

It's all about seeing linkages and marveling at them

We first met in Montreal quite some time ago. At that point he was already rich in experience, both in the arts and elsewhere. I was a young curator, curious and eager to learn, to invite and to organize.

That day in Montreal, he guided me to a studio a few blocks away, to a local artist he was enthusiastic about. I can't remember the work of that artist now, what I do remember are the miles of paving stones as we walked through the city in the bright light of early spring, and his remarkable take on the world. He was as keen as a curious little boy. He told me about an idea that he had. He wanted to make a composition for ringing phones. 'Imagine,' he said, 'you are walking in a district on the outskirts of the city. It's a sunny Sunday, families are barbecuing in the small gardens in front of their house. The windows are open. As you walk the streets, you hear a symphony of ringing phones.' He stopped to gaze at me for a few seconds, with his eyes full of wonder.

I didn't know much about him or his work at that point, we had been introduced by a common friend. I thought he was a musician but that afternoon he unfolded ideas and pieces that were about photography, drawing and writing, and about groups of young scouts running up and down hills with whistles, and self-playing pianos with letters appearing on the keys.

Back home I discovered he had also founded an artist-run organisation for sound art in Quebec called Avatar, and that he had been one of the founding fathers of a cooperative of nine art organisations called Méduse. An impressive hub for creative encounters, right on the border of the old city centre and downtown Quebec.

Since that day in Montreal our paths joined every so often. And every few years we would hijack a day in our busy calendars. We would meet in a city in the middle or steal a few hours during a conference. Six years ago I was visiting Quebec for such an encounter. In a coffeehouse next to a small park in the centre of town, he asked me if I knew I was an artist. I was very surprised. My own path had led me to many different kind of experiences in curating and organizing art events. What did he mean 'did I know I was an artist?' What on earth would I create? I felt a strange unease about his question, but also a tiny sparkle of wonder.

October 2017. Jocelyn is in Paris for a few weeks. We meet in Lille in the north of France, right in between his temporary city and my permanent one. The leaves on the trees are still rustling but will have to let go of their hosts sometime soon.

It's been a couple of years since we've seen each other but we jump right back into our habit of drinking coffee and walking pavements. Strangely enough, today I somehow ended up on the the creating side as my first novel will come out in a couple of months. He's been at the head of the arts department of Laval University in the meanwhile, a challenge he was entrusted with and which he only accepted on the condition of the occasional bubble of oxygen. And one of those bubbles brought him to France today: an artist residency.

I ask him how he rolled into being an artist as a youngster. He smiles and nods his head a few times. As a boy he was blessed with a good set of brains and was encouraged to start an education that would fit with that brain and lead to a decent diploma. Pharmacy it would be. But in his second year he already felt discouraged because of the market laws applying to the field, narrowing things down. He switched to architecture, an education he finished and that

automatically led to a starting career. But it brought him little joy. He tore himself away from the road ahead and put the music, that had been on a side track all that time, in the middle of a new street. That's how his artist career officially started.

Our meandering stroll brings us to the museum of fine arts. Next Sunday will be the opening of an exhibition of the famous French painter Jean-François Millet, an artist whom Jocelyn greatly admires. We sit down in the spacious lobby of the museum and 'for the record' I ask him some questions.

I didn't know your path started out with pharmacy. Could you tell me a bit more on that?

JR: "Can I tell you about somebody else's path instead?" He laughs his famous loud laughter, it goes for a run around the big lobby before coming back to our table. "It doesn't happen very often but every once in a while you hear someone's story and think: that's sort of how it went for me too. Racing cars is my hobby. Last December it brought me to Florida. It wasn't actually a race, it was a two-day training session. One of the teachers was a woman, and I was fascinated by her. There aren't many women in car racing, but she was great at it. She wasn't very young and quite small but she was strong and quick. Racing is pretty tough, you need top concentration and great endurance.

