

Exploding into action

Artists use public spaces to address social issues

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

In the end, ours is the humble work of two citizens. What will ultimately change the world is individual action multiplied exponentially on a planetary scale. Each of us needs to take responsibility. Multinationals allocate vast sums of money to advertising in order to convince us, one at a time, to buy their products. That same strategy can be harnessed by the artist to convince people and generate momentum for change. Art is a link in the chain of public opinion, in the urban fabric, in Culture. It contributes to change by fueling a way of thinking, of being.

From the publication ATSA: When Art Takes Action, Page 17.

Today's article is devoted to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who claimed on the news this week that "ordinary" citizen's did not want to subsidize "a bunch of people ... at a rich gala." What is culture to Harper – the Oscars?

Instead of looking longingly to the south, the Montreal-based ATSA (Action Terroriste Socialement Acceptable), founded by Annie Roy and Pierre Allard, have created politically and socially engaged works in public spaces around our own city to raise awareness of poverty, the environment and our history.

On Thursday, they are opening a store called Change, where all of their artistic interventions will be gathered for the first time under one roof. They are also launching a bilingual publication, titled ATSA: When Art Takes Action, containing colour photographs, analytical texts and information about the topics that generated each of their projects.

I had a chance to speak with Roy this week.

How did ATSA start?

First Pierre and I met, and fell in love, and we felt we could do anything. I was more of a dancer, Pierre was a visual artist and an art director in cinema. Cinema is a medium where anything is possible – spring can be made into winter – so he had all these contacts to make things possible in the street.

ATSA started in 1997. Our first action was inspired by indignation over what we heard in the news. The Maison du Père, a refuge for homeless people, urgently needed 107 pairs of socks per day, and right after that, (the news report) said that Canadian banks were making record billions of dollars in profits. When we heard in the news this gap between rich and poor, it generated the conception of the Sock Bank (La Banque à Bas).

At the same time there was an exhibit called De fugue et de passion, talking about up-and-coming Quebec art at the Musée d'art contemporain (de Montréal) and there was not one piece of public art.

So we thought: We are going to make them one outside. So we came



LUC SÉNÉCAL COURTESY OF ATSA

La Banque à Bas was a public art project set up outside the Musée d'art contemporain in 1997 to benefit the homeless.

up with the strategy of putting a structure illegally in front of the museum. That is also why the word terrorist is used in our name. We were putting this thing that was going to explode into the public space. It is art, not a real bomb but a conceptual, symbolic bomb. (Our action) was heavily publicized – a combative action, but a socially acceptable one.

Were you forced to remove the illegal structure?

The cause was just, plus there had been a lot of media coverage on it, so we stayed there for three months nourishing the bank with socks.

Our next project, well, then I was pregnant, which is a big creation. Then it was the "refugee camp" (that we set up) in 1998 with the armed

forces for the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

(For one week, these camps over the past 10 years have brought warmth and joy to the homeless. Hundreds of artists and volunteers, including some of Montreal's most celebrated chefs, have helped make the "State of Emergency" a reality. From its inception, it has overcome many challenges in order to exist. This year it runs Nov. 26 to 30 at Place Émilie Gamelin on Berri St., just north of Ste. Catherine St.)

So step-by-step, indignation-by-indignation, we managed to make projects. And now we are recycling ourselves in a store. It is a temporary one; for us, it is an art intervention. It is using the commercial space as a space of discussion. We have done

big interventions in the street, but they are ephemeral. So revisiting them with the store is a way to keep talking about poverty, history and the environment.

The store's name, Change, is a play on words. The change in your pockets, but also we are tired of talking about it, lets do it! Go! Change!

ATSA invites the public to the grand opening of its new store, Change, the launch of its new publication ATSA: When Art Takes Action and to an evening fair, Thursday at 6 p.m., 4351 St. Laurent Blvd. Change is open until Dec. 20. For more information, call 514-563-1382 (starting Thursday) or visit www.atsa.qc.ca.

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