

# AN INSIDER VIEW TO THE PAST/PRESENT OF AN ART PROJECT “The Future is on the Table”

*Written around October 18 by Gwylene Gallimard. Some discussions took place since and hopefully will spread on this website soon.*

These five pages have been written for a few reasons; regroup, prepare Happening 2 & 3, communicate some thoughts and provide a context for Frank Martin and Darryl Wellington, and maybe other readers – their decision – to comment, add, criticize, propose, explain... Where are their words going to be placed, I don't know. Their decision this time. Please look at the catalogue and at

<http://thefutureisonthetable.ning.com/profiles/blog/show?id=1908930%3ABlogPost%3A2146>

Also, I am aware of the research for art space in Charleston, spearheaded by Redux Contemporary Art Center, and that gave me strength to be seating at a computer table this weekend as opposed to be using traditional tools in my studio. I would like to insist that without *The Future is on the Table* in Charleston, with all its artists and participants, those thoughts would not have existed clearly. Thank you so much.

## **Sept 13 HAPPENING 1, the City Gallery at Waterfront Park**

It is hot in Charleston. We just avoided two hurricanes. But see: blocks of ice are on the steps of the imposing stairway facing the Ashley river and the pineapple fountain of Waterfront Park. A woman dressed in white - Aurore Gruel - dances with the ice. Sounds and music are pushing her, or attracting her. The musicians - Bill Carson (accordion, electric guitar), Nathan Koci (accordion), Ron Wiltrout (percussion), Sam Sfirri (accordion, piano), Hazel Ketchum (accordion, lute), Mustafa Walker (percussion) are relentless partners with the precision of her movements. The chemistry is efficient. The stone steps get darker as the ice is so slowly melting. Or is it her sweating?

In the Park, along the river, wanderers are proposed a gift: a special handcrafted thought or a \$1 bill. All gifts are colorfully handmade, except the \$1 bills. A special thought - always nice and kind though - to a stranger, do you think those are welcome?

It is crowded inside. The opening buffet is gone. Your front head may be stamped with a bindi – a red dot - by three ladies from India. There is still dance with ice and live music. Other sounds invade the space: hip-hop poetry and music; a recording of the freezing and breaking up of the Doubs river in France; trains – Charleston trains and the adventurous TransSiberian –; the streets of Mumbai; laughs and a harsh discussion on race. Hard to follow anything. I am at the same time exhausted and not at ease. I hear and I see what is still missing. Need two more days. Would like to propose a rehearsing and a walk through. Why? Everybody is here. Everybody is ready to be public. We can do more... Almost everybody is here. There is a sense of happiness, which should allow truth, strength and energy again.

It is my turn to speak, which means to honor all participants. I know I am going to miss some efforts, which have moved mountains. A customer of the cafe is gently reminding me that maybe I should not be here. She or I don't get it I guess. Not enough thanks in my mouth and especially I can't find the poetry or humor that may englobe the depth of

these last weeks and mention the links or the net in the making. Nevertheless thank you Office of Cultural Affairs: you made it possible.

### **Sept 14 HAPPENING 2, 1PM to 5 PM, the Garden of the Gibbes Museum of Art**

It is 95° and we had known that. So lucky. Jonell Pulliam and I chose the garden as the locus for that event, as opposed to Gallery A, the exhibition space. After *Happening I* in a majestic two floor high venue facing a river - and even the ocean – with 55' x 20' of windows, to be in an air-conditioned room with no windows would have limited our “*The Future is on the Table. Welcome*” approach. So we rolled all the carts to the garden. Actually this was their first trip as active art elements of this show.

Between 50 and 60 people were very attentive and participated till 5 Pm. This was an amazing afternoon among the most diverse crowd. What a day! What a day for the arts! What a memory for all participants! This was the last day all national and international travelers were in Charleston and the first day they could publicly say it all: *How did I feel when I first received the gift of the stools? How did I arrive at my concept? How did the gifts influence my work at home? From us who are at the community end in Charleston, whether as artists or participants, how did the project impact us? Has this project given me ideas of how to carry the spirit of it further? Was this useful to me or was it a burden? What will I do with the cart? Will I give it to someone else? What is the role of the artist in the community?* Those questions were presented by Linda Burnham and Alice Lovelace who had been invited to help us make sense of the whole project. Artists, teachers, assistants, observers, we all talked. There were the fine arts and the one of dance, the creative traditions of craftsmanship, the arts in education and their role, the arts as presenters of issues, the community-based arts and the arts based in communities; the Gibbes Sunday visitor and the issue-driven activist, the photographers/filmmakers and note-takers, from youth to senior. People were African- and Euro-American, African, European, Indian.

Please look at the very thorough notes taken by Ruby Thorkelson at <http://thefutureisonthetable.ning.com/> and scroll down to **Opening Weekend-Presentation at the Gibbes.**

The dimensions of our attempt with *The Future is on the Table* were revealed as an almost complete art project. As Tim Taylor and Conner Hansen, two observers, successively noticed “*If you ask honesty of an artist, do not expect to be entertained*” [although] “*The art could be seen physically, of course, but there was also art being constructed out of the invisible connections between the people as they interacted.*”

Thank you so much. How to say that today, it feels that the whole journey, which includes as much a learning as a giving process – and some waste - is 100% worth it. And everyone felt this tone.

