

Cahier 01



Les Cahiers
de la Fondation

Exhibition

Richard Ibghy
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Acknowledgments

The Grantham Foundation enthusiastically launches *Les Cahiers de la Fondation*, a new series of publications on art and environment.

The subject of the first issue of *Les Cahiers*, an exhibition by Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens entitled *Querelle entre deux puces pour savoir à qui appartient le chien sur lequel elles vivent* (Two fleas quarrelling over who owns the dog they live on), responds perfectly to the Foundation's commitment. Indeed, as indicated in their presentation, the artists bring together "works that relate to the land that we share, the territory that we appropriate, the soil that we care for, and the ground beneath our feet." We thank them warmly. The exhibition is remarkable in every way.

An exhibition of this nature could not take place without the help of many accomplices. We would like to thank the members of the Foundation's Board of Directors and Scientific Committee for their invaluable advice. We would particularly like to thank Gentiane Bélanger, whose text accompanying

the exhibition allows us to better understand how the work of the artists relates to the history of science and knowledge. We would also like to thank Louise Paradis who designed the graphics of the *Cahiers* with creativity and sobriety.

Our warmest thanks also go to the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, the MRC de Drummond and the Desjardins Group for their financial support.

Finally, we would especially like to thank Anne-Marie Boucher and Claudette Hould for their great generosity. We dedicate this first issue of *Les Cahiers* to them.

Michel Paradis and Bernard Landriault,
co-founders of the Foundation

Richard Ibgby
Marilou Lemmens

Querelle entre deux puces pour savoir à qui appartient le chien sur lequel elles vivent

Querelle entre deux puces pour savoir à qui appartient le chien sur lequel elles vivent (Two fleas quarrelling over who owns the dog they live on) brings together works that relate to the land that we share, the territory that we appropriate, the soil that we care for, and the ground beneath our feet. The land is approached as matter, as a lifeworld, as a conceptual object, as a field of power struggle, and as the site of multiple agencies and responsibilities. As the title implies, the exhibition raises questions about what can be owned and by whom.

Several works connect fields of knowledge that use abstract forms of representation, such as surveying and cartography, to inscribe boundaries in the continuum of space and legitimise specific regimes of property and exclusion. These regimes enable possession at a distance, a defining feature of colonialism, but they also enable the displacement and dispossession of people, animals, plants and other lifeworlds.

Exploring further the conjuncture between abstract processes and land, we consider how farmland has become increasingly financialized and treated as a commodity by speculators. The recent financialization of agriculture, which may be understood as a form of neo-agro-colonialism, is also performed through speculation on world trade prices of food and policies that encourage a shift to cash crops.

Globalised capital is not limited to speculation, and its power to affect ecologies in their totality, including their human social, political, and cultural dimensions, is explored via its influence on scientific research in government agencies in what has come to be known as the Louis Robert affair.

In these works, land is revealed as an assemblage of materialities, relations, practices, technologies, and discourses that render it ownable and investible. Yet the market is not the sole arbiter of value. Soil, water, and plants are essential

for the perpetuation of life in all of its forms, they make this world inhabitable, and the exhibition also looks at alternative modes of living *with, of and on* the land, which pay attention to the material engagements necessary to sustain interdependent worlds.

In this respect, small-scale organic farming reveals a form of caring that involves an embodied labour that takes place in always complex situations. We explored this type of care, where humans and non-humans are densely interwoven with one another, by focusing on gestures that participate in growing food, while also making life worlds regenerate beyond coloniality, extractivism, and productionism.

Over the summer, the water level of the river David, which runs at the foot of the Grantham Foundation, was quite low and we could walk along the riverbed in rubber boots. During these walks, we encountered mollusks, worms, nymphs, insect larvae, and crayfish that belong to a group of mud-dwelling beings known collectively as benthos.

Because they respond quickly to changes in their milieu, the well-being of the benthic community is considered to be an indicator of the health of an ecosystem. In a final piece, we decided to examine the level of inhospitality of various rivers in agricultural areas across Quebec, based on the toxicity of pesticides present in the water for this community.

In attempting to go beyond a vision of land as an objectified natural resource, or a site of capitalist speculation, we can begin to redo relations in more-than-human webs, and develop committed attachments that are multi-layered and never innocent. These connections can enable us to re-imagine a way of inhabiting the land that is up to the task of engaging with the joy and the troubles of interdependent existences.

