

The Paths Between Word and Image

An exhibition by
Marie Samuel Levasseur

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ARTIESTE

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Foreword

Since I took on the role of Executive and Artistic Director at Artexte, accessibility has been on my mind. A few projects have been carried out, including one focused on digitizing documents in accordance with WCAG (1) standards so that more people with diverse abilities can access them. Other initiatives have helped establish initial contact with certain groups, whether through sensory tours for people with visual impairments or through training that enables us to better welcome Deaf visitors. Artexte has added an accessibility statement to its website, where one can read, among other things, the following lines: "Artexte is committed to providing an inclusive environment. We are working to promote accessibility in order to provide equitable access to the documentary collection, research, and programming activities." These are very small steps, but the team is taking them sincerely, with a genuine desire to offer services adapted to our capacities.

It is in this desire to reflect on the accessibility of our services that Artexte selected Marie Samuel Levasseur's proposal, which integrates audio description into her creative process. She asks herself how we describe artworks to others. As part of her residency, she wanted to challenge her "chatter" methodology, which involves describing a work in a non-linear way, letting oneself be guided by speech, by emerging thoughts, without limits. Through this freeing of speech, each person starts from their own experience, background, knowledge, and sensitivity. There are multiple ways to construct micro-narratives, multiplying points of entry to offer a personal vision of a work. This work of description also involves a concern for finding the right word. The richness of vocabulary is essential in order to create different paths between images and words. Marie Samuel Levasseur takes the exhibition as an opportunity to pay tribute to Jean-Claude Corbeil, creator of the *Dictionnaire visuel* (Visual Dictionary). The first edition, published in 1986, had the slogan "The shortest path from image to word." The goal was to provide everyday terminology for elements of daily life and, very certainly, to eliminate anglicisms, which were often used at the time in workplaces.

Marie Samuel Levasseur's time at Artexte proved to be very fruitful. Some of the elements included in the exhibition were produced during her residency. This is the case for the annotated bibliography *Repenser la description des œuvres d'art* (Rethinking the Description of Works of Art). The artist, who developed this bibliography section by section, offers references that address seven categories, including: "How can emotions, affects, and bodily experiences serve as tools for analysis and transformation in our engagement with art?" and "What is hospitality, and what ethical and practical frameworks transform art institutions into spaces of welcome and liberation?" She was also able to record four interviews with people from diverse ability communities, or with those who rethink our understanding of the world through the body and through words. These interviews can be listened to in an area of the exhibition space set up so that visitors can sit comfortably. The concept of hospitality, which was one of the artist's guiding questions, becomes concrete here and unfolds throughout the space. Marie Samuel Levasseur's contribution strikes me as essential in rethinking our exhibition presentation models, using the white cube as a starting point and turning it into a place for living and sharing. The artist cares about your well-being and makes simple but effective gestures to enrich our experience as visitors. The paths between word and image become invitations to bring our experiences into dialogue, and to let ourselves be guided by different narratives that have so much to teach us.

- Manon Tourigny

(1) Web Content Accessibility Guideline

Artist's word

To me, describing a work is never a neutral or purely technical act: it is a way of being in relation, of taking the floor either to welcome or to exclude. Every description is carried by a voice.

This exhibition invites visitors to move through voices that create pathways between language and what becomes image. I drew on two major privileges to develop this proposal: a research residency at Artexte, following a residency completed in 2023, *Interroger l'accès*, at OBORO, the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, and Spectrum Productions. Another profound privilege, my experience as a caregiver, shapes the entire exhibition space. Describing things with precision, specifically for someone I love, is part of my daily life, and it makes my life very beautiful.

With *Beau dire*, I invited people to describe, in their own words, a work of art that had made a lasting impression on them. Their voices, multiple and singular, seek a form of accuracy. The transcripts, displayed on the wall, preserve the rhythm of each speaker, making silences, hesitations and repetitions visible. What matters to me here is the way a work moves from one body to another, from one memory to another. *Beau dire* also shows how, for most of us, speaking publicly remains a vulnerable and rare act.

The plurality of voices is also at the heart of *Pièce*, which brings together eleven different audio descriptions of the same video. Each person describes it for the first time, without training, embracing their subjectivity, their identity and their voice. In French, in English or in sign singing, these descriptions call into question the idea of neutrality often associated with audio description. A collaborative practice rooted in multiplicity becomes a form of precision, and description becomes a creative space in its own right.

With *Le dictionnaire visuel de Jean-Claude et Ariane*, I pay tribute to my friend Jean-Claude Corbeil and to his deeply humanist vision of language. By imagining a dialogue between 1986, the year the visual dictionary was

published and the year I was born, and today, I reflect on its everyday use in my life and on its potential as a tool for creating pathways between words and images. The visual dictionary's schematic approach is far more than a predecessor of today's search engines, since it involves an important act of translation that builds bridges toward ways of thinking we should consider more carefully when we talk about images. In that regard, people from linguistically diverse backgrounds and people who are neurodivergent, in my view, often have a head start.

