



---

p|m Gallery

---

(<http://www.magentamagazine.com/ad/redirect/361/t166?url=http://www.magentamagazine.com/>)

## Canadians in Europe: Derek Sullivan, Robert Waters, Gwen MacGregor & Sandra Rechico

Submitted by Magenta on Thu, 07/07/2011 - 03:34 in

Tags:

*Like the rest of the art world, we here at Magenta have our eyes turned towards Europe at the moment because of the Venice Biennale. Canadian artists, however, have long cast their eyes towards Europe. The three articles gathered here under the title "Canadians in Europe" illustrate that Canadians are particularly adept at formulating work that responds sensitively to the foreign social, political, physical and geographical environments in which they are working. While these four artists represent barely the tip of the iceberg of Canadian visual artists achieving success abroad, they reflect the diversity of Canadian art practices that are resonating out there in the international art world. Here, artist and writer [Jen Hutton talks to Derek Sullivan \(#sullivan\)](#) about his recent exhibition in Belgium; Magenta's editor [Bill Clarke talks to Robert Waters \(#waters\)](#) about his art of engagement in Spain; and first-time Magenta contributor [Sally McKay examines the work of Gwen McGregor and Sandra Rechico \(#mcgregor\)](#) as they currently prepare for an exhibition in Germany.*

---



<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/Sullivan1.jpg>

**Derek Sullivan: Young Americans:** Installation views at KIOSK, 2011. Images courtesy the artist and Galerie Tatjana Pieters, Ghent. All photos: Yana Foque

---

## **Bookish in Belgium: Derek Sullivan’s friendly and formal “Young Americans”**

**by Jen Hutton**

*2011 has already been a busy year for Toronto-based artist Derek Sullivan. On the heels of exhibitions in Toronto, Ottawa, Waterloo and New York, Sullivan continues to pursue an ongoing project with New York-based artist Gareth Long and just received his second longlist nod for the Sobey Award. Sullivan is currently preparing for his commissioned exhibition Albatross Omnibus at The Power Plant this fall. This past spring, Sullivan, who is represented by Jessica Bradley Art +Projects in Toronto, took a break to speak with artist and writer Jen Hutton about his recent solo exhibition at KIOSK, an up-and-coming contemporary exhibition space in Ghent, Belgium.*



<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/sullivan13.jpg>

**Jen Hutton (JH):** How did your show at KIOSK come about?

**Derek Sullivan (DS):** The show came about after the curator at KIOSK, Wim Waelput, became interested in my work after a solo exhibition I had with Tatjana Pieters, a Ghent-based commercial gallerist, in 2008. Wim had been programming exhibitions in a pavilion connected to the KASK, the art school in Ghent. By the time we started talking about a show, that little pavillion had been decommissioned because the gallery had taken its permanent space inside the school. The KASK is a part of a cultural complex that the city was developing in a group of old building that has been, over the years, a monastery and a hospital. The gallery is in a 19<sup>th</sup> Century neo-gothic portion of the building that was the surgical theatre for training doctors. The gallery is built around this theatre, with a number of smaller rooms radiating from it. So, it's quite an eccentric space. KIOSK has only been programming there for one year, so they haven't developed any tried and true rules for how shows should happen, which is kind of nice actually. The various spaces in their portion of the complex are used differently for each exhibition.

**JH:** So, it's kind of a malleable exhibition space.

**DS:** It's very malleable. Although KIOSK has programmed solo exhibitions that take over the whole space, Wim seems to prefer programming two parallel solo

exhibitions at the same time. I was paired with Jan de Cock, who is known for doing these large, very ambitious projects. How our two exhibitions would work together was the least-resolved aspect of this project before installation began but, in the end, it worked together really well.

**JH:** Stemming from that idea of a happy accident, it sounds as if the inner architecture of KIOSK's space could be navigated or read like a book, like many of your previous projects.

**DS:** The architecture is comprised of a stacked series of rooms, which related to my strategy of stacking objects and materials formally, somewhat akin to a manuscript where you have to unpeel it one page at a time. It's about an experience or delivery that is a bit slower. I wanted the show to be based on a conceit that the exhibition *Young Americans* was a book. Actually, the exhibition started with the title *Young Americans*, which I know is counter to how many artists work. But, I used the title as a framing device for collecting certain materials within it. The literal touchstone for the title was a pair of books that the Museum of Modern Art published in the 1950s that I bought in a dollar bin. One was called *12 Americans* and the other *16 Americans*, which were primarily surveys of American art at the time. They were very formalized in a way, in that the editors accompanied reproductions of the work with stylized, staged portraits of each artist—the kind of thing you might see on the back of a book jacket. In the first book, there were portraits of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg—it was their first institutional show—and they looked *young*. To me, there's something amazing about these books in that they capture the potential that these portraits have, combined with two or three images of work that are the seed or the kernel of a practice that we now know.



