montréal, doctoral thesis, 2001. Several parts or partial versions of that essay, elements of which I have also used here, have been published in, among other publications, *Liberté, Ethica and Trois*.
6. This should be housing / *Le temps de la maison est passé* receives support from Collège de Maisonneuve and from the Fonds de recherche sur la société et la culture in the context of the activities conducted by l’Équipe de recherche sur l’imaginaire contemporain, Centre Figura, Université du Québec à Montréal. The present article refers to material being used in an essay-in-progress, *Le coin rouge: l’angle de beauté* (working title; The red corner: the angle of beauty), which will give an account of this cycle of research-creation.
7. Italics will emphasize the root dom- (house) throughout this article.
8. See note 1. See also my participation in the *Community Art Training and Exchange Program* (2004), p. 66, the *Community Art Video Documentary Training and Exchange Program*, pp. 100–101 and in the training and exchange program, *Community Art: Imagination, Collaboration and Ethics*, p. 121. I acted as collaborating editor for this book.
9. See www.engrenagenoir.ca/blog/ce-que-fait-levier.
10. All the quoted sections presented in this indented form are excerpted from the current publication.
11. About the relationship between house and book, see, among others, “L’intérieur est l’asile où l’art se réfugie,” also part of the cycle of works titled *This should be housing / Le temps de la maison est passé*. See brocku.ca/brockreview/index.php/voixplurielles/article/view/369.
12. Note that during LEVIER’s first brainstorming session, when the question came up about the administration of funds and who they should be awarded to, Kim Anderson had already suggested to “Give the money to the communities, they know who their artists are.”
13. The expression is from Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The House of the Dead* (1862) (also published as *Notes from the Dead House and Memoirs from the House of the Dead*). The first chapter, which covers Dostoyevsky’s years in a Siberian prison, opens with a description of the prison from inside its walls and closes with an act of generosity: the gift of a kopek to a prisoner. That gesture represents a rare crossing of the boundaries of that world-apart which nonetheless (re)structures itself according to the model of that other world, the world of the civil house, of which prison is the condition of possibility and that, in a sense, it protects.
14. See my text *Community Art, or Finding the Way Back Home?*, pp. 52–61.
15. I am referring here to the work of French philosopher René Girard and of German theorist Heiner Mühlmann: René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: Continuum, 2008 [2004]); René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987 [1983]); Heiner Mühlmann, *MSC Maximal Stress Cooperation: The Driving Force of Cultures* (Wien: SpringerWienNewYork, 2005), 71 p.
16. René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: Continuum, 2008 [2004]).
17. René Girard (see note 16).
18. “Everything indeed occurs as if over there [in the world of houses, as opposed to here, the camp] as though there were species – more specifically as though belonging to the species were not a certainty, as if it were possible to enter and exit [...] the division into races or into classes being the canon of the species and entertaining the ever-ready axiom, the ultimate line of defense: ‘Those people are not like us.’” Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, translated by Jeffrey Haight and Annie Mahler (Vermont: Marlboro Press, 1992 [1947]).
19. “Research and teaching: an ambidextrous practice, or self-portrait of a teacher-researcher,” in *Pédagogie collégiale*, special issue “Histoire de la recherche au collégial,” Éd. Sébastien Piché, 22:4, Summer 2009, p. 28–32. Available on-line at www.aqpc.qc.ca/en/research-and-teaching-ambidextrous-practice-or-self-portrait-teacher-researcher.
20. Excerpt from my still-untitled abandoned text, the narrative of the contemplative and the walker, one woman in expectation of the other. The title of this text, *La brûlure avant la voix*, is also from that unpublished fiction (1992).
21. “Dead Palestinian Babies and Bombed Mosques – IDF Fashion 2009,” article by Uri Blau, March 20, 2009 available on-line at www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1072466.html. Page consulted on March 23, 2009. The article is no longer accessible via that URL link but has been reproduced on several websites where it can still be consulted.
22. Madeleine Gagnon, *Women in a World At War*, translated by Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2004 [2000]), p. 17.
23. See “La violence conjugale fait des ravages dans l’armée”, *Le Devoir* (Montréal), July 19, 2010.
24. Benoîte Groulx in Madeleine Gagnon, pp. 6–7 (see note 22). Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in the remainder of this paragraph are taken from those pages. According to Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, this social violence against women is inscribed in the French grammatical system of gender identification: “The grammatical rule, which assumes that the masculine form overrules that of the feminine is not the result of chance, nor the expression of a natural order. Rather, it reflects the situation of socioeconomic, political, legal and symbolic inferiority of women. [...] French is not only anti-democratic (the majority does not prevail) but fundamentally unfair.” Freely translated from *Re-Belle et Infidèle: La traduction comme pratique de réécriture au féminin / The Body Bilingual: Translation as a Rewriting in the Feminine* (Montréal: Les Éditions du remue-ménage, Toronto: Women’s Press, 1991), pp. 14–15.
25. Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel’s Architecture of Occupation* (London/New York: Verso, 2007), Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in the remainder of this paragraph are taken from this book.
26. See for example: Paul Ardenne, *Un art contextuel: Création artistique en milieu urbain, en situation, d’intervention, de participation* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), Nathalie Heinrich, *Le*

- triple jeu de l'art contemporain : Sociologie des arts plastiques (Paris: Minuit, coll. Paradoxe, 1998).
