



AFFRONTS TO INERTIA: ATSA'S STAGED ENCOUNTERS

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ABSTRACT In 1998, when the Montreal-based collective ATSA declared a state of emergency and held its first edition of *État d'Urgence* (*State of Emergency*), a socially engaged and temporary public art project seeking to call attention to the state of homelessness in downtown Montreal and of citizens around the world forced to exile because of wars or political instability, it did not anticipate that this project would unfold over the course of two decades. However, the recurrent need to remind the authorities and the public of this persistent issue, as well as the positive impact that the project had, led the artists to hold an edition of this project almost every year. Since Pierre Allard and Annie Roy founded ATSA in 1997, one of the main aims of their public interventions has been to stage encounters between complete strangers or between groups of people that do not necessarily talk to one another, such as homeless people and city representatives. By focusing on two of the collective's long-term projects, namely *State of Emergency* (1998–2017) and *While Having Soup* (2015–present), this paper examines the strategies employed by the artists to stage encounters and how they used the rallying potential of art to activate public spaces and to ensure that they remain open to free expression and democracy. This paper also discusses the material and immaterial traces left by these public interventions.

Introduction

In 1998, the year marking the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Montreal-based collective ATSA declared a state of emergency and presented for the first time its eponymous project *État d'Urgence* (*State of Emergency*).¹ Even though the artists did not have the legal power to adopt such temporary measures, they used artistic creativity and imagination in order to rattle the cage and remind the authorities, citizens, and whoever might listen that our society is failing to help people living on its margins. Described as an 'urban refugee camp', *State of Emergency* was a *mise en scène* that intended to raise awareness of the situation of homeless people in Montreal, and of citizens around the world who were driven into exile for political reasons (ATSA 1998). When Pierre Allard (1964–2018) and Annie Roy (b.1968), co-founders of ATSA, designed this project at the end of the 20th century, they had not anticipated that its course would spread over 20 years.

In this paper, after a brief introduction to ATSA² and socially engaged art, I examine the act of making and

the collaborations established in two of the collective's long-term projects, namely *State of Emergency* (1998–2017) and *Le Temps d'une Soupe* (*While Having Soup*) (2015–present), and look into how ATSA proceeds to stage encounters between the different groups of people or individuals with whom a constructive dialogue may be established. I also ask the question: What kind of material and immaterial traces are left by *State of Emergency* and *While Having Soup*? I argue that the numerous traces these projects have left are not only due to their high relevance and originality, but also to the specific strategies employed by the artists. These include their close collaboration with people from the different groups with whom they wished to see a constructive dialogue established, as well as the unique themes and focuses chosen for the yearly editions of these projects. I also contend that in the case of socially engaged art, when assessing what remains of durational and ephemeral projects, it is more productive to focus on their *socialisation* rather than the material traces that have been left behind.³



Figure 1 ATSA, *La Banque à Bas*, 1997, Place des Arts Esplanade, Montréal. View of installation, 17 December 1997. Photo: Luc Sénécal. Image courtesy of the artists.

ATSA: When art takes action

At first, the acronym ATSA stood for *Action terroriste socialement acceptable* (*Socially Acceptable Terrorist Action*). This catchy and provocative name was initially intended to be used only once: for a spontaneous action that was staged in 1997 on the Place des Arts Esplanade, right next to the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.⁴ After hearing on the radio that the Canadian banks had made a record profit of 7.5 billion dollars that year, and later, on the same newscast, that La Maison du Père, a shelter for homeless men in downtown Montreal, needed 107 pairs of warm socks to operate each day, Pierre Allard and Annie Roy created *La Banque à Bas* (*Sock Bank*) in order to expose these inequalities (Pelletier 2008: 15).⁵ ATSA's repurposed bank operated similarly to cash dispensers, but rather than being able to deposit and withdraw money, participants could either deposit or withdraw socks from the installation made of an assemblage of stoves (Figure 1).