The series *Repenser la description des œuvres d'art : conversations*, recorded during my research residency at ArtexTe, extends these reflections through warm, informal exchanges with artist friends, writers and cultural workers. These conversations open up sensitive and non-linear paths for rethinking our relationship to art and the ways we talk about it.

I invite you to take your time, make yourself comfortable, choose and move the chair that suits you best, and slip on a pair of slippers. Here, describing is also a way of caring for one another and imagining, together, more equitable and sustainable ways of doing things.

This spatial proposal, and every element within it, would never have come to life without the participation of many friends. Interdependence is at the heart of the exhibition, since nothing could have been done by me alone. Thank you to the incredible authors whose words punctuate the space. Thank you to everyone who had the desire and the courage to talk with me. Thank you for making the journey here to visit the exhibition. We were waiting for you.

- Marie Samuel Levasseur

Interview

For your residency project here at Artexte, you explore text and audio description in art from an intersectional approach. Can you tell us what led you to this area of research? And what made you want to revisit the idea of “description” in the art context?

I actually came to audio description and text description separately, via different paths. The broader point of departure was my research-creation practice, where I was developing a methodology I call “bavardage” (chatter)—a way of making art that draws on multiplicity and micro-narratives. For me, description isn’t just about translating or explaining; it’s an act of presence, an act of relationship.

But it was really my own personal experience as a caregiver that led me to specifically revisit the idea of description as such. I care for my child, who has encephalopathy and severe receptive and expressive speech disorder, among other things. So, every day in my role as a caregiver, I describe the world to her. Through this experience, I have come to understand that to describe is to love. It means building something together, making the world livable for someone else, and in doing so, allowing oneself to be transformed.

In the art context, it seems to me that description has often been thought of as a practical, technical, and neutral activity. However, in reality, description is never neutral: it carries subjectivity, a voice, a situated perspective. This is precisely what interests me: how audio and text description can become sensitive, porous, intersectional practices; how multiplicity can lead to much greater precision than traditional methods based on reduction, synthesis, and concision.

A few years ago, during a residency (*Interroger l'accès*) with Oboro, the Musée d'Art Contemporain, and Spectrum Productions, I tried to reframe the idea of audio description so it would no longer be seen as a mere afterthought, a layer added at the end of a project. Instead, I proposed that description is a space of creation in its own right—a space of care, resistance, and

hospitality. For me, it's also a political question: Who has access to the artwork? With what words? With whose voices? Who narrates? Who translates? And who is it for?

It is with these questions, which are theoretical, but also deeply emotional and rooted in the everyday, that I wish to open this research project at Artex.

Can you tell us more about your “*méthodologie du bavardage*” (chatter methodology)? Where does it come from? How does it manifest itself concretely in your practice?

My practice is based in chatter because chatter firmly rejects finality and repetition. It allows me the possibility of always telling a story differently, of always starting over again without aiming for a coherent ending. The chattering person—the so-called chatterbox—is often perceived as excessive or bothersome. However, the chatterbox possesses a particular form of knowledge: they reveal, they shed light, they know secrets. Their words, judged to be too verbose, too dangerous, or too disordered, circulate every which-way, avoiding linearity and narrative closure.

Writer Suzanne Lamy (in *D'elles*, published by L'Hexagone in 1979) describes chatter as a “a window, a wound, a valve, an escape, an outlet”, that is, a path of exploration and self-revelation. She also writes that chatter is often considered “irredeemable” discourse, because it does not allow itself to be confined to a goal. I feel that my own place is precisely in this absence of finality. Perhaps because I find comfort and a form of hope there as well.

My experiments with the unspeakable—the inexpressible, with what is not supposed to be said out loud in social spaces—seek to thwart normative language. Through the proliferation of voices, through the breakdown of time and memory, through fragmentation and multiplicity, chatter becomes a form of resistance.

Chatter also means making do, tinkering and creating with that which remains. After loss, destruction, and trauma, what is left? How can we make something out of it? The chatterbox, much like the tinkerer, works with the vestiges. She assembles, cuts, glues back together, stitches up, creatively misuses. She makes these vestiges into something material, something new, she transforms it into living narrative. Detritus and noise, like silence and unspoken words, also tell our stories. And out of them, other forms of memory and meaning can emerge. I am a chatterbox; it is my way of speaking, of thinking, of creating. It is my way of making meaning.

While exploring the Artexte collection, were there any documents, formats or voices that particularly moved you? Were there specific moments of surprise or resonance during your research and readings?