<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/sullivan4.jpg>

**JH:** So, are you reading their work through this biographical filter?

**DH:** Only on a superficial level. I became fascinated with these portraits, in the sense that rather than seeing a work as a footnote for a period, you actually saw the faces of the people who made them. In truth, even though I had used the MoMA catalogues as a starting point, I also broke the rules a little bit. There's an image of Philip Johnson from the 1930s, and one of Montgomery Clift from the 50s. I'll admit I'm being a little loose with the term, but I'm wholly interested in the idea of the relatively young American artist, and also the position of youth in cultural production. I'm not trying to revisit or unearth a history, but I'm using it to reflect on the present. On one level, I was thinking about how, as a young artist, you might only get a couple of chances: you throw your work up against the wall, and if it doesn't stick, then that's it.

And so, *Young Americans* became the title for an exhibition that was designed as a book, which is a way that one can formalize a set of ideas or information in a moment and allows us to then reflect on them later on. But, the exhibition is a temporal thing. Although the show contains about 14 framed drawings, they are hung on the walls on top of large black and white Xeroxed pages that in their form imply that they are pulled from the pages of a book. The prints have page numbers though not all of them are present.

**JH:** Looking at the documentation of the show, on some of these pages you've used this placeholder for an image—this rectangle or bounding box with an 'x' through it—almost as a formal device.

**DS:** Some of the pages have photographs culled from those books that I mentioned, while others have a bounding box as a placeholder ready to receive an image, which in my mind implies that the book is a draft, or in flux. These prints were hung in long horizontals around the various spaces that I was exhibiting in, and the framed drawings were hung on top, creating these two simultaneous rhythms through the space. I'd like to think of them as two trajectories slightly out of sync, so at some points the drawings would obscure what was behind them. But ultimately, you only experience this book within the space at KIOSK.



<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/kiosk%20sullivan8.jpg>

**JH:** That's a concept that comes up frequently in your other projects, too—where you posit that a book is a malleable, indefinite thing. This is a relatively old concept—from when early books were ripped apart and bound in anthologies for circulation, to more contemporary ideas around print-on-demand publishing.

**DS:** Yes, as a print-on-demand author you are able to constantly alter the file because each book is being printed one-at-a-time. Each time the book is printed, it has the capacity to become a unique iteration. So, in this sense, the book becomes a malleable framing device that allows one to float or consider a set of ideas.

**JH:** But, that runs counter to what we think books are: how they archive information; how they become these static, singular repositories for data.

**DS:** Well, they still do, but they are about freezing something that is already in flux. In terms of the artist books that I make, indeed there is no definitive version because the parameters of the book are more speculative. So, it's not about fixing an argument or form in time, but rather making manifest a kind of changing trajectory of thought. A book is fixed, but to experience it you have to read it, which is in itself an act of interpretation and not a fixed thing. These fluctuations of meaning and the shifting of meaning is something I'm very interested in. The *Poster Drawings* are comprised of these reduced, abstract forms so they have the capacity

to be about anything.

**JH:** Like a screen.

**DS:** Yes, a screen, or a platform to receive information. And, it's sensitive to context continually. In terms of the show at KIOSK, I showed four works from the *Poster Drawings* series, and in a way they became strangely affected by the structure of *Young Americans*. One in particular was based on this very strange, Op-Art inspired album cover from the late-60s, and it was from that juxtaposition that I began to think about popular music during that time in the context of the show.

**JH:** Do you feel this show could be easily shown in North America or do you think it has a certain appeal to a European audience?

**DS:** Well, that's part of it, as well. Initially, I liked the idea of it as I, too, am a young, American artist—although technically a North American artist—and I thought of the show as a way to frame the foreignness of my point of view. I was making an exhibition at a place where I had already exhibited, so my work wasn't without context. But, it was foreign. So, it was a nice starting point for me to keep that foreignness in mind. We constantly recall the forms and exchanges in abstraction during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century between Europe and North America, but what is actually the residue or reputation of that history? I don't think we really look that well at art anymore but rather see art as a floating sea of signs. I use these strategies to tease out various signs to create a semblance of a subject, but that subject is always in flux. Dada is a loaded word, but it's essentially a collage strategy that I'm using. Especially in its early incarnations, such as with Schwitters, collage was primarily a formal enterprise based on abstraction. Understanding the work is based on its composition, though there's always this residue of where the fragments came from—newspapers, books and so on. The show at KIOSK came together in that way, having a group of images, my own reading experience and then bringing that together with a few other trajectories, such as a drawing practice, and setting it up in a context that is foreign to me. Friendly, but foreign. And, the titling for the drawings would occur after the fact. It's not being indefinite; I'm very definitive about the fact that ideas change. It's about being open to the fact that these things are going to be refined and projected on.



