

# «Documents d'artistes visits Artex»

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This summer, Artex welcomed the Marseilles-based group Documents d'artistes to Montreal for a series of special activities that ran during the second week of June. Chief among these endeavours were professional working sessions between the staff of our respective institutions, an exhibition held at a nearby artist-run centre, and public presentations that reflected upon the complex relationships between documentation and research as well as artistic and curatorial practices. François Dion, Director of Artex and coordinator of this event hoped that an examination of Documents d'artistes' work would help us to "reflect on our own activities within our community," and so "we have set out, in a spirit of dialogue, to share the competencies we have in common and to do so in such a way that the public can get involved in the process."<sup>1</sup>

Documents d'artistes is a non-profit organization that was founded in 1999 by Christine Finizio and Marceline Matheron in order to highlight the production of contemporary artists in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) region of France. In the following year, they were joined by Olivier Baudevin, who became the webmaster for their website ([www.documentsdartistes.org](http://www.documentsdartistes.org)). Although Documents d'artistes and Artex are both dedicated to the collection, organization, and dissemination of information pertaining to visual art practices; the format, size, and scope of our two collections differ in significant ways. Documents d'artistes' collection is almost entirely virtual in nature. It is accessible through their website database that consists of some 150 digital artist files, all of which promote the work of artists in the PACA region. Artex's largely paper-based collection comprises over 17,000 catalogued publications, 6,500 artist files and some 1,300 organizational files of various types.<sup>2</sup> Documents d'artistes' collecting practices are selective, contemporary, and reflect their regional mandate, whereas Artex strives to build an exhaustive collection of Canadian visual arts documentation from 1965 to the present day. The highly focused nature of Documents d'artistes' collection has enabled the Marseilles group to devote much of their energies towards the development of an information-rich electronic resource in collaboration with professional artists from the PACA region.

Earlier this year, Documents d'artistes established its own information centre so our three visitors were especially interested in learning how we organize our physical resources and make them accessible to researchers. Conversely, the staff at Artex wanted to learn more about the collaborative approaches that our colleagues take towards the creation of artist files as well as the strategies they employ to develop this collection. During the course of our first encounter we discussed, among other things, the processes through which Documents d'artistes selects its artists.

Submissions are received and reviewed on a yearly basis, and these are presented by the coordinators to a committee of six to eight specialists from the contemporary art field. Committee members include art critics, curators, art historians, professors, artists, and collectors. Selected artists then work closely with Baudevin to develop their individualized artist file – a process that can take anywhere from a single day to six months, depending on the technical specifications required by each artist.

A quick survey of the Documents d'artistes website shows that the participating artists work in a range of disciplines, although each artist's file is typically broken down into three standard sections: bibliography, artist's statement, and works (visual or multimedia documentation). The complexity of the artists' files and their content is determined by the artists themselves, although Finizio, Matheron, and Baudevin provide editorial advice and technical support in order to maintain the overall intellectual and professional integrity of the website. This working relationship between the coordinators and the participating artists has led to a unique collection of files that is rigorous in terms of its content, but not necessarily rigid in style. In some instances, the dossiers are playfully unconventional as they blur the boundaries between art and documentation.

Our first working session also touched upon the organization of electronic artist files versus paper-based ones, the effectiveness of websites as research tools, and the inherent demands of maintaining these resources. The goal of our second encounter was to reflect upon each organizations' place within its respective communities. A number of questions that pertain to the improvement of public service and outreach were raised by both groups, but we also acknowledged the difficulties in gauging the impact of our efforts on our clientele. We also talked about the differences between funding sources in Canada and France, employment opportunities for artists living in each country, and the network of artist-run centres in Canada.

Although our working sessions took place "behind closed doors" on the premises of Artex, the more public-oriented activities that made up the Artex/ Documents d'artistes event were held at Galerie Optica in the nearby Belgo Building.<sup>3</sup> This included a four-day exhibition that showcased a wide array of Documents d'artistes materials including posters, artists' books, videos, catalogues, and related ephemera – all arranged in a dispersed fashion throughout the gallery. This non-linear installation encouraged visitors to approach the various documents according to their own predilections. Visitors could also consult printed copies of the artists' files and navigate the Documents d'artistes website, which was made accessible in the gallery through the

use of a video projector and an internet connection. The exhibition also featured the work of one of the members of Documents d'artistes, Anne Pesce, whose entrancing video of rolling landscapes entitled *Island* (2004) was projected onto one of the walls of a secondary space adjoining the main gallery. Finizio, Matheron, and Baudevin were also on hand during the opening hours of the exhibition to meet the public, discuss the work of their organization, and answer any questions about the documents on display. Their role as animators greatly contributed to the success of this exhibition.

The third component of our project involved a series of talks that took place at Optica on three consecutive evenings during the week of the exhibition. Two Montreal-based curators and one visiting artist were invited to speak about the importance of documentation and research in relation to their own curatorial or artistic practices. The first speaker was Jean-Claude Rochefort, an art critic and curator who has conducted extensive research on the work of artist Raymonde April and who curated an exhibition of her art in 2004. Rochefort spoke about the vital role that the internet has assumed in his own study and interpretation of April's production; and he illustrated this point by giving a virtual tour of the artist's work on a website project he developed with Vox: centre de l'image contemporaine ([www.voxphoto.com](http://www.voxphoto.com)). Rochefort's interest in presenting April's art in this manner was marked by a curiosity in seeing how her photo-based oeuvre would be experienced differently in a digital format.

French artist Sandrine Raquin talked about her artistic production in the second presentation, and she referred to its dissemination through exhibitions, public commissions, and the internet. Raquin's work encompasses painting, drawing, photography, video, and public art. It refers to systems of signs inspired by graphic representations such as charts, maps, and graphs; although the artist transforms these mundane sources in untraditional and unexpected ways. Raquin noted how the staff of Documents d'artistes proved to be invaluable when it came time to organize her production into digital and multimedia-based formats, thus making it accessible to a broad, internet-using audience.

Art historian and independent curator Marie Fraser was the final presenter in this series of talks. She spoke at length of certain curatorial approaches that distinguish European curators from their North American counterparts. By discussing her first hand experience in organizing exhibitions in Canada and abroad, we became aware that her particular interests lie in the areas of narrative and relational art, public and private spaces, memory, and identity. Fraser also talked about the ways in which she researches exhibitions, how this research develops into published texts, and how she builds close professional relationships with the artists she curates.

This final point, that of the meaningful connections made between art professionals from different disciplines echoes a sentiment that ran throughout the three presentations. It was also a theme that was touched upon by the coordinators of Documents

d'artistes, whose work with selection committees and the artists of the PACA region have led to highly rewarding experiences. Our own professional working sessions also demonstrated how two related but distinct organizations can mutually benefit from raising questions about collection development, research, and documentation. This critical dialogue between Artexpte and Documents d'artistes has not concluded with the end of our week-long activities. Rather, it remains an open-ended conversation, one that will hopefully be continued in Marseilles in the coming year.

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1 François Dion, "Artexpte invite / hosts Documents d'artistes." Artexpte info 6 (mai 2005).

2 Artexpte's bibliographic catalogue is accessible via the internet at [www.artexpte.ca](http://www.artexpte.ca)

3 For more details regarding these activities, visit the gallery's website at [www.optica.ca](http://www.optica.ca)