We followed the first day of class and at the end of the day there was an exercise. The idea of the exercise was that you would follow your teacher for three laps, then pass the teacher by as part of the exercise and then you were free for some practice time on your own. I did the exercise with my teacher and I continued on my free laps. At a certain moment I was coming up from behind her and there was some sort of misunderstanding. She thought I was one of her students. She directed me to go a certain way, but I didn't realise she mistook me for one of her students. In the next corner she hit me and both cars went backwards. I hit the brakes like you are supposed to - when you lose control in racing, you hit the brakes immediately, it has to be a reflex. She lost some control of her car too and came backwards towards me, her back wheel mounting onto my front wheel. She ended up five feet in the air and then slammed back to the ground." He demonstrates with his hands how the car hit the ground with force. "So we were side by side in the end of the curve looking at each other. She wasn't happy, but I looked at her with an air of 'it happens'. She then came out of the car to ask if I was okay. I said I was. When we were back in the pits, we were both pumped up because of the adrenaline of racing and crashing so we started talking to calm down. And then I learned that she was 72! She was a female racing car teacher of 72 whom I had just crashed into!

Let me tell you how her path went. She had been a professional skier representing England three times at the Olympics, holding the record of the fastest woman going down hill. She did that for a few years. At some point she got a call: there was a celebrity race to raise funds for a good cause. Was she interested? Sure, she said, and she turned up to practice. At the first practice, the monitor said: 'Waw, you are good, you know how to keep the line'. She shrugged her shoulders and said: 'It's the same as in skiing'.

'That's true,' said the monitor, 'but you are also quite good at corners, which is the hard part in racing.'

'Well,' she laughed, 'at least you have brakes, I didn't have brakes in skiing.'

She turned out to be really good, and became one of the only women in professional formula one racing. Then at some point she quit and became vice president of a big company. She walked through life like this: 'Hey, there's a door there, let's walk through it and see what happens.'

I can relate to that. I think it applies to my story as well. It's exactly how I ended up doing what I do. It's not like I planned anything but I did open every door. Very often doors would slam in my face. I would say: four out of five doors slammed in my face. But there was always one I could go through." He looks around for a second. "One important thing I've learned is: when it doesn't feel right, leave. I've noticed that people are uncomfortable with that but I have no problem with it. I think it's important to be able to say no. I once had a teaching position in an art school for example it was a good job, well-paid and with nice colleagues but I wasn't feeling comfortable about it. So I walked out. I got calls from friends and colleagues saying it wasn't a wise decision but I knew it wasn't right for me to stay. I relied on the advice I was once given by Michael Snow (*famous Canadian artist/filmmaker*): never despair, the phone will ring."

In your case the phone also rang to start a sound art organisation and later to run an art school. To me it seems that you have done those things with the same drive and curiosity as you do your art practise.

JR: "Hmm, yes. When I started Avatar, people asked me: 'do you regret putting aside your art practise to run an art organisation?' For me that is a strange question. The importance is that the art work gets done. I have no attachment to my signature, to being the one who does the art. If I can choose between working for Avatar and having twenty art works at the end of the year or being alone and having five, I'll choose the first option."

You are very devoted to help building structures to support art.

JR: "Art is taken for granted in many places. In Quebec we have been very fortunate to have an atmosphere of trust when it comes to the necessity for artists to do things. And there has been a good funding system. But elsewhere in the world I would say it's eroding, it's slowly pushed towards cultural industries, to practices that are creative but that are not art. At the moment there is a tendency everywhere to move away from art towards creativity. One example: an art school in the area of Vancouver decided to become a movie industry school. Yes, it's still creative but no, it's not art."

Somersaults

Are creativity and art two different things for you?

JR: "Yes they are. Don't get me wrong, it's not that the art world holds more interesting people than anywhere else. There are just as many interesting people in the world of plumbing or manufacturing chairs. You could use the word creative, I guess, but creativity is more associated with lifestyle these days, like finding new things to do during the weekend. For me art is about reinventing: I want to reinvent life all the time. To renew life all the time. There are constantly occasions to renew life around you. When you are sitting in the train for example and you see things, you wonder about things.

I remember a meeting with an artist about ten years older than me, Pierre-André Arcand. We were going to start Avatar and we needed a name and a program. We met at his house and wondered where to start. He had a bubblegum machine with words in it. It was like a dictionary in a bubblegum machine. He turned the handle of the machine and the word 'fracas' came out. Fracas means something like the noise of an accident or the sound of catastrophe. There we went, the ideas for the program started to flow and pile up.