<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/sullivan6.jpg>

**JH:** Or, accrue meaning over time.

**DS:** Exactly. It's like a snowball. But, at the same time, I know I do it in a very subtle way. These changes are quite slight. There are enough practices out there devoted to accruing material, like Dieter Roth's works or Jason Rhoades' installations. There are the ways that those things can literally happen, but for me I feel that the things that I'm using as mechanisms in my work are actually present in all work, though we choose not to see them.

**JH:** Why is that? Is it a strategy of preservation that we don't see the changing core of art?

**DS:** I think that when an artist puts a work in circulation it is meant to be definitive. If that work becomes contaminated through other contexts, then somehow it's outside of the work. We know that a work is different in the studio than it is in the museum. There have been enough discussions about the role of the studio and the museum in contemporary art practice before and after Daniel Buren formalized it. We allow the work to be read under the authorship of a collector. But, what happens when, for example, a museum installs a Rothko next to a Brice Marden? Aren't they affecting each other? Shouldn't the fact that a certain work that is in storage for a decade should be taken in account? Especially now with the formalization of curatorial practice, the work does reflect the authorship of the curator, as well. The work is physically unchanged, but that exhibition history should be considered a material part of the work; so that in the *Poster Drawings*, the titles grow on them in such a way to acknowledge changes. I know at times the titles can be opaque, but



the fact is the real histories of art are opaque. The titles are not meant to be explicative but rather indexes for past contexts that we can't always access.

**JH:** Earlier you mentioned thinking about popular music, which is funny because I wanted to ask whether there was a relationship between David Bowie's stab at 60s soul with his album *Young Americans*—or the title track—and this show?

**DS:** No, not at all.

**JH:** Well, is it a latent reference?

**DS:** I want it to be a *false friend*, which is this idea that manifests in translations between languages. It's a word that sounds so familiar to your own language that it must have the same semantic meaning, but often it can mean the opposite. I wanted to have an ambivalent take on what *Young Americans* was. I'm interested in evoking those latent references, but it wasn't about Bowie, specifically.

*Derek Sullivan's Young Americans was exhibited at KIOSK from April 23 to June 12, 2011. His Albatross Omnibus opens at the Power Plant on September 24, 2011.*

**Jen Hutton** is an artist and writer based in Toronto.





**Robert Waters: Willem Dafoe from *The Last Temptation of Christ*, 1988 (Dir. Martin Scorsese), 2007:** Red wine ("Sangre de Cristo", Mexico, 2005) on paper. All images courtesy the artist and p|m Gallery, Toronto.

## Catholic Distastes: Robert Waters uncovers fraught histories

**By Bill Clarke**

*According to a review in Art in America, globe-trotting Canadian artist Robert Waters creates "intelligent, sophisticated art, in which the poetic always trumps the polemical." Indeed, Waters' work has always trafficked in potentially controversial subject matter, from early paper-based works using vintage gay pornography as its basis, to paintings, sculptures and installations that chronicle the misdeeds of the Catholic Church. Through it all, however, Waters' demonstrates a deft handling of unconventional materials, such as painting with red wine or urine mixed with vinegar, or using communion wafers as canvases. At the end of 2009, a retrospective of his religious-themed work was mounted at Ex Teresa Arte Actual, a former convent that has been converted into an art space, in Mexico City, where the artist lived for three years before decamping to Spain in early 2010.*

*This past winter, Waters' mounted his first solo exhibition in Europe at Artium in Vitoria, the capital city of northern Spain's Basque Country. Titled "uncover RECOVER", Waters' two-month-long project examined yet another fraught subject,*

*the legacy of the Spanish Civil War. While in Toronto this spring, Waters' sat down with Magenta editor Bill Clarke to discuss the project and how immersing himself in Spanish culture has influenced his practice.*



(<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/Waters2.jpg>)

**uncover RECOVER, 2011:** Waters (at right) collecting soil from a mass grave with Aranzadi scientists and volunteers, Oteiza, Navarra, Spain.

**Bill Clarke (BC):** How did the exhibition in Spain come about?

**Robert Waters (RW):** In 2008, I had work in a group show called *Shake Before Using* at Artium, where my recent show was held. The first show was all site-specific installations, and I did a "Man at Computer" packing-tape mural. The exhibition included an interesting mix of artists, including Katarina Grosse, Jorge Macchi and Maider Lopez. My exhibition earlier this year was part of a series organized by Artium curator Blanca de la Torre. The series, called *Praxis*, is influenced by a 1970s DIY, no-budget, 'hello, financial crisis' approach that encourages artists to play a very active role in their exhibition. In most cases, the exhibitions have evolved over the course of their run, so the process *is* the exhibition.