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Herber, désherber

(Planting, Unplanting)

A woman digs a hole in the ground with her bare hands. Her fingers are covered with dark, textured clumps of soil. It gets into the lines of her palms; it gets under her fingernails. In the hole, she places a seed or a small plant. She presses the soil down, smoothening the surface, its grooves, its bumps. She repeats this gesture again and again, in long columns, row after row.



Richard Ibgby & Marilou Lemmens, *Herber, désherber*, 2020. Video, 17 min. Production still.



The same hands move over the same terrain some time after. This time she rips plants from the soil, quickly, skillfully, ruthlessly. Extracting the entire organism, from its leaves to its roots, her aim is clear—to destroy life, completely, entirely, so that it will not grow back.

Both gestures are not very different from each other and both participate in the process of care. In the first case, it is fostering the conditions for life to thrive. In the second, it is removing life that is thriving.

The gestures of planting and weeding are part of the usual scope and uses of soil for food production. It is a hands-on, repetitive, physical labour which involves both care and violence. It is care that maintains and repairs interdependent worlds so that we can live in them as well as possible. Violence is the doings needed to sustain our bodies through the consumption of other living beings.

Foregrounding those doings needed to sustain human life, means acknowledging the violence involved in the removal of some plants and the care for others. Those gestures participate in the complex webs that connect the living and nonliving, the human and nonhuman, in continuing cycles of living and dying.

Those cycles are fundamental to regeneration and without regeneration there is no sustainability. Sustainable forms of agriculture involve maintaining long-term soil fertility and the conditions for biological activity and diversity within the soil. It involves thinking in circles, instead of along lines, the lines of progress and production.

Produced in collaboration with Roxanne Beaulieu

La grande appropriation

(The Great Appropriation)

In many non-Indo-European languages, there is no word for the noun *land*, void of all material substances and social relations. For example, indigenous highlanders in the Indonesian island of Sulawesi have words that refer to more specific qualities, such as soil, primary forest, tilled garden, grassy patch or barren zone.

When Europeans began seeking control over territories beyond their own, they brought with them their manner of dwelling and sought to impose property regimes on colonial settlements, based on clearly demarcated territories inscribed in legal documents. These regimes were grounded in a logic that combined a geometrical framing of space along with its simultaneous appropriation, a process that led to a fundamental redrawing of the ways that human and nonhuman collectives relate to the land, and to each other.

Such forms of territorialisation were made possible at the turn of the 16th century by new modes of inscription—mapping and surveying—that transformed the concept of land from something concrete and relational into something fundamentally abstract. Reduced to pure geometry, any land could be measured and described in precise, mathematical terms. Coloured squares and rectangles stood-in for complex milieus, erasing everything beyond a two-dimensional plane.

Drawn to scale, the map and the cadastral survey made it possible to view territory as disembedded from lived experience and social relations. Presented as something that could be marked and divided, cut-out from the interconnectedness of the world,

such technologies facilitated the displacement and dispossession of peoples, plants, animals, and other life forms through the establishment of a system of agriculture and extraction connected to global commerce.

On Turtle Island, or what they called New France, the settlers referred to the making and marking of territory as the seigneurial system—an institutionalised form of land appropriation, distribution and occupation. It was a commercial company, the Compagnie des Cent-Associés, which was first granted the right to allocate areas of this territory from the Arctic to Florida. After France ceded this land to Britain in a treaty signed in Paris in 1763, the British township system took over the task of opening up new land for colonization.

La grande appropriation (The Great Appropriation) is an installation that consists of more than three hundred sculptures, each representing a particular seigneurie or township. While the French preferred elongated rectangles, the British were happiest with squares. The violence of this appropriation is historical, but the current ecological crisis and inequalities in access to and governance of the land, are linked to its ontological, technical and legal foundations.



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1. Seigneuries, numbered according to the map of A.E.B Courchesne in 1923. Produced by Isabelle Diaz, Laboratoire de cartographie, Département de géographie, Université Laval, 1984.
2. Aerial photo of the region of Saint-Pierre-les-Becquets and the mouth of the Rivier Batiscan.
3. Map of the seigneurie of Demaure dite St-Augustin, 1735. Plamondon, Archives du monastère des Augustines de l'Hôtel-Dieu de Québec, PR3-00001-001.
4. SSeigneuries, numbered according to the map of A.E.B Courchesne in 1923. Produced by Isabelle Diaz, Laboratoire de cartographie, Département de géographie, Université Laval, 1984.
5. Cadastral map of Batiscan, Seigneurie des Jésuites. Unknown. 1725. Archives nationales de France : Section Outre-Mer, Colonies, Gt, vol. 461.

Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, *La grande appropriation*, 2020. Installation, bamboo, colour gels, plastic, thread, paper and ink. Production still.



L'affaire Louis Robert

(The Louis Robert Affair)

In January 2019, Louis Robert, an agronomist working for Quebec's Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPAQ), was dismissed for having denounced what he characterized as interference by members of the pesticide industry into public research conducted at the Centre for Grain Research (CÉROM). Despite the existence of a law protecting whistle-blowers, the minister stated that he personally authorised the firing of Robert. Later, he denied all involvement. Months later, with an official apology from the Prime Minister, Robert was reinstated into his position.



Louis Robert, agronomist, MAPAQ. Video still.



Corn seeds treated with neonicotinoids. Digital image.

Specifically, Robert worked with journalists to expose the fact that scientists were under pressure to censor studies on the effects of neonicotinoids, a class of pesticides known to be linked to the collapse of the population of insects, birds, and other living organisms. One year after the affair, the researchers were finally able to publish their controversial findings in the scientific journal *PLOS ONE*.

The study demonstrates that no significant differences in productivity in soya and corn crops were observed with respect to seeds treated with neonicotinoids and those that were not. The study concluded that the use of neonicotinoids was unnecessary and represented no material advantage to farmers.

The sculpture *L'affaire Louis Robert* (The Louis Robert Affair) materialises the results of the study concerning the productivity of 64 commercial corn fields consisting of strips planted with seeds treated with neonicotinoids and without

(control strips). Each of the sculpture's levels represent the results observed over one year from 2012 to 2015. The natural wood blocks correspond to non-treated seeds and the coloured blocks to treated seeds. The height of the blocks represents productivity in kilogram per hectare.

Amongst the documents that Louis Robert leaked to journalists was an internal memo from the ministry, dated from 2017, which stated that there was a lack of transparency at the CÉROM. The existence of the document reveals that the ministry was aware of corporate interference but did nothing to abate it. While transparency can refer to the quality of materials, like water or glass, it also refers to the degree to which information is collected, circulated and provided to the public.



L'inhospitalité de douze rivières

(Inhospitability of Twelve Rivers)

If hospitality is about living well together with the multitude of beings with whom we share this world, then inhospitability is to make a place unsuitable to sustain living and regeneration.

Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, *L'inhospitalité de douze rivières*, 2020. Installation. Production still.



For the benthic community, that is, the diverse beings that live on the bottom of rivers, such as crayfish, nematodes, leeches, mollusks, beetle larvae and the larvae of dragonflies, blackflies, stoneflies, caddisflies, mayflies, and many more, the aquatic life chronic toxicity value is a measuring device developed by scientists to determine the level of toxicity of their aquatic milieu.

During the summer of 2020, we collected water samples from rivers in agricultural areas across the province of Quebec. We then filled each bottle to a level corresponding to the river's inhospitality according to the presence and concentrations of pesticides in the water and their chronic toxicity value.

Le nombre d'hectares de terre en zone agricole acquis par des spéculateurs dans 54 municipalités du Québec entre 2009 et 2014

(Hectares of land acquired by speculators in areas zoned for
agriculture in 54 municipalities in Quebec between 2009 and 2014)



Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, *Le nombre d'hectares
de terre en zone agricole acquis par des spéculateurs
dans 54 municipalités du Québec entre 2009 et 2014*, 2020.
Series of six digital prints, each 36" x 46", detail.

For centuries, there has been much effort dedicated to preventing the privatisation of land by surrounding it with customs, regulations, the creation of protected areas, and so on. In this respect land is different from other resources, such as corn or diamonds. The spectrum of what land is cannot be captured if it is defined narrowly, as ownable property.

Since 2008, there has been an increase in the area of farmland acquired globally by private equity funds, pension funds, hedge funds and other institutional investors, domestic and foreign, for large-scale corporate agriculture and speculation. The immediate cause of this 'land grab' was the market crash of the same year that brought investors to look for safe places to store their money. A secondary cause was the spike in food prices in 2007-2008 that led importing countries to consider ways to by-pass global food markets by engaging directly in food production.

Sometimes investors directly operate the land or lease it to farmers who operate it for them, and reward their capital by selling agricultural products. In other circumstances, investors bet on the scarcity of land and hope its value will increase over time. Finally, some investors are merely interested in moving their money from volatile markets into land as a class asset that can guarantee a diversification of their portfolio.