ATSA's first intervention in the public space set the tone for its future projects: it aimed to call the public and the authorities' attention to a specific issue, and it intended to directly help people in need while also inviting everyone to participate and join the conversation. If ATSA's *La Banque à Bas* can be tied to the word terrorism that the artists used in the name they originally gave to their collective, it is because this intervention in the public space was spontaneous, and unannounced. Seeing that terrorism

has taken a totally different meaning in our contemporary society after 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks, the artists, conscious that several people, especially outside of Québec, would not be aware of the context in which their collective's name was first used, now ask to be referred to only by their acronym ATSA, ultimately paired with the statement *Quand l'art passe à l'action* (ATSA: When art takes action).⁶

ATSA's artistic practice is socially engaged, and has been influenced by Suzanne Lacy's work and writings on new genre public art.⁷ Lacy writes that this type of artistic practice 'is based on engagement'.⁸ She also adds that artists associated with new genre public art 'have a common interest in leftist politics, social activism, redefined audiences, relevance for communities (particularly marginalised ones), and collaborative methodology'.⁹ In the history of art and art criticism literature, in addition to 'new genre public art', a number of terms have been put forth to refer to practices that use art outside the traditional space of the institution, and expose, confront, and at times try to propose concrete solutions to social issues. For instance: 'social aesthetics',¹⁰ 'relational aesthetics',¹¹ and 'dialogical art practices'.¹² Each term comes with specificities, but overall, the practices associated with socially engaged art, have, as Claire Bishop pointed out, occupied 'an increasingly conspicuous presence in the public sector'.¹³ Besides, as Grant H. Kester has argued, the 'durational commitment and the ephemeral nature of [dialogical] projects pose a

particular challenge to the researcher'.¹⁴ In the fields of technical art history and art conservation, Rebecca Gordon initiated an important reflection on the issues that socially engaged art raises concerning the very notions of authenticity and authorship.¹⁵ In order to further contribute to the reflection on the challenges that socially engaged art poses to the abovementioned fields, this paper focuses on the making of socially engaged projects, and examines how their socialisation impacts the traces that are left behind.

From five days to two decades: ATSA's *State of Emergency*

The very first edition of *State of Emergency* was created in collaboration with the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal and the Canadian Armed Forces. This was a sensible alliance since the army had both the resources and the experience of building camps. The original intention was to hold a camp where everyone would be invited to come, eat, and sleep, but an important shift took place while it unfolded. Whereas initially everyone was invited to stay, confronted with reality – a wave of people in need of food and shelter showed up – meals, clothes and beds were given to those who truly needed them. As Roy has stated, from a symbolic concept it became a concrete manifestation.¹⁶ Held on the Place des Arts Esplanade, the camp ran from 13 to 17 December 1998, during the early cold days of winter, and was open 24 hours per day (Figure 2). Over the course of five days, 500 people were offered beds to sleep, 3200 meals were served, and warm clothes for a value of CDN \$15,000 were handed out to those who needed them.¹⁷ To put these numbers in context, a study on the state of itinerants in Montreal reports that in 1996–1997, 28,214 people were in a situation of absolute or relative homelessness.¹⁸

Between 1998 and 2010, *State of Emergency* was held almost every year in different locations of downtown Montreal, depending on the authorisations given by the City Council (Figure 3). Securing the space was a challenge during the first few years. Yet, a study of media coverage and the critical reception of the project in newspapers and magazines (dedicated to art or social issues) shows that *State of Emergency* had become an expected key event in the Montreal landscape at the beginning of every winter.¹⁹

In 2010, the artists found themselves at a crossroads. Prior to the yearly edition of *State of Emergency*, the media were informed that they were considering putting an end to their project so as to have more time to focus on other works while calling attention to other urgent issues, and admitting that the situation of homeless people still required attention.²⁰ In addition, a few days before the event was to be held, they were informed that they had lost an important financial partner, Canadian Heritage. Since the artists thought at the time that this would be the final edition, they played with the idea of '*tout inclus/tous inclus*', which translates as 'all included/everyone included'. With such a phrase, they wanted to point out that not only would food and shelter be provided but social



Figure 2 ATSA, *État d'Urgence*, 1998, Place des Arts Esplanade, Montréal, 13–17 December 1998. Photo: ATSA. Image courtesy of the artists.