This skill of reinventing things is something you can learn. Once you have learned it, once you know how to do it, it's so much fun. The world becomes so much richer. That's how I live, it's how I want to live. I look at something and I wonder: what can I do with that? What does it tell me that I didn't know yet? Often what I make ends up being something that is then categorized as art but not always. It's not that I'm trying to make art, I'm trying to live this kind of life and it often results in art along the way."

Would you say it's a sort of ...

JR: "... disease?"

He laughs and so do I.

The word creativity seems to have ended up in the corner as a naughty child. In personal growth practices creativity is considered a natural thing. If you are centred and strong, it comes naturally. Would you agree?

JR: "Some people are more comfortable jumping ropes than others, it doesn't mean they are not creative. Generally speaking I think you can say people like certainties. They like to know a job begins at eight and ends at five. They like to have a pay check at the end of the month, they like to know that there is someone deciding for them at a political level and that they can yell at from time to time. We have an economical system that feeds on that: we need the last phone, it's designed so that you can tell when it's old. There is a lot of pressure for you to have certainties. On top of that, you now also have a voice, you can go on Facebook and say: 'I am against this and that.' Unsurprisingly you end up in a fifty-fifty situation. Half of the people say this is good, the other half says this is bad. It doesn't lead to a very creative life. If you need a lot of security, it's hard to take a different path. But if you are willing to let go of that, and I believe that is something that can be learned, then yes, I think creativity comes naturally."

He thinks for a second.

"The image of somebody falling off a cliff comes up. For me the image is rather this: we are all falling from a cliff. Some people fall face down terrified and screaming, some people flip over so that they are facing upwards, saying: 'there is no pilot but the sky is blue, we'll see.' And some people are doing somersaults, that's my pick. I like the somersault."

Reinventing

"When I was young sometimes my mother would take a cardboard shoe box and open it at one end and put a bit of wax paper in to make a door. It became a garage with a gate for my cars. I thought it was so amazing that she had this idea. Making art is just one form of creativity, it shouldn't deny the other kinds. I have no esthetic prejudice, none. I don't care if it's kitsch art or something else. I want to know: what did you do? Did you make a cake? Did it taste well?

I remember a student making a cake for a fellow student's birthday. He had never baked a cake before, it was a big mess of chocolate. He put the cake full of candles. And when he lit it, the flames stuck together and the cake became a fire. It was fantastic, it was the best moment of the day.

The part I'm looking for ... I don't know what it's called ... it often ends up in art. People will call it creativity. But sometimes it's not even people doing it, it's just something that is there and that you see.

People sometimes ask me: what do you do as an artist? I like to answer this with the image of all these small rocks on a table and me trying to find one point of view in which they align. That's what I do as a artist: I tend to see links. The downside to that is: I'm very bad at classifying, I see linkages everywhere." He laughs. "When I became the director of the art school, they gave me several cabinets for organizing stuff. I went to buy classifiers to fit into the cabinets. When I now open the cabinets, five years later, they are all empty. I don't know how to organize things. They all are all connected to each other through different links. An item could be about the budget but it's also about a specific project which is about the new building etcetera. Where do I put it? In the trash!" He laughs.

"A while ago, I was in a class with about twenty people. They were all managers in some way. It was a class about good management with a focus on how to deal with people. The teacher noticed the woman next to me was taking notes.

'What do you do with those notes?'

'Well, I have a book for each year but for special projects like this, I have a book per project.'

'What do you do with the book afterwards?'

'I put it on the shelf and I write the year on it so I can go back to it.'

Then she turned towards me and asked me the same question: 'what do you do with your notes?'

'Nothing.'

'What do you mean?'

'I can't read my own notes. I write so badly, tomorrow I won't be able to say what it means.'

'Why do you take notes?'

'It helps me remember.'

'What will happen if you go back to the notes that you can't read?'

'I will have another idea, a new one.'"

His eyes sparkle.

"The teacher was very good, after two weeks she really knew us. She would team me up with the lady next to me. Some people want certainties. I prefer a situation where I have to reinvent something. It's a choice. It wasn't easy for that lady and me to collaborate but we did learn about each other's strengths.