**BC:** What did your exhibition entail?

**RW:** For my project, titled "uncover RECOVER", I grew medicinal plants for the community using soil obtained from a Spanish Civil War-era mass grave. Although Franco died in 1975, I found it interesting that the official exhumations of the mass

graves didn't start until around 2000. Perhaps, this was because Spanish society needed to forget the past in order to move forward. But now, those who actually experienced the Civil War first hand are passing away, so there is a resurgence of interest in that history. The mass graves aren't marked, and the people who know where they are located are passing away, so excavating the graves has become a priority. There are over 2,000 mass graves throughout Spain and they are still finding more. A fraught debate continues between those that don't want to dig up the past and those with no direct experience of the Civil War, with questions they want answered. The ramifications of living under a dictatorship for that long are still felt, and the country is still in need of healing.

**BC:** Was it difficult to obtain permission to take soil from the excavation sites?

**RW:** Surprisingly, no. I worked with Aranzadi, the scientific society responsible for the majority of the exhumations of the grave sites. When they first started, there was no funding, so most of the exhumations were carried out by volunteers. I contacted the group that was responsible for the excavation near Pamplona, and told them about my idea for the exhibition. They were quite receptive, largely due to the reputation of the museum where I was showing. They are also very scientific in their approach; there were no politics.

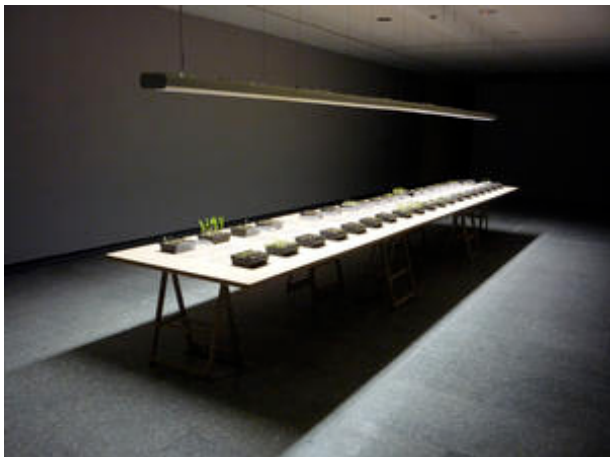
**BC:** What was it like working with the excavation team?

**RW:** It was a very poignant experience. I was expecting to just get some topsoil, but, upon arrival, I actually stepped down into the earth to see exposed skeletons. The scientists were brushing the dirt right off the bones and giving it to me. So, for the project, I was growing the plants in soil that was flesh that had turned into dirt. The scientists told me that, in this climate, that would have taken about six months.

**BC:** How did you decide what plants to grow?

**RW:** I found a Spanish book on medicinal plants from the 1940s, the transition period shortly after the war ended. I went to a local seed shop and they provided me with seeds for 36 different plants. The plant that most interested me was the Ginkgo biloba tree, which is proven to increase memory in humans. I liked how this

tree's medicinal properties tied into the exhibition's theme of "historical memory", which currently is a big movement in Spain. This plant really became symbolic of the entire project; turning death back into life, and using history to help the present. "Leaves of Grass" by Walt Whitman was also an inspiration. Actually, I found a copy of it in Spanish, translated by Jorge Luis Borges. This idea of translation became important as well in thinking about the afterlife in a purely material way. With the Ginkgo biloba tree, specifically, there was this idea of the dead enhancing the memories of the living.



<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/Waters3.jpg>

**uncover RECOVER, installation view at Artium,  
Vitoria, Spain**

---

**BC:** Do you have a green thumb?

**RW:** (Laughs) No, I'm not a gardener! I do enjoy it, though several of the plants died, and I had to replant them or adjust the mixture of the soil. But, part of this project was to learn not only about gardening, but also about the Civil War and the history of the country in which I was living. Instead of just reading about the Civil War in books or on Wikipedia, I was able to engage in conversations with the community as the exhibition progressed and learn that way.

**BC:** How did you organize the exhibition?

**RW:** The gallery space was divided in two. The front was like a waiting room area where people coming to the gallery found information about the exhumations by

Aranzadi, herbal medicine, and healing environments. I designed this space based on articles for improving the healing environments of hospitals – how to reduce stress and promote psychological healing with the use of sound, colour, art and plants. Of course, it included a clock, front and centre, to suggest the necessity of time in healing and growing. The back of the gallery contained the “greenhouse”, with the 36 plants on a long wooden table under fluorescent lights. The exhibition ran for two months, which was enough time for the plants to germinate from seed. I was in there every day, watering and tending them. There was an adoption list for the plants in the front room; people could sign up to take a plant home at the end of the exhibition. The plants came with adoption certificates from the museum and information on how the plant could be used medicinally.