Investors make a bet today that more value will be generated tomorrow and that a minimum amount of profit will continue to flow in their coffers. Uncertainty must be minimized with respect to productivity and quality, which leads to a variety of strategies, including firm concentration, rent-seeking, monoculture, flex crops and cash-crops, and vertical integration. The impact of these strategies lead to an increase in the cost of land, reduction of the number of farms, loss of crop diversity and biodiversity, export-oriented chains, possible monopsony and the

associated risks for local food sovereignty. These pressures add to the constraints already imposed by the corporate food regime on family farms.

Le nombre d'hectares de terre en zone agricole acquis par des spéculateurs dans 54 municipalités du Québec entre 2009 et 2014 (Hectares of land acquired by speculators in areas zoned for agriculture in 54 municipalities in Quebec between 2009 and 2014) consists of six photographic compositions which present the area of agricultural land acquired by financial actors in fifty-four municipalities over a five-year period in one region of Quebec. Created to scale, each of the wooden assemblages in the images represent the contours of one municipality. During that time, five companies, all based in Quebec, purchased a total of 2,701 hectares in this region. Over the same period, the 15 most active financial groups purchased over 27,000 hectares of agricultural land in the province.



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1-4. Richard Ibgby & Marilou Lemmens, *Le nombre d'hectares de terre en zone agricole acquis par des spéculateurs dans 54 municipalités du Québec entre 2009 et 2014, 2020*. Series of six digital prints, each 36" x 46", details.

Things that grow
by themselves / Things
that we help grow



Things that grow by themselves / Things that we help grow was filmed near our home in a rural area of the Centre-du-Quebec. In the video, Marilou is seen moving through different environments, plucking plants and other forms of vegetation (flowers, weeds, ferns, seeds or parts of trees) out of their milieu and showing them to the camera. In the process, fragments of nature—plant specimens—are extracted and transformed into samples, that is, objects of trade and speculation.

The video features the gestures of isolating beings from their life world in an attempt to identify them and better observe their anatomy, of pulling them apart to exhibit and distinguish their functions, and then of discarding them. It is through this detached, analytic gaze that scientific knowledge is produced. By transforming living beings into objects of study and commerce, economic botany and other plant sciences were tools for colonial expansion and the appropriation of new environments.

Things that grow by themselves / Things that we help grow is part of a project entitled *The Golden USB* (2014–ongoing) which gives form to the idea of an interstellar trade capsule. Housed in a gold USB flash memory device, the capsule is intended for travel aboard a probe headed towards the stars beyond our solar system. Following in the footsteps of the Pioneer Plaque (1972–1973) and *The Golden Record* (1977), which introduced human civilization to extraterrestrials, *The Golden USB* is an invitation to make contact and begin a trade relationship. The work revolves around the *Trade Catalogue of Everything*, a digital file listing everything and anything—land, water, air, plants, animals, fragments of nature, but also the products of human culture, industry, invention and know-how—that may be of interest to alien life.



Richard Ibgby & Marilou Lemmens, *Things that grow by themselves / Things that we help grow*, 2014. Video, 53 min. 20. Video stills.

Richard Ibghy Marilou Lemmens Bio

Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens create installations, videos, sculptures, photography, and artist books, amongst other things. Their collaborative practice combines a concise approach to the form and construction of the art object with a desire to make ideas visible. For several years, they have examined the power and history of science and other forms of knowledge, including the language of economy, the magic of statistics, the capacity for models to impact the future, the aesthetics of data visualization, and the design of laboratory experiments. Their work tends toward the re-sensualisation of abstractions through objects and actions.

Their work was presented in solo exhibitions at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts (Omaha, USA, 2019), VOLT, Visningsrommet USF Gallery (Bergen, Norway, 2019), Audain Gallery (Vancouver, 2018), Agnes Etherington Art Centre (Kingston, Canada, 2017), Jane Lombard Gallery (New York, 2017), Owens Art Gallery (Sackville, Canada, 2017), the International Studio & Curatorial Program (New York, 2016), Esker Foundation (Calgary, 2016), Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery (Montreal, 2016), VOX (Montreal, 2014), and Monte Vista Projects (Los Angeles, 2012). They have participated in a number of group exhibitions including the Fiskars Biennale (Finland, 2019), Columbus Museum of Art (USA, 2018), OFF-Biennale, Budapest (Hungary, 2017), Bienal de Cuenca (Ecuador, 2016), Istanbul Biennial (Turkey, 2015), Biennale de Montréal (Canada, 2014), Manif d'art 7 (Canada, 2014), Henie Onstad Kunstsenter (Norway, 2013), and Sharjah Biennial (U.A.E., 2011).

They live in Durham-Sud, Quebec.