The next exercise was about authority. We had twenty minutes. The woman sitting next to me said: 'It won't take twenty minutes. It's so easy: authority is defined by structure. You have the rector, then the deans, then the assistant deans etcetera.' I didn't agree. If anyone says to me: Jocelyn, do this, I won't do it. If somebody tells me: 'Jocelyn, I have an idea, what do you think?' I will do it. I don't take authority for granted from anyone. But you can ask me anything. We ended up with different ways of seeing the world. Some people like a world with very strong reference points and they build in the details. Others prefer to rebuild it. I'm part of the last category. But I'm not very good with the details."

What's the most impressive thing that has happened to you?

JR: "Tomorrow I might answer something different but what comes up now is this: in 1986 my partner Diane was studying in Bordeaux. The owner of the apartment she stayed at was a guy called Eric. I came over to Bordeaux to spend a week with Diane in France. Eric said: you should stay at my parents' house in the countryside. He lend us his car and we drove up to his parents' place. It was an old nobleman's house where his parents - who had been farmers - now lived. There were two rooms in the back were two guys had stayed during the war. On the dark

wooden floor there were scratchings. With a simple pin and the sun they had made an amazing but basic sundial, just by scratching the floor. Things like that impress me.

Then we borrowed old bicycles and we took a tour through the old village and the fields. The colors in the field were like François Millet paintings and the sun was going down. It was a type of yellow that I had never seen before. I almost cried.

I don't know if it fits your question but I have another one. I was in Vancouver in a residency and they told me that there was a pow wow the next day. I didn't know what that was. In Quebec we are completely remote from the natives but in the west there are many interactions between different communities. A pow wow is a meeting of native americans, it's a sort of party but there is also a political aspect to it. It's a huge meeting with a lot of singing and dancing. I got in a car with two women I didn't really know, they were a bit older than me. They sat in the front, I sat in the back. The sun was shining on the hood of the car. We were silent for a while. Then the woman who was sitting in passenger's seat started singing old gaelic songs a capella." He looks at his coffee cup for a second and caresses its side. "I was out of my body. It was ... These are small things but they impress me. I could name things that are impressive for a general public like crossing canada on a bicycle. I did that. But that's not something that impressed me, it rather left an impression on me."

Why did you quit your pharmacy studies?

JR: "It was all about 'business' and I had no interest in that at all."

Why did you start it in the first place?

JR: "Parent pressure. I wasn't strong enough in the beginning to stand up against that. After a while I ended up being really depressed. I remember saying: either I quit or you find me a chair and a rope. I quit but there was still a lot of peer pressure. So I ended up in architecture instead of art which would have been the real answer for me. I did architecture: four years of studies, then five years of work. But all the time I played my music on the side. Then I met a few people like Michael Snow and Chris Cutler (*famous avant garde musician*) who said: 'hey, your work is really good.' I jumped. Left architecture, never went back.

It's funny. We now are so many years later and I'm attracted to drawing again. Suddenly I'm thinking it might be a nice medium to go back to. I have my little book here, I started to make some drawings. I don't know if it will lead somewhere. It's always like that: I'm never sure where it will lead to. Like the soundtrack of a video I did for instance. I was listening to a piece of music to hear if the mastering was any good. At the same time I was editing a video. They weren't meant to go together but then a connection happened. I do lot's of things at the same time, things grow like the branches of a tree and as they grow, connections happen.

A waiter appears with his face in a painful grimace and the message that the museumcafé is closing for the day.

'I see,' Jocelyn says to the waiter, 'so it would be practical if we went?'

The waiter nods at us in an almost shy way.

'We are off then.'

A bit later we are walking streets again. We pass by an old art academy. The facade is largely intact, as is the majestic swirling staircase that must have hosted countless staggering young artists over the course of many decades. The building itself however has disappeared. Through

the window openings without glass you can see the debris of the broken auditoriums and rooms. We look at it for a while from the fence by the street. There is an announcement of an ambitious building project, a residential care centre for elderly people. Jocelyn giggles about the idea of mooring on your years as a beginning artist at the exact same place where your life is coming to an end.

We approach a busy crossing and we wonder what the habits for pedestrians are in this city: waiting politely for the cars to stop or run into the boulevard in an assertive way, claiming the right to cross. We are in no rush and go for the first option. Suddenly he stops in the middle of the crossing.

“What it’s all about,” he says, “in art and in life, is noticing linkages. Discovering connections and marveling at them.”