**BC:** You said that the Spanish Civil War still fosters debate, so what was the community’s response to your exhibition?

**RW:** Well, most of the plants were claimed, so I think it was pretty positive. I was actually very worried about arriving as a foreigner and addressing a topic that is still very touchy for a lot of people. It’s a political issue but, more importantly, it’s an emotional one. But, because “uncover RECOVER” was about turning a negative into a positive, people were very receptive. I was told by people who visited the exhibition that a Spanish artist probably couldn’t have thought of it because it was too simple – that they are just too close to the issues. The exhibition, like the exhumations, wasn’t about laying blame or finding justice, but about the healing process, restoring dignity to the people who died in these atrocities, and acknowledging these lives that were cut short.

**BC:** How did “uncover RECOVER” relate to your previous work?

**RW:** I think the easiest tie-in is that I’ve always worked with materials that are charged with meaning.

**BC:** I also think it ties into your past work because it has to do with bodily absence and presence.

**RW:** Yes, I am interested in the temporality of the human body, as well as the

societal attitudes around the body and how they shift, including how technology affects our bodies. I've also investigated violence and masculinity in relation to the body. I also like thinking about how we, as bodies, influence the world.

**BC:** What prompted your move to Mexico City and how did living there affect your work?

**RW:** From a practical standpoint, I moved there because it is cheaper to live there as an artist than in Toronto. I was able to live well on \$1,000 a month, and was able to make work full time for the first time in my life. But, I wasn't sure the direction my work was headed when I moved there. I initially thought that moving to Mexico would give me new ideas about the influence of the U.S. – from the point of view of their *other* neighbour – but, I found that what I noticed most was the Spanish influence. Although Mexico has strong economic ties to the States, culturally, they are still more closely tied to Europe.

Being in such a large city with a vibrant and exciting art scene was great, but becoming immersed in a Catholic culture influenced my work more profoundly than I would have guessed. Their symbols are everywhere, and memories began to surface from my youth, both learning the history of Italian art in high school and struggling with personal religious beliefs. I grew up in the United Church of Canada, but I still consider some of their (Catholic) symbols as my symbols. Their's tend to have a lot more blood on them, though.

Ultimately, being in a different country freed me to try new things – take more risks than I would attempt here in Canada. And, I learned how to speak Spanish, which allowed me to think about and approach things differently. It has opened a huge part of the world to me.

**BC:** How do you respond to people who think your work conveys nothing but a hate-on for the Catholic Church, and that you've chosen too obvious a target?

**RW:** I feel that I am being true to my Protestant roots by questioning the authority of the Church. I am now an atheist, but most of the people I love aren't. Really, a lot of this work involves my coming to terms with who I feel Jesus Christ was as a

human – a teacher and philosopher in a line of great teachers and philosophers. The Catholic Church makes itself an easy target by not changing with society. Their hypocrisy is becoming more and more evident. Take gender inequality, for instance. They're making themselves irrelevant.

What I have found most difficult, though, about using the iconography of the Church in my own work, is that people tend to only look at the surface of the images. I'm attempting to use their images to examine other things.

**BC:** Well, such images are already so laden with meaning....

**RW:** Exactly. But this meaning and its significance are changing over time. The course of world history, as well as Western art history, has been hugely influenced by developments and changes within the Church. Part of my interest in using the Church comes from the fact that it has existed for such a long time, and that it is possible to see and think about our changes as a society over time. An example is my series "What You Can't See" (2007 - 2009) – a group of loincloths based on Italian paintings of the Crucifixion over the course of 300 years, from early Christian to Mannerist depictions. Aside from isolating the loincloth as a new symbol for what the Church represents to me – both not knowing and covering up – it represents art styles and social attitudes changing over time.

**BC:** How does the response to your work differ here than in Mexico or Spain?



<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/Waters4.jpg>

**uncover RECOVER:** Waters (centre) at Artium, giving



plant care advice to members of the community who  
adopted plants.

---

**RW:** Well, in Mexico City, I had the opportunity to show in a former convent, so that added a greater weight to the work and the experience. The space was incredible! The museum said that they never before had to add a second comment book, and most of the comments were very positive. Showing the work here in Toronto, though, it almost feels irrelevant. I'm not sure why. Perhaps, it's because we have so many religions that can practise freely. Tolerance of others' beliefs is ingrained in our society but, in Mexico and Spain, the Catholic Church is a monopoly.

**BC:** My favourite works of yours are the images of actors portraying Jesus in the movies, painted on paper using a Mexican red wine. What is the story behind those?