ESSAY

Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens explore the aspects of reality that extend beyond the ideological perspective imposed by schematic thinking. Their work is focused on making visible forms of abstractions—administrative, legal, cadastral, financial—that are otherwise invisible in their functioning as structural agents of power. The exhibition *Querelle entre deux puces pour savoir à qui appartient le chien sur lequel elles vivent* (Two fleas quarrelling over who owns the dog they live on) casts a penetrating eye on the epistemic structure of modernity through the imprint it has left on issues related to territory and the land. The works gathered here, which were developed over the course of meetings, discussions and collaborations with various actors associated with agriculture in the Centre-du Québec region, set out to analyse the way in which the prevailing definitions of land and territory are constructed, in order to open up the possibility of reinventing them. Ibghy & Lemmens describe this new body of works as being centred on historical and contemporary forms of appropriation of territory in Quebec and their impact on our frameworks for understanding the world, as well as on the effects of the industrialization of agriculture on living beings and the environment, and new ways of cultivating the land and inhabiting rural territories.

Note: This translation presents an abridged version of the original essay in French, published in *Les Cahiers de la Fondation Grantham* and on the Foundation's website.

These concrete issues convey a more fundamental interpretation of the epistemic schemes that sustain the dominant forms of territoriality, and in particular, the modern episteme. Epistemic distillation as a process of abstraction is prominent in the work of Ibhgy & Lemmens, which seeks to materialize this form of thinking. Their models and photographic montages apply a process of reducing the complexity of information through geometric shapes, chromatic refinements, schematizations and formal constructions extricated from their context. By heightening the territories' abstraction in the formal rendering of their work, Ibhgy & Lemmens highlight the process of epistemic distillation of reality, which in turn provides an opening for its objectification and appropriation. The cobbled-together nature of their schematizations can also be understood as a reminder of the role played by construction and invention in the narrative of the land as an appropriable resource.

In the eyes of the philosopher and sociologist of science Bruno Latour, modernity believes it has, through its scientific and philosophical method, attained the essence of things by a process of purification or reductionism of variables and separation of ontological zones, or poles: the Subject and the Object.¹ The fact that this method is so widespread in modern culture is attributable to its practical value. By removing elements (objects, concepts, notions, motives, species, cultures) from the particular mire from which they emerged, distillation makes these elements abstract. One of the main dangers of distilled thinking, which Latour makes sure to point out, is the slippery slope of naturalization that comes with the abstraction of thinking. Once they have been detached from any contextual mire, concepts come to be viewed as “universal” in their applicability. In contrast to this supposed universality, all other forms of knowledge—more embodied, situated and entangled in the chaos of the world—are relegated to the catch-all categories of “pre-modern” or, worse, “other-than-modern.” This hierarchical marginalization of various bodies of knowledge is all the more drastic since this claim of universality is in itself a fiction, as knowledge cannot be embodied outside of any situated context.

This universalization of the modern episteme gives rise to extractive approaches that reduce the agency of the natural world to its instrumentalization by humans, as well as globally distributed forms of colonial domination. These wrongs are gathered together under the heading of the “Plantationocene,” which places the colonial, extractionist model of the plantation at the source of the environmental imbalances and climate changes more commonly attributed to the Anthropocene. According to the anthropologist Anna Tsing and the philosopher Donna Haraway, the Plantationocene is defined by the displacement and radical subjugation of living species and human populations in monoculture practices that result in the simplification and homogenization of complex ecologies.² While the Plantationocene is rooted in a specific socioeconomic context, its colonial ramifications are distributed globally, under the universalist heading of the modern episteme.

1. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

2. See: Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “A Threat to Holocene Resurgence is a Threat to Livability,” *The Anthropology of Sustainability: Beyond Development and Progress*, ed. Mark Brightman and Jerome Lewis (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), p. 50; “Reflections on the Plantationocene: A Conversation with Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing,” conversation moderated by Gregg Mitman, *EdgeEffects*, 2019. <https://edgeeffects.net/haraway-tsing-plantationocene/>

The historical occupation of the land on Quebec soil is no exception to this regime, as *La grande appropriation* (The Great Appropriation) (2020) demonstrates. This installation amasses a dense assortment of more than 300 small, delicate, brightly coloured sculptures on a large, immaculate surface, like a virtual topography. These models reflect the division of land under the two major colonial regimes—the French seigneurial regime and the British system of townships—that still today lay out Quebec landscapes in a Cartesian configuration. This wave of colonization through the occupation of the land marks an initial abstraction of the soil, whose environmental complexity is thus thrust aside to make way for a new value system centred exclusively on ownership. As the legal geographer Nicholas Blomley has observed, ownership is never an innate fact. It is a reality that needs to be performed and put into practice to be effective, for example through such myths and colonial fictions as the principle of *terra nullius*.³ Under this principle, settlers' clearing of the land amounts to an act of appropriation, of possession, of “cleansing” by the eradication of indigenous species and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples.