Figure 3 ATSA, *État d'Urgence*, 2008, Place Émilie-Gamelin, Montréal, 26–30 November 2008. View of the performance *Danses invisibles* (O.D.N.I. Objects Dansants Non-identifiés, Léna Massiani et Katya Montaignac). Photo: Martin Savoie. Image courtesy of the artists.

inclusion would also be enhanced. Over the following years, ATSA organised an event entitled *Fin novembre* (*End of November*). This offspring of *State of Emergency* did not run as a camp, but was also held in a public place and intended to further create platforms for constructive dialogue. *End of November* persisted in calling attention to homelessness and social inequalities. After a hiatus of a few years, during which they actively worked on other projects, including *End of November*, ATSA held its last edition of *State of Emergency* in downtown Montreal between 16 and 19 November 2017.²¹ This final iteration was entitled *Pas d'Radis Fiscaux*, a pun made on 'paradis fiscaux' (tax havens) and the vegetable *radis* (radish). In colloquial language, *radis* also refers to a small quantity of money. For instance, the expression 'Être sans un radis' translates as 'to be penniless'. Here, the artists addressed the theme of wealth disparity. Taking a stance against tax havens, they suggested promoting 'the eradication of inequality'.²²

ATSA's impact through the numerous editions of *State of Emergency* can be assessed quantitatively in terms of the number of meals served, beds offered, etc. For instance, in the case of editions of *State of Emergency* held between 2004 and 2010, 32,200 meals were served, 65 nights offered (250 persons/night), 2238 volunteers helped, and

8952 hours of work were required.²³ The impact of this project can also be assessed qualitatively. *State of Emergency* created a temporary and mixed community composed of homeless people, artists, citizens, Canadian Armed Forces (for the 1998 and 1999 editions only), and fellow artists. Suzanne Lacy has written that in new genre public art, '[o]ne of the distinguishing characteristics of the work in question is the factoring of the audience into the actual construction of the work'.²⁴ In the case of ATSA, the most significant relationships are those being built between different groups of people who do not necessarily interact with one another, and whose paths do not necessarily intersect.

Of all the material and immaterial traces that *State of Emergency* has left, the most significant one is the trace left on people who attended the camps, helped or became aware of the project. From year to year, ATSA had the opportunity to witness the changing situations of some of the people they had met through *State of Emergency*. Some individuals succeeded in finding a permanent place to live and some even found work. Others, depending on the year, were living on and off the street, since the path to get off the street is fraught with difficulties. Many came back: either for the services offered, to renew contacts, or to help out.²⁵

Whereas it is difficult to specifically and quantitatively tackle the human impact that *State of Emergency* has had on Montreal's homeless population, aside from the food, services and shelter made available when the event was being held, the media attention that the project has received helps in assessing the traces that it has left in the collective imaginary and memory.²⁶ In his thorough discussion of the 2009 edition of *State of Emergency*, Marc James Léger writes: '[i]n this provisional space of emergency rescue through charity and community, there appear to be no exceptions'.²⁷ The fact that it was also held in the public space, rather than in an institution, like Martha Rosler's thought-provoking multi-partite project *If I Lived Here...*, helped to create an atmosphere of openness and enabled people to come and go as they pleased.²⁸ Yet, even if the ambience of the camp was intended to be welcoming, emphatic, and festive, the artists themselves have also indicated that the mood, at times, could also be confronting and overwhelming.²⁹ It goes without saying that the topics they wanted to tackle were most challenging.