The working visitors did not have time to go to the beach. Debra Wright, who had housed some of the visitors, had launched the idea: a trip to the beach. What an idea! Years ago the stools had been transported to Folly beach to take a picture of their leaving to the big big world and that picture had become the symbol of *The Future is on the Table*. As an echo, or maybe an achievement, participants from Zimbabwe, India, France, Nigeria, England and the States found themselves RUNNING to the water together. But don't

misunderstand the scene! The strongest pictures of the day do not show faces but many backs, as they are running to the water. And as art history shows us, the representation of a back has moved from secondary role to a thoughtful one, rich of mystery, independence and revolt.

## **FRAMES, FRAMING OR BEING FRAMED**

The City Gallery at Waterfront Park is a space big enough to allow multiple aesthetics, Although it is obvious that its architecture has some pitfalls regarding water leaks, ceiling height and lighting in regard to diverse presentations of arts, it is nevertheless a large space wide open to the scenery afforded by one of the rivers “which created the Atlantic Ocean”, as it is said in Charleston. In that sense it is interesting to contrast it with the architecture of The Charleston Museum, the bunker type architecture that has been prevalent in the States in the 70’s. Art, History, even Natural Sciences were supposed to be preserved from... maybe the cold war... maybe the degradation of urban downtowns.... maybe the students... or the poor people... or actually the unknown (?) neighborhoods and communities. At the same time in other parts of the world museums were built as a symbolic gesture to invite the city within their realm. The Georges Pompidou museum of Art in Paris is one example, which became at the same time a serious competitor to the Eiffel Tower and a free space for urban culture, the good, the bad and the ugly. But the City Gallery at Waterfront Park is also literally on a podium – two long majestic stairways govern its entries – And it is within a frame, the one of high-end condominiums. It is situated within the old Charleston where most of us cannot expect to live and that has been renovated as the heart of the Charleston tourist attraction. Actually many tourists visit the City Gallery at Waterfront Park since it offers one of the rare public restrooms in the area.

In planning “the return of the stools”, that is the coming of all participants in *The Future is on the Table* to Charleston, we have let the space of that gallery invade us. We wanted to take advantage of all its best features, create a universe out of its shape, render it round and pierce its center. At the same time we wanted to make sure it was not going to be perceived just as a gallery. We were bringing the world to Charleston, a global dimension. And we wanted to link it to our Charleston. By design we wanted to reach a multiple audience, one which may feel secure only in a school setting, or one who looks at libraries as an endless treasure, or one whose five senses are challenged only in the wild. The show at The City Gallery at Waterfront Park is to be seen as a garden, flowers and greens one can touch. Actually if you enter it on the street side it is a pass to the Waterfront Garden and the shores of the river. The following words in the voice of my late friend Hugh DesMarais resonate in my head: “There is no set way to see the place” - a show as a garden - “Any way is the right way”. One may be attracted by the flowers or the trees, the frozen rocks or the sanctuaries, the places to seat or rest, the water, shelter and race issues or the marketable items. Art is a right and an adventure, then maybe a journey or a cause.

So why is the show not really working as dreamt? Here we have to go back to our discussion of the frames. The podium like situation of the City Gallery at Waterfront Park

was only excused the day of the opening. The work of Delphine Ziegler and Aurore Gruel creating ice blocks in tropical Charleston and playing with them was – no pun intended – refreshing. The whole area felt the cold air of the frozen Doubs River way passed the horizon and its scale was transformed. We had not gotten an authorization to use the park for that performance, because it is a "people's park", which we were told means "no art" and for us means dancers, musicians, clowns, visual, conceptual or community-based artists are not people. People whose trade and life is to inform, represent, express and communicate are not people. So what is being done in segregating those activities out of the realm of day-to-day life and framing them in entities, which represent a limited view of the American dream, is preventing people to meet the work of artists, and take the time to be at ease with art. Art: a private, frivolous or dangerous activity? What The City Gallery is missing in order to play a full artistic role is... the people; or a school nearby, a public school on the same type of podium; a full neighborhood involved in daily life (sleep-work-question-honor) and shops for all. And there may be a few homeless around. And artists' studios. The art some of us are striving to make is not only for being shown. It involves people in the concept, the production and the aftermath. There are five love-chairs part of the show. Have they been used? Has a photographer caught activity there, as opposed to organize a promotional shoot?