The pre-eminent tool of the appropriation of the land is its schematic representation. Blomley refers here to maps, surveys, property lines and the grid of land parcelization as colonial tools for claiming lands and legitimating the new occupation.⁴ Cartography and topographical surveys allow the land to be transformed into an object of calculation, a conceptual object that can be immediately apprehended by the mind, rather than a complex reality that needs to be lived to be understood. The anthropologist Tania Murray Li maintains that “land is not like a mat. You cannot roll it up and take it away. It has presence and location.”⁵ Nevertheless, diagrammatic thinking makes it possible to have an impact on the land without being connected to it physically: “Crucially, statistical picturing devices enable the kind of action-at-a-distance that assembling land as a national, colonial and global ‘resource’ requires. Land still cannot be removed from the place where it is located, but with these devices in place, it can be assembled in new forms and differently disposed.”⁶

While *La grande appropriation* charms us with its transparent lightness, the richness of its textured surfaces and its bright tonalities, it intensifies the abstraction of the soil by concealing a systemic violence that lies behind its clean aesthetic. The acetates, polymers and nets cut out in simple but effective forms reveal nothing of the dispossession of indigenous cultures from their ties to the land, nor of the supplanting of indigenous plant and animal life by the importation of new species that bring about major breaks in ecological exchanges. Like any good map, the sculptures that fill up *La grande appropriation* eliminate this brutal complexity so as to focus solely on red-tape-obsessed cadastral rhetoric. Here, Ibhgy & Lemmens show us the pernicious role of aesthetics, which de-politicizes, de-socializes and de-historicizes the content portrayed.

3. Nicholas Blomley, «Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence: The Frontier, the Survey, and the Grid», *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 93, 1 (2003): 122.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

5. Tania Murray Li, “What is Land? Assembling a Resource for Global Investment,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39, 4 (2014): 589-602.

6. *Ibid.*

The historical movement of colonization documented in *La grande appropriation* bears similarities to what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls the age of “solid modernity.” This modernity is defined as resting on principles of stability, permanence, planning, regulation and centralization. Power is then entrenched in the land and the nation, and crystallized in the hands of a social elite.⁷ This was the case, for example, with the seigneurial regime, which sought to occupy and organize the land by splitting up the space according to a Cartesian model and subjecting its inhabitants to a set of structuralizing rules. While the British township system increased the inhabitants’ autonomy by giving them access to ownership, the fact remains that both of these systems are based on a hereditary connection to the land, which becomes an ancestral possession rooted in the filial tradition and handed down from generation to generation.

This reality pervades much of modernity, and is finally shattered at the turn of the millennium, when the financial bubble increases its grip on the tangible economy. With the speculative turn and the globalization of the market, stability erodes, and the mechanisms of power shift to the never-ending flow of communication, while capital is bought and sold over the Internet. In this “liquid” modernity, the old power structures, such as the nation-state and political regimes, become mere tools that facilitate the flow of capital. Their authority is like an empty shell, whereas the real power slips in through the maze of economic exchanges and the buzz of financial speculation.⁸

Liquid modernity thus runs counter to structures that aim for stability and rootedness. While, in solid modernity, the most precarious people were those without ties to the land, in liquid modernity the most vulnerable people are those who are doing their best to remain attached to their roots and who are unable to follow the flow of capital. And while, in solid modernity, the land was embodied in an enduring *legacy*, rooted in durability and stability, the financialization of land in liquid modernity turns land into an agricultural *asset*, subject to market fluctuations and speculative drifts. To rephrase the words of Tania Murray Li, it is as if under the deterritorializing impact of financial speculation, land became a mat that you can, in the end, roll up and take away.

This recent phenomenon of abstraction of land through its financialization is the subject of the photographic series *Le nombre d'hectares de terre en zone agricole acquis par des spéculateurs dans 54 municipalités du Québec entre 2009 et 2014* (Hectares of land acquired by speculators in areas zoned for agriculture in 54 municipalities in Quebec between 2009 and 2014) (2020). In this project, Ibgly & Lemmens reproduced the outlines of the 54 municipalities in a rural region of Quebec and annotated the number of hectares of farmland in each one that were the subject of a transaction by financial investors. The sculptures that resulted from this process are made from wood scraps in a variety of finishes,

7. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000).