Traces of the impact of *State of Emergency* can also be encountered in the 2009 documentary *L'art en action* by Magnus Isacson and Simon Bujold, and in videos made on-site between 1998 and 2010, and in 2017. In addition, thousands of photographs documenting each of their projects, along with press releases and artists' statements, can be found on ATSA's website which is updated regularly. Furthermore, the book *ATSA: Quand l'art passe à l'action* published in 2008 includes an interview with the artists as well as key articles on the different aspects of the organisation's artistic practice written by art historians, sociologists, and environmentalists. The prizes awarded by the City of Montreal to ATSA, including *Artistes pour la paix* (Artists for peace) and *Citoyen de la culture* (Culture Citizen),

both in 2008, as well as the *Mention d'honneur du prix du Maire de Montréal en démocratie* (Honourable mention of the Montreal Mayor's prize in democracy) in 2013, and the *Médaille de la paix du YMCA* (YMCA's *Medallion for Peace*) in 2019, confirm the recognition given to the organisation for its work over the years.

The exhibition *Ten Years of Emergency* that toured across Canada between 2010 and 2014 was also a contributory factor to the socialisation of the project. It aimed to raise social awareness by introducing the project to a new public. Inevitably, it offered an experience completely different from that of the actual public intervention, since the artists were not present and the communities with whom the initiation of a constructive dialogue was originally intended were also absent. Reflecting on dialogical practices, Grant Kester writes: 'the meaning of a given dialogical work is not centered on the physical condition of a single object or the imaginative capacity of an individual viewer. Instead, the work is constituted as an ensemble of effects, operating at numerous points of discursive interaction'.³⁰ Therefore, the exhibition must be understood as a component of the project, and not as a substitute. It meant to commemorate the different editions of the project and the works produced by participants, collaborating artists, as well as by Pierre Allard and Annie Roy, from photography to drawings, from posters to videos. It also contributed to make the long-term endeavour of *State of Emergency* evident.

It must be stressed that *State of Emergency* never intended to replace the existing resources for people in need. In the same way as a state of emergency is declared by a government, ATSA's project was created as a temporary measure. It functioned as a short-term supplement to the permanent organisations that help Montreal's homeless population and people in need. Each year, *State of Emergency*, aptly described by Annie Roy as 'an affront to inertia',³¹ was intended to remind government and society that homelessness is a persistent issue, and cast light on the need for increased help to best support homeless people and deal with social exclusion.

The five-day state of emergency that ATSA symbolically declared in 1998 ended up lasting 20 years. This unintended duration of the project contributed to its socialisation and increased its impact. The special focus and theme of each edition, the new collaborations and partnerships – as, for instance, in 2008 the collaboration with Amnesty International – demonstrate how the artists continued to enhance their initial concept devised in 1998. On the other hand, the 20-year-long duration of ATSA's *State of Emergency* invites us to reconsider this project in the context of an ongoing reflection on states of emergency, bearing in mind, for instance, the writings of Walter Benjamin on the state of emergency as well as Giorgio Agamben's discussion of a state of exception.³² In his 'Theses on the philosophy of history', Benjamin writes: 'The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule'.³³ In *State of Exception*, Giorgio Agamben

argues that the state of exception reached a dominance by the mid-20th century and 'tends increasingly to appear as dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics'.³⁴ Of note, a state of emergency is not to be confused with a state of exception, as the former is a system of exception.³⁵ Yet, both imply recourse to extensive government powers.

Moreover, one should bear in mind the different national legislations that enable a government to declare a state of emergency.³⁶ In Canada, a state of emergency is a *dispositif* and a temporary measure used, for instance, to deal with social unrest, political violence, or natural disasters. In 1998, when ATSA symbolically declared a state of emergency, the artists' intention was to provide temporarily for the safety, health, and welfare of those who lived on the margins of society, while creating a constructive platform for the exchange of ideas on how to mitigate the effects of this social issue. They also offered a safe place for the homeless people to express themselves through different means: art and public spaces. Whereas the last edition of *State of Emergency* was held in 2017, ATSA continues to mobilise citizen actions and also create encounters in public spaces between complete strangers with projects such as *While Having Soup*.