**RW:** This was largely about subjectivity, how media influences our understanding of something, and how changes in media mean changes in understanding. At first, after his death, impressions of Christ were conveyed orally. Soon after that, the story also began to be told in images, through painting and sculpture. In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, though, movies have become the dominant media for telling stories. My series of Jesus paintings, titled "Jesuses", brings together 12 different actors interpreting 12 different versions of Jesus' story. The wine, which is actually quite bad, is called "Sangre de Cristo" – Blood of Christ – so, in the end, it's about the subjective understanding of a symbol.

**BC:** But, you could argue that they're really not that subjective. They all pretty much conform to the Western notion of Jesus. There's not a whole lot of variety in how Jesus is presented nowadays, especially in North America...

**RW:** Well, yes...a Western idealization has certainly happened. Scientists have actually done fossil analysis and developed computer composites of what Jesus would have looked like, based on the skeletal structures of men from Nazareth 2000 years ago. It's unlikely that Jesus, by our current standards, was very handsome. Well, maybe he was kind of cute...but that's about it! (Laughs) Either way, he certainly didn't look like Willem Dafoe, Jeremy Sisto or Jim Caveziel. You bring up a good point, though, that relates to Baudrillard's idea of the simulacra - the idea that

there is no 'original', that there are only copies, which eventually become the 'real'. Our understanding today of who Jesus is – not was – comes from these copies. We've moved from oral to visual representations of Jesus, and we are now on the cusp of another version of Jesus. Who is Jesus going to be in the digital age?

**BC:** That's an excellent segue into your upcoming show and the work you're putting together for it. You have recently moved into digital animation.

**RW:** Yes, I recently commissioned a digital animation based on Leonardo Da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man" called "I Am the Wave, the Particle, The Light". The title is a modification of the Biblical verse of Christ describing himself as "the Way, the Truth and the Life". The projected animation references the wave-particle duality of light, and our understanding of Christ as a man and a god at the same time. I don't want to give too much away, though.

**BC:** What else are you working on for the show?

**RW:** I'm currently working on a series called "Facial Expression Study for the Ecstasy of San Sebastian" made with black velvet on targets. I've also been starting to feel like my work has gotten maybe a little too neat, so there might be a decapitated head of a saint - something more visceral. This is a perfect example of how living in another place and learning Spanish has influenced my work; if you type 'decapitated head' into Google Images, the results are fairly tame. But, when you type it in Spanish – 'cabeza decapitada' – the results are...whoa!

*Robert Waters' uncover RECOVER was on view at Artium from January 11 - March 14, 2011. His exhibition, Mortal, opens at Toronto's p|m Gallery on September 8, 2011.*

---



<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/M&R1.jpg>

**Gwen MacGregor and Sandra Rechico: You are Here: path (2011):** Digital ink jet print. Images courtesy the artists.

---

## **Spatial Reckonings: Gwen MacGregor and Sandra Rechico invite us to get lost**

**By Sally McKay**

A red dot on a map is reassuring symbol. When you lose track of where your body is in space, the dot can momentarily take your place, and that swimming sense of being lost comes to an end — you are here. The red dot in Gwen MacGregor and Sandra Rechico's photograph does something different. It is not just a symbol, but a thing, made of matter. Its existence as an entity, in a specific yet un-labelled place, stands in for the viewer's living, breathing body, as it moves through space and time. Unlike the dot on the map in the shopping mall, this one asks us to become a little lost, to look at our own everyday locations with fresh eyes, as if we were in

need of navigation.

I don't usually think very much about where I am. Without looking up from my computer screen, I can tell you that I am in my office, in a downtown Toronto neighbourhood. I know my postal code. Ensnared in this familiar spot, I am not required to be aware of my surroundings. Even if I were to leave the office, get on my bike and go to the beer store, I would not need to devote many brain cells to navigation — I've done that route plenty of times before. But, what if I *was* lost? What if this messy office was suddenly rendered unfamiliar? Would my heart rate accelerate? Would I begin to feel my body shifting, looking, sniffing, feeling for perceptual cues to help me orient myself? What details about this place would assume a feeling of significance?

MacGregor and Rechico inhabit space in a heightened state of awareness more often than most people who live in large cities. Through their embodied artistic investigations, they have both become alert to the extraordinary aesthetic experiences that can be found embedded in the mundane, everyday activity of moving through space. MacGregor is often lost — she tells me that she has a terrible sense of direction. But, as part of her collaboration with Rechico, she carries a GPS device that records her every movement. When travelling with friends, she confounds them by refusing to use the GPS as a navigation tool. The technology is not there to influence her movements, only to record them for future reference. Rechico, who usually knows the direction she is facing, keeps track of her movements in a little notebook, writing down details about the paths she's taken as she goes about her day. As cartographic tools, both systems are fallible. MacGregor's GPS is sometimes just plain wrong, and Rechico's note-taking is subject to the imperfections of memory and other types of human error. As an aesthetic system, however, this joint process of record-taking and comparing notes is a generative framework, an underlying practice that lets sensory experience take centre stage.