8. Ibid.

which gives them a makeshift look, reminiscent of constructivism. The irregular materiality enhances the sculptures’ individuality and sensory richness, and contrasts sharply with the administrative abstraction it underscores. These sculptural abstractions are then reworked in photographic form, in serial combinations.

Land grabbing by investors is as opaque and intangible in these sculptures as it can often be on the ground. Nothing in the rough finish of these little wooden curiosities hints at the dispossession taking place through these transactions, or the gradual removal of land from its ecological context. The archivist structure of photographic documentation relies, once again, on a formal language that operates through extraction, distillation, organization and classification. The serial approach suggests an ideal of neutrality, systematization and transparency that is often associated with the archiving of information. And yet, the transactions schematized and photographed add a layer of opaqueness to the land’s management by removing its value from its tangible use and relocating it, instead, in financial speculation.

The installations *L'affaire Louis Robert* (The Louis Robert Affair) (2020) and *L'inhospitalité de douze rivières* (Inhospitability of Twelve Rivers) (2020) function in a similar way, though in sculptural form. *The Louis Robert Affair* gathers together, in a large, glass display case, the research findings that lie at the heart of the dispute involving the agronomist and whistle-blower Louis Robert. The installation presents the findings of a study that was suppressed by the pesticide industry,⁹ in the form of a spacious cabinet, glassed in on either side, containing four shelves holding data put into material form in laths of natural wood for untreated seeds, and coloured laths for seeds treated with pesticides. The colour scheme and formal refinement of the installation affiliate it with modernism, somewhere in the wake of post-pictorial abstraction, which the art critic Clement Greenberg favoured, in part, for its clarity of composition and absence of narrative connotations. However, the plain materiality of the data, embodied by lowly strips of wood, links it to arte povera and suggests a resistance to cultural one-upmanship and economic pressures. In other words, through its aesthetic, *The Louis Robert Affair* conjures up a distinct tension. The uncluttered elegance of the presentation device is in line with postwar abstraction and its relationship to diagrammatic thinking in its ideal of clarity and objectivity. In contrast, the humble but stubborn presence of the data materialized in the wood, like the return of that which was repressed, unquestionably inscribes the intent of the work in the economic, environmental, political, emotional and legal maelstrom surrounding this affair. Under cover of abstract art, *The Louis Robert Affair* contains everything that modernist abstraction attempted to brush aside: narration (the story behind the work) and the reference to political and social life.

9. Geneviève Labrie et al., “Impacts of neonicotinoid seed treatments on soil-dwelling pest populations and agronomic parameters in corn and soybean in Quebec (Canada),” *PLOS ONE* 15, 2 (2020). <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0229136>

L'inhospitalité de douze rivières explores the health of rivers, more specifically their degree of inhospitality to the benthic environment as a result of the concentration of pesticides. For this project, Ibgby & Lemmens collected water samples from twelve Quebec rivers, whose degree of inhospitality they reveal by bottling a quantity of water comparable to their ranking. The variable quantities in the bottles on display are consequently indexes of the level of inhospitality of the sampled rivers. The beauty of the installation is misleading, as the sparkle of the bottles of water hides the toxicity they harbour. The installation endeavours to provide a sense of an ecological richness that is central to soil's water health, even though it is imperceptible to the eye and unimportant to the agri-food industry that is its main polluter.

Vandana Shiva is one of the many people today who criticize industrial agriculture as being a vision of land and its fertility based on a linear logic of inputs and outputs that stems from economic theory. Opposite this logic, these thinkers place that of a living soil, to be respected in its function as habitat for a myriad of microorganisms that act as fertilizers through their work of biodegradation, fixing of nutrients and soil-structure maintenance.¹⁰ We can understand current organic-farming movements as ways of coming to terms with the complexity of reality and of adapting to the forces that drive the living world. Small-scale agriculture points to a humility and a flexibility of approach in the face of the world's natural complexity, in contrast to the eco-colonial logic of transgenic seeds, chemical inputs and pesticides. The video *Herber, désherber* (Planting, Unplanting) (2020) fits into this logic and records a series of gestures illustrating fundamental aspects of the work of market gardeners. In a way, these gestures form a kind of "dialogue" with the land. The video documents a choreographed sequence of gestures, a matrix of movements, attentions, growth potentials, time frames and ways of being in relation to the living world. The shots close in on a woman's hands, which are digging in the soil efficiently and industriously, the way a mole would. From this haptic relationship with the earth there emerges an intimate, sensory knowledge of it, which cannot be reduced to productivity quotas. The experience of the film, very much based on time and centred on simple, repetitive gestures, contrasts sharply with the reductionist aesthetic of the sculptural and photographic installations. It is no longer a question of abstraction as much as one of immersion and corporeity in this work. It is a question of becoming one with the soil.