Staging encounters between individuals: ATSA's *While Having Soup*

One of ATSA's ongoing projects, entitled *While Having Soup*, was created in the context of the 2015 edition of *End of November*, held in collaboration with another event aiming at calling the public's attention to poverty, social exclusion, and homelessness: namely *La Nuit des sans-abri* (*The Night of the Homeless*). *While Having Soup* was first held 15–18 October 2015. The collective described the first iteration of the project in these words: 'Through an installation that combines effective staging, a straightforward mechanism for fostering interaction, and seasoned sociocultural mediators, ATSA invites you to explore homelessness through a mix of social encounter, soul-searching and a poetic touch.'³⁷ *While Having Soup* is a public installation that looks like the patio of a restaurant, with the difference that it is not attached to any building (Figure 4). Passers-by are invited to participate and are offered an unconventional three-course menu. The starter consists in pairing two people who do not know one another; the main dish involves a conversation over a bowl of soup that has been served to the party; and the dessert comprises the making of a poetic photographic portrait of the two participants holding a piece of cardboard on which keywords or short statements best describe their exchanges over a soup. When the participants are offered soup, they must also choose a discussion topic from the menu. Indeed, the intent goes beyond making two people share a moment together while having soup; the participants are also invited to discuss a meaningful and topical theme.

Since 2015, the project has been presented in numerous cities in Québec, across Canada, and around the world,



Figure 4 ATSA, *Le Temps d'une Soupe*, *Les escalas improbables*, Parc des Faubourgs, Montréal, 13–18 September 2016. Photo: Debie Lyra. Image courtesy of the artists.



Figure 5 ATSA, *Le Temps d'une Soupe*, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, 9–11 February 2018. Presented during the Festival Rendez-vous chez nous. Photo: ATSA. Image courtesy of the artists.

including Hull, Graz, Rennes, Glasgow, Beirut, Port-Louis, and Madagascar (Figure 5). For each location, the artists draw up a list of site-specific discussion topics. This is always done in collaboration with locals through workshops in order to identify the pressing issues that should be addressed to the community. For instance, when *While Having Soup* was presented in Vancouver as part of the *Drum is Calling Festival* in 2017, the menu listed topics such as social housing, poverty, unceded territories, and reconciliation. By establishing strong ties with the specific communities in which *While Having Soup* is held, ATSA ensures that each manifestation has an immediate relevance and *locational identity*.³⁸

Ultimately, it is the long-term endeavour that distinguishes ATSA's projects such as *State of Emergency* and *While Having Soup* from other creative endeavours that have been associated with *relational aesthetics* as defined by Nicolas Bourriaud and strongly criticised for their political limitations. As Suzanne Lacy argues in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* and Nato Thompson in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011*, long-term endeavour and continuity is the key for socially engaged projects to have an impact.³⁹ Additionally, by organising workshops as Lacy has done for her projects,

and by being deeply rooted in specific communities, ATSA further contributed to the socialisation of its projects, their acceptance, and increased their chances of making an impact.

Conclusion: On staged encounters

Considering that a large share of its practice is immaterial and ephemeral, the collective ATSA has adopted strategies to ensure the socialisation of its project. By developing long-lasting projects while entertaining an excellent relationship not only with the media, but also politicians, community organisations, and an extensive list of partners, ATSA has created an extensive network that supports its various endeavours. By thoroughly documenting its activities and posting the information online and on social media, the collective has ensured that traces of its numerous projects are retained. Ultimately, what characterises projects such as *State of Emergency* and *While Having Soup* is their need to exist in the public space, hence the multiple editions of the former between 1998 and 2017 and the international iterations of the latter since 2015 (with planned events for years to come).

When artists declare a state of emergency, there is, inevitably, the danger that this symbolic gesture will lead some to expect the artists to resolve the issue. ATSA has never claimed that it had found the solution to put an end to homelessness and social exclusion in Montreal or anywhere else in the world. With projects such as *State of Emergency* and *While Having Soup*, ATSA has used the rallying potential of art in order to create encounters between different groups or individuals who do not normally interact with one another. With punchy statements, powerful interventions in the public space and long-lasting projects, ATSA has created a significant body of work that is mostly immaterial, yet has left meaningful traces in the collective memory and imagination. For over two decades now, this organisation has created thought-provoking work to fight inertia and ensure that public places are activated and remain open to free expression and democracy.