**ATrans Pavilion:** Photo credit ©Claus Grabner, Berlin.

This summer in Berlin, MacGregor and Rechico will locate themselves at the ATrans Pavilion, a sort of human-scale fish tank located in the nested courtyards of the Hackesche Höfe area. Much of the exhibition, curated by Isolde Nagel, will be created on site, as the artists open up their collaboration to include Berlin artists and passersby. There will be two works in the show. In preparation for the first, MacGregor and Rechico have been engaged with one another in a process of call and response. Between October 2010 and May 2011, Rechico has been in Toronto, while MacGregor has been travelling in India, Europe and Britain. The artists maintained regular contact over Skype and e-mail, each tracking their own movements and passing their notes and images back and forth to one another.



<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/M&R3.jpg>

**Toronto – Wales (2010):** Digital ink jet print.

One time, the artists shared short videos of sunsets shot through the silhouetted trees. The two suns, glowing fiery red, are really one sun, experienced by different people, at different times, from different places on the planet. Usually, however, the images are less universal and more mundane, small intimate moments that resonate as a reminder that every normal life is full of aesthetic points of interest. Rechico drew a little map of the movements she made in her Toronto studio building. She scanned the image and sent it to MacGregor who printed it, cut it out and placed it into a formal conversation with the skyline of a small mountain in Wales. Another time, MacGregor sent photographs of small store windows she passed along a city block in Barcelona. Rechico responded with photos of a city block she walked in Manhattan.

Separated by continents, the artists took time with the aesthetics of one another's

situated experiences, developing a visual dialogue around the small, felt moments that can emerge when one is paying attention to place and time. At ATrans, they will invite Berlin artists to join in the call and response, grounding and extending the project with Berlin-based notes and images.



<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/M&R4.jpg>

**One Block Square (2011):** Digital ink jet print.

For the second piece at A Trans, MacGregor and Rechico will engage with passersby moving through the Hackesche Höfe courtyards, gathering data about how far people have travelled that day, and at what time. They will then make this information manifest in a three-dimensional, multi-layered line drawing that criss-crosses the space inside the pavilion. The piece has grown out of an earlier project, *Distance (Kassel)*, that was shown as part of their 2008 exhibition, *Maps in Doubt*, curated by Dan Adler for Mercer Union in Toronto and Gallery B-312 in Montreal.

*Distance (Kassel)* consists of graphite drawings by each artist, that literally represent the distance each of them travelled while attending Documenta. Rechico drew 69 km worth of graphite lines on her paper and MacGregor drew 80. The minimalist, grey drawings are both representational (indicating the distance travelled) and indexical, indicating the rigorous embodied labour of producing the drawing itself. The drawing at ATrans will have a similarly physical presence. The lines themselves will be made of material sourced in Berlin and they will be painstakingly installed by hand. The artists hope that the minimalist materiality of the piece will afford viewers the opportunity to experience the collective movements of people through the city in a whole new way.



<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/M&R5.jpeg>

**Distance (Kassel):** Graphite on paper.

In the age of Foursquare and Facebook, human movements are increasingly recorded and commodified. An instructional video on the Foursquare website begins, "Wish you were more aware of all the incredible things around you? With Foursquare, you can unlock your world and find happiness just around corner!" Happiness, apparently, comes from keeping surveillance-style tabs on your friends' activities and getting discount coupons from "one of the thousands of places Foursquare lists". On Foursquare, if you spend more time checked in to a particular location than anyone else, you get the title of "mayor" of that site. As of March, 2010, Starbucks offers special discounts to the "mayors" of their locations, making a direct link between social network hierarchies and marketplace reward. MacGregor and Rechico, alert to the exploitive aspects of social networking media, will be careful not to ask their participants for any sensitive information. They don't, for instance, want to know where we live, what we had for breakfast or our current relationship status. Instead, they want us to feel an embodied connection to the places we are always, ever moving through. By making manifest the physical traces that our bodies leave behind, they also draw attention to the material influence that various forms of spatial reckoning can have on our own sensory experience.

