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The House That Refused To Become A Parking Lot

Malcolm Reid

In 1969, I moved to Québec City to become Québec correspondent for the Globe and Mail. My wife Réjeanne is Québécoise, but the old city was going to be new for both of us, for she'd lived all her life in the Montréal area.

At first the parliamentary gang was our gang, especially those from the English media. But bit by bit we got into Québec. The decisive event was when we moved to a neighbourhood called Saint-Jean-Baptiste outside the walls and our little girl Joëlle was born at the Hôtel-Dieu.

In that first year as a father, I amused myself by painting a mural on the tin siding of our back porch. It was a happy time. Yet we also lived the October Crisis there. Friends came to our apartment from jail to tell us what was going on.

I'd largely forgotten my mural since quitting the Globe and moving to a house a couple of blocks away. Then it came back to me, in this way.

I was visiting a young man named Richard Couture to encourage him to keep up his fight against the demolition of his house by the hotel developer Marcel Beaulieu. Beaulieu said he needed it to provide parking and boutique space for his hotel, which he had established in this non-tourist part of Québec by slipping around zoning laws. As I looked out the win-

dow of Richard's kitchen, I saw the wall I'd painted the decade before, and it too was part of the block of houses acquired by Beaulieu.

Before I'd finished my beer, I'd tossed out to Richard the idea of an exhibition, a festival of painting, drawing and sculpture by artists of the neighbourhood, Dix ans de luttes, dix ans d'art. Richard liked the idea and the show took place in June 1988.

Works ranged from abstract sculptures to folksy landscapes. The theme that kept coming back was The City. Artists came, activists came, business people came, punks came.

As of early 1989, Richard's apartment on the Côte Sainte-Geneviève has still not been demolished. And the fight has spread to a sector up the hill called the Parc Berthelot and down the old road into lowertown, the Côte d'Abraham. There, the high-rise development in prospect is called La Grande Place.

Here is a conversation I had with another of the artists who exhibited in June, Line Tremblay. (Line and I recorded our words as we walked the neighbourhood to Richard's place, which might, I suppose, be called La Petite Place.)

Back in the cold of February, I'd seen in my mural a happy man going fishing with his dog. There was a pond, and in the pond I'd painted, under the influence of my contemporaries John, Paul, George and Ringo, the yellow periscope of a Yellow Submarine.

And hey — this winter, Richard had heat in his kitchen!

Malcolm Reid: Line, when I arrived in Saint-Jean-Baptiste in 1969, the people's movements were just starting. It was mainly a working-class quarter in those days. When did you arrive in the neighbourhood?

Line Tremblay: Saint-Jean Baptiste? Well, I'd put it at 17 years ago.

MR: And what were you looking for in a neighbourhood like this?

LT: Refuge! I was looking for refuge.

MR: Why choose this corner of town for a refuge?

LT: Simply because there are many people here who resemble me.

MR: Artists? Bohemians? Other people in the counter-culture?

LT: Exactly.

MR: I have the feeling that all that was coming when I discovered the neighbourhood, but that it wasn't yet a fact. There was a thing called "Opération Soleil" — look, there's a courtyard door they painted with a sun, after they'd cleaned up the yard. My impression was that the area would remain half counter-cultural and half working-class forever. I wonder if that's possible... but give me your idea on this. The meeting between social struggles and art, the mixture that was present in *Dix ans de luttes, dix ans d'art*, do you think of that as something that's present in all eras? Do you think artistic creation and social revolt have something which always brings them together? Is it chance? Is it history? Is it something that pops up only occasionally?

LT: I don't know...

MR: When you arrived in this neigh-

bourhood for you? A
LT: It was never been
MR: For m gone toge educated deal with at the sam me to the paintings absorbing at differen the twenti well, great been able of art and work, my or whethe ity in the move tow disconten able to the LT: Yes, th central. It's always thi building a work and committed know I'm making th is always v do is ask ti new words an outside that I don from some inequality. chemical. answer you in my min ist's art... artists who their work, anybody, a That's my where (it's some succe my work a rate any ro something speech, a d be treated it is put un not touch, silence, a la space... We me to have mummified you can th which is pe almost free there are w work and w with them? the questio kind of wor politicized isn't politica being politi talks to itse cation, we'l forms and p to populari body, even mean? Whe

bourhood, which of the two counted most for you? Art, or social action?

LT: It was always art that I... No... really I've never been able to separate the two!

MR: For me, I guess the two have always gone together for a simple reason. I was educated that way. I was taught we had to deal with politics and social justice... but at the same time, my parents would take me to the National Gallery. I'd see the paintings of the Group of Seven. I was absorbing the idea that the paintings done at different points in history — especially the twenties, the time of Modern! — were, well, great things of life. What I've never been able to tell is whether this marrying of art and struggle was simply my will at work, my wishing them to come together, or whether there was a conjuncture, a reality in the nature of art itself that made it move towards social issues. Are artists a discontented group, perhaps, more available to the left than to the right?