Also based on time and repetitive action, *Things that grow by themselves / Things that we help grow* (which came out of the project *The Golden USB*, 2014) documents a process of collecting and presenting botanical specimens, with a view to a hypothetical taxonomic classification or a sales catalogue. In it, we see Marilou Lemmens moving through a variety of lands, ranging from cultivated fields to plots of land that have returned to the wild, while the movement of the light indicates the passing of the day.

10. Vandana Shiva, *Soil Not Oil* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2015). Book excerpt published online: "Living Soil: Vandana Shiva on the Triple Climate Crisis," *Green America*. <https://www.greenamerica.org/soil-not-oil-how-organics-can-feed-world/living-soil-vandana-shiva-triple-climate-crisis>

Lemmens engages in a tedious search for specimens, extricating them from the lush jumble of plants and isolating them from their relational environment (which suddenly becomes a mere backdrop), in order to reveal them as entities with autonomous value. The action of cataloguing as a form of production of knowledge is proposed here, with all it entails in terms of arbitrary inclusions and exclusions in its desire for identification and its need for systematization.

Running throughout the exhibition *Querelle entre deux puces pour savoir à qui appartient le chien sur lequel elles vivent* is a critique of the modern epistemic framework and its colonial ramifications. Through a process of aesthetic subversion, the artists lead us to mistrust the distillation that lies at the core of the modern episteme, with its compulsion to remove objects from their context, to isolate variables, to refine processes in a futile quest for the essence of things. What emerges from their approach is a plea favouring systemic approaches over reductionist approaches and essentialist divisions.

THE AUTHOR

Gentiane Bélanger is completing a PhD in art history at Université du Québec à Montréal, with the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Her dissertation was submitted in January 2020. Her research interests lie at the intersection of art theory and environmental philosophy, a subject that is closely connected to the practice of artists Ibgby & Lemmens. She has been Director-Curator at the Foreman Art Gallery, Bishop's University, since 2015, sits on the board of Sporobole, centre en art actuel, and has published widely, in *C Magazine*, *ESPACE*, *esse arts+opinions*, *ETC* and *Plastik art & science*, among others.

Cover

Shape of the Township of Grantham based on a 1973 map of Lower Canada.

Published by the Grantham Foundation for the Arts and the Environment, Saint-Edmond-de-Grantham, Quebec

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Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Querelle entre deux puces pour savoir à qui appartient le chien sur lequel elles vivent* organized by the Grantham Foundation for the Arts and the Environment and presented in Saint-Edmond-de-Grantham from September 26 to November 29, 2020.

Works

All images have been provided by artists, Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens, except those that have already been credited. All works presented have been produced in 2020, except *Things that grow by themselves / Things that we help grow* which dates back to 2014.

Translation

Gentiane Bélanger's text was translated from French by Susan Le Pan.

Graphic Design

Louise Paradis

Paper

Paper printed on Canadian Rolland Enviro Satin paper containing 100% post-consumer fibers for the inside pages and on Neenah environment® Concrete paper containing a minimum of 30% post-consumer fibers for the cover.

The artists wish to thank: Roxane, Myriam and Robert Beaulieu, Johanne Marcil, Marc-Olivier Gasser, Lianne Chauvette, Lucie Grenon, Johnny Parente, Réjean Roy, Richard Contant, Denis Thibeault, Louise Paradis, Noémie Fortin, Claudel Lauzière Vanasse, Gentiane Bélanger, Bernard Landriault and Michel Paradis as well as the Canada Council for the Arts and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ), programme Partenariat territorial du Centre-du-Québec, volet création, production, rayonnement.

Things that grow by themselves / Things that we help grow was produced with the support of La Biennale de Montréal for BNLMTL 2014.

The Grantham Foundation thanks the CALQ for its support in the framework of the program Soutien aux activités 2020–2021/ Manifestation et présentation publique.



Legal Deposit

Bibliothèque et Archives
nationales du Québec
Library and Archives Canada

ISBN 978-2-9819284-0-5 (print, French ed.)
ISBN 978-2-9819284-1-2 (digital, French ed.)
ISSN 2563-5190 (print, French ed.)
ISSN 2563-6014 (digital, English ed.)

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