Considering all the lab rats that have been run through mazes in the history of science, a surprising number of questions about relationships between spatial reckoning and consciousness remain. Linguists Lera Boroditsky and Alice Gaby have been researching the Aboriginal language Kuuk Thaayorre in Pormpuraaw, Australia. In Kuuk Thaayorre, there are words for left and right; all spatial terms, including those on a very close personal scale, are conceived in reference to north, south,

east and west. As Boroditsky and Gaby explain in a [2010 paper for \*Psychological Science\*](http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2010/10/19/0956797610386621) (<http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2010/10/19/0956797610386621>), the most basic elements of communication are affected by this orientation. “In Kuuk Thaayorre ... to say hello, one says, ‘Where are you going?’ and an appropriate response would be, ‘a long way to the southsouthwest.’ Thus, if you do not know which way is, you literally cannot get past hello.” (When I mentioned this story to MacGregor and Rechico they laughed and said, “That’s what we do to each other.”)



(<http://www.magentamagazine.com/sites/magentamagazine.com/files/images/M&R6.jpg>)

**You are Here: roof (2011):** Digital ink jet print.

For English speakers, the concept of personal space tends to revolve around one’s own vantage point. For the people of Pormpuraaw, personal vantage points revolve inside a concept of space. In an [interview for the Radiolab podcast](http://www.radiolab.org/2011/jan/25/birds-eye-view) (<http://www.radiolab.org/2011/jan/25/birds-eye-view>), Boroditsky explains that even the very small Pormpuraawan children can always point to north when asked, even when they are indoors. They achieve this by paying attention to their own movements, keep track of the twists and turns they make as they progress through space. The Pormpuraawans have the ability of dead reckoning, meaning that they can always find their way straight back to their starting point, no matter how circuitous the path that they have taken. “That ability we thought was beyond human capacity,” says Boroditsky, “we had observed it in ants, and we had observed it in birds, but there was always some other explanation — like birds have magnets in their beaks and ants are counting steps — you know, there’s some kind of extra thing that they were doing. But there’s about seven thousand languages in the world, and about a third of the world’s languages have this property ... these are not folks that have magnets or special ant superpowers. They are using the same cognitive system that we are using, they’re just using it differently — they are paying attention to something that



we normally don't pay attention to."

This is exactly what MacGregor and Rechico are also doing, paying close attention to their own, ongoing space-time continuums. By keeping track of their movements, they suggest a different kind of social media. The Foursquare app feeds information about our locations through the commodified and potentially intrusive databanks being compiled by Facebook. The collective experience of spatial relations thus becomes an anonymous hegemony, reducing participants to the roles of consumers or, maybe worse, "friends." Our social status in these networks takes precedence over any embodied experience of place they might provide. The networks explored by MacGregor and Rechico, on the other hand, are quixotic, fleeting and material. As audiences, we may choose to become embodied participants, and take stock our own temporal, aesthetic experiences as we interact with space and time and place.

So now I look up from my keyboard and ask myself, "Where am I?" I am in a room with a window facing west. Soft afternoon light is filtering through the pale curtain and making objects on the desk around me shine. To the north, a dusty old glass jar full of Sharpie markers and pencil stubs picks up photons and glows like some kind of grail. I take a deep breath, waking up the sun-drenched cat to the south. She looks at me strangely, wondering where I am going to go next. I wonder the same thing.

*Gwen MacGregor and Sandra Rechico's project, Backtrack, takes place at [A Trans](http://www.atrans.org/) (<http://www.atrans.org/>) in Berlin from July 30 to September 10, 2011. For more information on their work, visit their [web site](http://cargocollective.com/MacGregorRechicoProjects) (<http://cargocollective.com/MacGregorRechicoProjects>).*

**Sally McKay** is an artist, curator and writer researching neuroaesthetics for a PhD in Art History and Visual Culture at York University in Toronto. Recent essays include "[The Affect of Animated Gifs](http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/the-affect-of-animated-gifs-tom-moody-petra-cortright-lorna-mills/) (<http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/the-affect-of-animated-gifs-tom-moody-petra-cortright-lorna-mills/>)" published by art&education and "Nature in the



Network,” part of the exhibition catalogue [FASTWÜRMS Donky@Ninja@Witch: A Living Retrospective \(http://theagyuisoutthere.org/everywhere/?p=2792\)](http://theagyuisoutthere.org/everywhere/?p=2792), published by the Art Gallery of York University.

---

**Published in** [Magenta Magazine Online \(/epublish/1\)](#), [Summer 2011, Volume 2, No. 3 \(/epublish/1/7\)](#)

---

**Previous Story:**

[Black Metal, Black Humour: Steven Shearer rocks Canada’s pavilion in Venice \(/7/features/shearer-black-metal\)](#)

**[View All](#)**

**[Issues \(/epublish/1\)](#)**

**Next Story:**

[Energized Landscapes: Robert Bourdeau’s art of looking and seeing \(/7/features/bourdeau-station-point\)](#)