LT: Yes, that's a very good question. It's central. It's close to the heart of what I'm always thinking about. I'm at work slowly building a kind of ethic of art. I look at a work and I try to see if it's the work of a committed hand, or a non-committed hand. I know I'm perhaps caricaturing things, making them too simple. But the question is always working on me. All I can really do is ask the same question over again, in new words. For me, it is visceral. It's not an outside force that makes me draw. It's that I don't want to be subject to orders from somewhere. I don't want to live in inequality. The need to draw is in me, it's chemical. It's very chemical. How can I answer you on this? It isn't all sorted out in my mind. I'm trying to sort it out. Artists' art... But you know, there are so many artists who succeed, who manage to sell their work, and who sell it to anybody. To anybody, any old way, they don't care. That's my fear, a fear I have to the point where (it's crazy to say this) I fear finding some success, because I don't want to sell my work any old way, to anyone, to decorate any room. I couldn't! Art isn't just something decorative. It's a form of speech, a declaration. Art seems to me to be treated as something prehistoric when it is put under glass, when it is labeled "do not touch," when it is kept in an area of silence, a lawyer's office, a nothing space... Works treated that way seem to me to have been killed, to have been mummified. Perhaps I'm in love with art you can throw away, art you consume, art which is popular, widespread, accessible, almost free of charge. Yet I admit that there are works which take months of work and which are superb. What to do with them? I'm perhaps getting away from the question, but how do you link that kind of work with a commitment, with a politicized life, or maybe even a life that isn't politicized, but... but then, everything being political... I don't know, but art that talks to itself in a corner... we'll need education, we'll need linkages between art forms and people. We'll need to find ways to popularize. We'll need to invite everybody, even our aunts, you know what I mean? When I was in art at university, in

my first course, early in the morning, a guru of the faculty said: "Show this to Mrs. Côté or Mrs. Gagnon, and of course they won't understand, we can't ask them to understand." That was maybe five years ago, it hurt me. I don't want to make an artistic work that has contempt for people, yet at the same time the artist is isolated from the world. And the world is commitment.

MR: I know that for me, the great way of solving that one in my head is a liking for print.

LT: Yes! That's it.

MR: I have an idea that that is why you've worked as a graphic artist.

LT: Yes, and that's why I like working on a newspaper.

MR: It seems to me it makes you an artist who has lived one of the essential experiences in art in the modern world. Even when the great, famous painters whose works sell for millions, or the artists who are avant-garde and whose works don't sell, are finally present in society, it is often through art books, reproductions, posters, and calendars. I said to myself: Much of visual art's presence among us is through print, even when, officially, these are fine artists, not graphic artists. And so for me, to bring together my desire to do something social and my desire to enjoy the pure pleasure of line and colour, I make —

LT: Printed matter!

MR: Yes, especially a magazine page. Or a poster. I know that my teenaged daughter Joëlle especially likes the greeting cards you made a few years ago. For the beauty of the drawings, the funny tenderness of the faces, but also because they are cards, they're part of her world. And in *Dix ans de lutttes, dix ans d'art*, didn't we have something of that in that the whole house was a magazine, whose rooms you leafed through?

LT: Yes!

MR: The rooms of the house were...

LT: Public. They were public, out amid the public like a newspaper, because events were taking place in them all through our exhibition. Meetings of committees, meetings over urban issues, meetings with owners and tenants. It was like a TV news-cast, there were kids, people taking care of kids and day care centres bringing in their kids to see the show...

MR: It was a bit like *dazibao*, the public poster-board in China a few years back, where all sorts of viewpoints were pasted up. But a *dazibao* that was full of festive spirit.

LT: Exactly, all of that was happening, all through the two weeks.

MR: And if we never once used the fashionable art word *performance* perhaps we were in a still earlier form called the party. The basic bash.

LT(laughing): Yes!

MR: And music! I was astounded at how many musicians turned up.

LT: Ah! That's the essential element.

MR: I kept panicking. No one wanted to say yes when I tried to set up music, but when the evening came, they just showed up.

LT: Hey, this quarter is full of musicians.

MR: The quarter is full of musicians, and they don't have the places they need to play in. And the occasions. Like us, with our visuals. We lack walls. That's what made me want to organize this thing! I looked at Richard's walls — so high, so empty, so white, so gray. High, high ceilings, square metres and square metres of space, all with nothing on it. And me with my dozens of collages at my place, stashed away, and all my friends with their works stashed away. So I said to myself: Richard has a house problem. And we have a wall problem. If we want to put our colours up on his walls, maybe we have to get involved in his problem with his house.

LT: Aha!

MR: Michel Saint-Onge, a sculptor who joined us halfway through *Dix ans de lutttes, dix ans d'art*, told me he thought we'd had a surprising impact on people in the neighbourhood, arts people and other people. That encouraged me.

LT: It encourages me, too. It gives me a strong desire to organize another event like that one.

MR: Yes, and to create spaces for the kinds of meetings of different clans that we hope for. Create spaces for them even if we aren't yet sure they're inevitable. At least we know we desire the clans to meet.

LT: Yes. Simply wishing for it is already something.

MR: And it's a struggle just to get people to build the base for new kinds of art. Here in Saint-Jean-Baptiste, we are less an "art" neighbourhood than they are in the Old Port; we're more a "save-this-house-from-demolition" kind of neighbourhood. Yet we're really better able to group ourselves than other artists, because we have all that neighbourhood experience with co-ops and citizen's committees...

LT: The kind of event I'd push for would be this kind: you go to it. The children leave the day care centre and go to it. The parents go to pick up their children at it. While they're there, they take it in. And then the shop-keeper that we always buy from hears us talking about it. At the end of the day he locks up and goes to it. It's formidable to organize something like that, an event that gets into everyone's life, children's lives, grandmothers' lives, everybody's lives. That's the important thing.

MR: Isn't there an element here of the very artistic, and also very political, Québec of the 1960s and 70s?

LT: Well, I don't like the idea of going back to something...

MR: I see what you mean. It's okay to preserve something we love. But let's make it work for the future, too.

LT: Precisely. It's something new, too.

MR: Right, and there are kids coming along who weren't even born when Charlebois and Mouffe sang that old song *Miss Pepsi*, about the girl who practised tap dancing and won all the contests:

I won them all

But where did it get me?

Malcolm Reid's column is a regular feature in *Border/Lines*.