As a true chatterbox, it wasn't one specific voice, but rather the multiplicity of voices that most moved me during my research at Artexte. I find libraries and archives moving because of the thousands of voices that meet there, defying eras and geographic constraints. For example, I was able to make connections between the exceptional practice of Lorenza Böttner, a Chilean-German trans artist from the 1970s-1980s who worked with the handicap of not having arms, and the recent writings of Amanda Cachia on prosthetics in contemporary art. What a privilege it is to have text, audio and video traces of these artists, knowing that only a tiny part of crip knowledge is considered and conserved by institutions. I can only feel sadness when I think of all the people who have been erased from the monolithic History told by the privileged in libraries and schools. Fortunately, oral history and other subterranean modes of recounting have allowed some otherwise inaudible voices to survive. I hope to be able to further develop the files of Indigenous artists and d/Deaf and disabled artists in the Artexte collection over the coming years.

You posit a vision of description that touches on the essence of the relationship to the work, to oneself, and to others. What would you like the art world to take from this approach?

What I'd like to get across, very humbly, is that description is not just a secondary or peripheral operation, but rather that it touches on the essence of our relationship to the artwork, and even goes through and beyond it. This essence is not a monolithic truth or an objective meaning that must be faithfully translated; it embodies the depth of the experience: the encounter between body, subjectivity and artwork, with all the affects, contexts and resonances this entails.

In working on this bibliography, I've tried to pay particular attention to how artists from equality-seeking communities describe their own artworks. Their modes of description often circumvent or reject the idea that there is a single "right" or "complete" way of speaking. Instead, they embrace micro-narratives, the craft of detour and circular forms. These strategies open up the possibility of description that eschews exhaustivity in favour of embodiment.

These practices should not be seen as technical or anecdotal add-ons, but rather as forms of knowledge in their own right. They show that description can be polyphonic, that it can incorporate multiple, situated, and even sometimes contradictory voices. And this polyphony—far from diluting the aesthetic experience—reveals the layers, the gray areas, the possibilities carried by the works themselves, by the artists, and by their own spaces and systems of creation and dissemination.

For someone like me, who has worked in the museum and communications fields for nearly 15 years, revisiting description is not just about improving accessibility in the technical sense of the word. It's also about questioning the way language shapes our relationships with artworks, and indeed the world. It's about asking: Who's allowed to speak? Which bodies? Which voices? Which experiences are considered legitimate in art spaces? By foregrounding these questions, description becomes a tool for symbolic redistribution: it can contribute to transforming and making visible. In short, description is not an extra

or an afterthought, but a critical, situated, and sensitive practice that encourages us to rethink our frameworks of production, mediation, and transmission. Describing an artwork is a way of giving voice; of centring the Other. It's a way to position oneself as an active witness.

You draw inspiration from crip practices in order to think differently about description. What do these approaches allow us to repair or reinvent, in our relationship with art and accessibility?

Both as an artist and as a caregiver, crip studies and the practices of disabled artists offer me the hope that we really can build new models and generate new forms of knowledge and activism, with the goal of changing our world and its oppressive structures. I am not a defeatist, perhaps because I consider myself a survivor. And I've survived thanks to models of interdependency, because the disabled people around me are a source of deep beauty and joy, and because they choose to live their lives to the fullest. Much like Indigenous forms of knowledge, Crip practices debunk myths of efficiency and linearity. They demonstrate the benefits of other rhythms, other languages, and other ways of building community.

Description enables us to repair many things. Firstly, the feeling of exclusion that art provokes when it is designed for a supposedly homogeneous audience. Crip practices recenter experiences that are usually marginalized. They challenge the idea that these experiences represent a kind of lack, and affirm their role as vectors of situated knowledge and lasting solutions for the future of our world. They show that we can describe using many voices, with humour, poetry, and subjectivity. That we can slow down, digress, improvise, be comfortable, and leave room for uncertainty. They allow us to reinvent our relationship with accessibility itself: not as an afterthought or a kind of repair, but as rather as a driving force for creation. They remind us that making art accessible is not about standardizing, but rather about multiplying possibility.

Crip practices expand how and what art can be, and for who. This is why I advocate for more funding, space, resources, and consideration for d/Deaf and disabled artists and publics. My d/Deaf, disabled and Indigenous friends are extraordinary people, artists, and researchers, and I dream of a future led by them. It is this idea that gives me hope and keeps me going.

- Maude Levasseur, for **Artex**

Marie Samuel Levasseur has a multidisciplinary practice that blends art and life. She has developed a collaborative, creative process through chatting, and uses micro-narratives to express the indescribable, but also plural identities in narratives that relate to the experiences of remarkable lives. Levasseur holds a Master of Visual and Media Arts from UQAM, and graduate diplomas in Indigenous Studies and Education. She is currently pursuing studies in sexual and interpersonal violence. As a caregiver, she is also developing a co-creative and curatorial practice at the intersection of art, truth, and justice, namely as part of the duo Place Courage.

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Artexpte supports artists, researchers, and curators in a collective effort that involves our entire team, including external collaborators who participate in the success of each project.

Artexpte is:

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