27. Eyal Weizman, p. 187 (see note 25).
 28. This continuity recalls the way in which art and artistic activity are reintegrated in the life of the community under the Third Reich by the Nazis' use of art. Indeed, the Reich gives art back a function that is barely different from the one claimed by some European art movements since the 19th century, a function founded on a concept of art not entirely unlike the ideas and the art of its time. It is, among other things, in their common acknowledgement of the power and the potentialities of art that the relationship to art under national-socialism entertains a rather troubling proximity with the collectivist movements of historical avant-gardes, as well as with modernist artistic ideology.
 29. Note that the Israeli government likes to present this technological material—developed essentially for military purposes by Israeli research and development firms—as technological tools designed to preserve and save human lives in situations of humanitarian catastrophe such as the events of January 12, 2010, in Haiti. Canada and the United States are currently clients of these “security” technologies and of the various “protection” and surveillance methods developed by Israel.
 30. See, including on LEVIER' site, the documentation linked to the training and exchange program that Devora and I co-animated, entitled *How Many Slaves Do You Own? Art and the Economies of Exploitation, Past and Present*, held on March 12, 13 and 14, 2010, at the MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels)—Meena Murugesan, Project Coordinator.
 31. “In this context the transgression of domestic boundaries must be understood as the very manifestation of state repression,” in Eyal Weizman, p. 210 (see note 25).
 32. See *War BABIES... nés de la HAINE*, documentary by Raymonde Provencher, produced by Macumba International Inc., in collaboration with Télé-Québec, TV5 and the National Film Board of Canada, 2002, approx. 92 mins.
 33. Barbara Victor, *Army of Roses: Inside the World of Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers*, (London: Robinson, 2004).
 34. Speech delivered by Arafat in Ramallah on the morning of January 27, 2002, and quoted by Victor: “Shahida, shahida, all the way to Jerusalem [...]” Victor, p. 18 (see note 33). That very afternoon, Wafa Idris, a 26-year-old Palestinian, carried out a suicide bombing in Jaffa Street in Jerusalem. She is considered the first Palestinian woman martyr.
 35. Barbara Victor, p. 264 and p. 123 (see note 33).
 36. See this video in the compilation, *Documenting Collaboration*, inserted in the centre of this publication.
 37. Irish writer Liam O'Flaherty's short story *The Sniper* (1923) describes a similar conflict: at the end of the story, the sniper realizes he has just killed his own brother.
 38. Valère Novarina, *Devant la parole* (Paris: P.O.L. 1999), p. 13.
 39. See www.engrenagenoir.ca/blog/en/ce-que-fait-levier.
 40. Note that the three terms are, in a sense, related to the house or to inhabiting/dwelling: *êthos*, meaning lair or dwelling place; “economy,” from *oikos nomos*, the law of the house; and *oikos logos*, “ecology,” dealing with the basic relationship between culture and human habitat.
 41. See Chapter 3, “The ‘big house’ and the ‘slave quarters,’” in Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the American Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: MIT Press, 1981).
 42. It is, among other things, by asserting the unity of the categories “camp” and “house,” and therefore the unity of the systems of exploitation of humans by humans, that Robert Antelme's thinking in *The Human Race* (see note 18), upholds the impossibility of separating us and them, and according to me designates the house as domination.
 43. Amos Oz, *Help Us to Divorce. Israel and Palestine: Between Right and Right* (London: Vintage, 2004).
 44. I am paraphrasing here the title of Audre Lorde's essay, “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.” I am also referring to the following excerpt, taken from another essay in the same anthology: “For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.” (*My italics*), *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press Feminist Series, 2007 [1984]).
 45. Excerpted from my still-untitled abandoned text, the narrative of the contemplative woman and of the woman who walks (unpublished, 1992).
 46. I am borrowing this expression from Angela B. Moorjani, in “Sacrifice, Mourning and Reparation: Käthe Kollwitz,” in *Aesthetics of Loss and Lessness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 107–121. The *pietà*, or figure of the mother with dead child, is prominent in the work of German artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) and this is true much before the First World War, as is the theme of sacrifice and regeneration. However, Moorjani shows that the theme loses its relevance as the artist begins to question the sacrificial credo, the powerful ideology of sacrifice armed with superior values typical of its era and tradition. At the beginning of the First War, Kollwitz—torn between her concern for the life of her sons and her respect for the spirit of sacrifice, expressed in the religious and social as well as artistic realms—considers sacrifice a strength, a gesture that puts the individual in the service of a cause, be it social, national or revolutionary. But in 1914, the death, in battle, of one of her sons, launches her into a lengthy and profound questioning of this mystique of sacrifice. Moorjani even talks of a “conversion to pacifism” in Kollwitz, whose commitment from then on will translate as an encouragement to resist the sacrificial ideology.
 47. This was one of many singing lessons given between the fall equinox and the winter solstice by various people invited because they had personally lived forced displacements, or experienced them via their family history. These lessons were part of the public event *Why Should We Cry? Lamentations in a Winter Garden*, a project by Devora Neumark and Deborah Margo, within the programming of *Dis/location: projet d'articulation urbaine, phase 3* (in Cabot Square) by DARE-DARE Centre de diffusion d'art multidisciplinaire de Montréal, September 21 to December 21, 2008.