Notes

- As the acronym ATSA requires both contextualisation and an explanation, I will return to its meaning later in this article.
- See <https://atsa.qc.ca>.
- My use of the term 'socialisation' is inspired by the definition given to it by Jean-Marc Poinot in his book *Quand l'œuvre a lieu: L'art exposé et ses récits autorisés*. Poinot writes that the socialisation of artwork and its presence in the world are ensured by its sanctioning narratives, namely the statements accompanying it (Poinot 2008: 128). According to Poinot, the task of the sanctioning narratives is to 'propose keys and procedures to access the signification and the contents of the works' (Poinot 2008: 216).
- Pierre Allard and Annie Roy (ATSA) in conversation with Ariane Noël de Tilly, Montreal, 19 December 2016.
- Of note, the title *La Banque à Bas* could also be inverted: it then becomes a militant slogan: 'À bas la banque' ('down with banks').
- Pierre Allard and Annie Roy (ATSA) in conversation with Ariane Noël de Tilly, Montreal, 19 December 2016.
- Pierre Allard and Annie Roy (ATSA) in conversation with Ariane Noël de Tilly, Montreal, 19 December 2016. See also Sonia Pelletier's interview with Pierre Allard and Annie Roy (Pelletier 2008: 16).
- Lacy 1995: 19.
- Lacy 1995: 25.
- Larsen 2000.
- Bourriaud 2001.
- Kester [2004] 2013, 2011.
- Bishop 2006: 178.
- Kester [2004] 2013: 189.
- Gordon 2016.
- Pierre Allard and Annie Roy (ATSA) in conversation with Ariane Noël de Tilly, Montreal, 19 December 2016.
- These numbers are available on the ATSA website, see: <https://atsa.qc.ca/etat-d-urgence-1998> (accessed 20 December 2020).
- These statistics are reported in an official government document entitled 'L'itinérance au Québec. Cadre de référence' (Ministère de la Santé et des Services Sociaux du Québec 2008: 17). The document cites a study conducted by Serge Chevalier and Louise Fournier for Santé Québec.
- For the complete list of media review of ATSA's *State of Emergency*, see: <https://atsa.qc.ca/revue-de-presse-2019> (accessed 18 December 2020).
- See for instance *Le Devoir* 10 November 2010 and *La Presse* 25 November 2010.
- Press release sent out on 3 June 2017.
- See press release on ATSA's website: <https://atsa.qc.ca/en/eu2017> (accessed 18 December 2020).
- Source: <http://www.atsa.qc.ca/projs/fin-novembre/fr/pourquoi.html> (accessed 18 December 2020).
- Lacy 1995: 37.
- Pierre Allard and Annie Roy (ATSA) in conversation with Ariane Noël de Tilly, Montreal, 19 December 2016.
- The complete and impressive list of the media coverage, in the written press, on television, on the radio, and on the Internet, for each edition of *State of Emergency* is accessible on ATSA's website: <https://atsa.qc.ca/revuepresse-2010> (accessed 20 December 2020).
- Léger 2011: 55.
- On Martha Rosler's project *If I Live Here...*, see Wallis 1991.
- Pierre Allard and Annie Roy (ATSA) in conversation with Ariane Noël de Tilly, Montreal, 19 December 2016.
- Kester [2004] 2013: 189.
- La Presse* 30 November 2004.
- Benjamin 1968; Agamben 1998, 2005.
- Benjamin 1968: 257.
- Agamben 2005: 2.
- Bigo and Bonelli 2018.
- See the Canadian Emergencies Act, <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/e-4.5/FullText.html> (accessed 18 December 2020), and the US Code of National Emergencies, <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title50/chapter34&edition=prelim> (accessed 18 December 2020).
- See the statement published on ATSA's website: <https://atsa.qc.ca/en/prendre-le-temps-d-une-soupe-en> (accessed 18 December 2020).
- Kwon 2002: 52–5.
- Lacy 1995: 34; Thompson 2012: 31–2.

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Biography

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