The Gibbes Museum show in Gallery A was conceived in a very different manner. The museum has a presence conferred by history. It is a site to be entered when touring Charleston. But, like many of this type of museums, it is suffering. Museums (le Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and le Musée de l'Homme in Paris) were the subjects of my visual art thesis to receive a Master from Ecole National Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in 1971. I always loved museums. All of them. They represented for me in my youth the Ali Baba treasure. Actually my art practice stems as much from drawing early on as from sojourning in museums. When we were offered the use of Gallery A I saw more than one formidable opportunity. A practical link between the Gibbes and The City Gallery could be developed as a link that would expose their complementarities. I also saw the situation of Gallery A as a free space, across the public bookstore, before the stand where you pay for entering the Gibbes Museum per se. Some people involved in *The Future is on the Table* project have never been to the Gibbes, because of personal decision, lack of interest or negligence. Maybe they will push the heavy door by necessity this time and who knows, then cross the financial border. And I was told Gallery A was meant to be an information or a documentation room, with computer access to the collections. Following other artists, I saw the opportunity to promote love of art in placing art objects of the Gibbes collection along cherished memorabilia. See the development of his idea in the blog at:

<http://thefutureisonthetable.ning.com/profiles/blog/show?id=1908930%3ABlogPost%3A2484og>

For all those reasons Jean-Marie Mauclet and I loved gallery A. This was an offer better than the whole museum and was challenging our project. We will swallow the blue, white and brown color of its walls and have a table emerging out of its floor. We will not damage the walls with holes. *The Future is on the Table* in Gallery A was going to be narrative, documentary, at the intersection of art and function. Therefore the idea of carts. Carts could mean market places, information centers with freebies, all in one utility, an

offer or a storage... They may be of different styles and different usages, but they may maintain a question: what are they doing here? Eight carts were designed in collaboration with participating groups and artists, then built by Jean-Marie Mauclet with drawers, attachments and specific features to be completed or animated during residency times in Charleston. The show will also propose a large table with many books for consultation. Then the Gibbes Museum proposed a residency for Phinias Chirubvu, accompanied by a partnership between the Gibbes Museum clay studio and Wilmot J. Fraser Elementary School.

So why is *The Future is on the Table* at the Gibbes a hidden traditional art show? Here again we have to go back to our discussion of frames. I do believe that art is a generator of tools, which have the power to tell stories, imagine or generate perceptions or provoke dissent, as well as the power to be inclusive or the one of segregating people, cultures and practices. As an example women for centuries – as well as other groups – have been excluded from producing the arts that would be chosen to define the European dominant culture and dominant art history to be taught. This knowledge or question, however, does not seem to have generated awareness of all its consequences. And in many situations it has not generated an open discussion about the practice of art and its consumption. Large banners announce the main show of the Gibbes and there is a bookstore sign on the steps leading to the Gibbes. Not one word about *The Future is on the Table* or gallery A or Phinias's residency. It is not a question of money as if it had been exposed in those terms, a solution would have been found, by necessity. We were also told that people will have to buy a ticket to enter Gallery A, which is, by design, an impossible task for the person behind the desk to manage, a task much harder than the one of letting people know that viewing this gallery is free of charge and that the Gibbes proposes annual memberships for their main shows and collections. Moreover the tours, which were planned, were not announced in blast e-mails sent just the day before. Should we, the artists and participants – contemporary and community oriented - feel that we have not been taken seriously?

We want to believe that problems surrounding the arts are not only insiders' problems and politics. They are generated by a cultural lack of openness and maybe a political lack of respect for artists, in a formula not so different from the one governing workers Vs financiers. Our show at the Gibbes is a conversation with the Gibbes - not all shows are or need to be like that. We created it as a conversation because this work is not only the one of two local artists. It is bringing potential international connections. *The Future is on the Table* generates opportunities to hear about different museum experiences and maybe more immediately valuable, specific contemporary artistic practices, which include outreach in their process. Has *The Future is on the Table* been framed to remain a symbolical gesture at the Gibbes? Why some of our potential audience was not genuinely welcomed as the result of a creative outreach program that some of us like to call an "inreach"? And how come so few art-students or art-teachers took the opportunity to meet Rajni Shah, Delphine Ziegler, Aurore Gruel and Marcia Kure at their presentations at the College of Charleston? What is wrong with the arts? Or, what is wrong with the arts institutions?

The frame(s) have two actions: they protect the work of art from being contaminated by the outside and they protect the outside from being contaminated by the work of art. The work of art is then well kept in place, on a throne if possible and demanding to be competitively priced. The arts I know tell stories of adventure, critical analysis, political implication, anthropological comparisons, deconstruction, permanence and dissent. *The Future is on the Table* participants do not include a collaborating historian or a curator. No exclusion there, more a result of pressure on contemporary artists to understand multi-disciplinarity, budget limits and the necessity to take charge when one lives in isolation. It is also a result of some sort of market study in Charleston. A lot of contacts and offers were made. All answers were great, the same way all stories are good in a story circle. They shape the work. By design all answers were used and not abused. The Future is now on a table that provides many tablecloths and the three-legged stools have often found their fourth leg. Thank you so much. September 2008 in Charleston, what a great memory! Vielen dank. Dhan-ya-vād, Muchas gracias, Xièxiè. Köszönöm, Kam-sa-ham-ni-da. Merci beaucoup beaucoup beaucoup... Those are really great shows and we all can do better I think.