

# We Knock on the Table

An exhibition curated by  
Tiphaine Girault and Elizabeth Sweeney

from April 23rd to June 20th, 2026



**ARTIESTE**



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# Foreword

I first came into contact with Tiphaine Girault in 2017, when I attended—and was deeply moved by—her presentation at *Flotilla*, a conference series organized by the Artist-Run Centres and Collectives Conference (ARCA) in Charlottetown. This event brought together workers from artist-run centres across Canada to meet and network. I believe I wasn't the only one unfamiliar with Tiphaine, SPiLL PROpagation, and the realities that Deaf artists have to deal with. Tiphaine's presence literally shook the room. On stage, she spoke in American Sign Language (ASL), and seemed completely at ease. This was the first time I had ever attended a signed presentation. Tiphaine was accompanied by three interpreters, who took turns signing. During her presentation, she said she was there to raise awareness of just how underrepresented Deaf artists are in Canadian artist-run centres. (1) I was working at Centre CLARK at the time. Accessibility issues were not taken into consideration, let alone understood. Tiphaine's talk did open our eyes, but we were far from grasping that we could become allies.

The limited presence and indeed absence of Deaf artists in our community is systemic and multifaceted. The root of accessibility problems in the art milieu lies largely in our lack of awareness and acceptance of ability diversity. Fortunately, in recent years, we have seen the implementation of several initiatives for artists who are of diverse abilities on the part of some artist-run centres and museums. (2)

1. There is still much work to be done. But we must applaud initiatives such as Vidéographe's residency program for Deaf artists, launched in 2017.
2. Tours adapted for people with reduced mobility, tours in ASL/LSQ, tours for the visually impaired, etc.

Arts councils at all levels have developed funding structures to support diversely-abled artists and programs geared towards them. (3)

The work we did with Tiphaine during her residency required many adjustments on our part. For example, what kind of materials can we collect from Deaf artists, if their language is neither French nor English? This question may seem naive, but it was to become a key factor in our learning process. For 45 years, Artex-te has processed printed documents for inclusion in artist and organization files.

These written materials allow for the cataloguing and inclusion of artists and organizations in our e-artex-te database. It took us some time to fully grasp that the Deaf community has little interest in producing this type of document.

The exhibition *We Knock on the Table* revisits the history of the organization SPiLL PROpagation (2009–2026), and showcases several of their projects. In 2023, SPiLL published a bilingual book with Sagamie recounting some of these. The exhibition features this book, along with a signed version and other archival documents, forming an overview of the organization during its 17 years of existence. The end of the SPiLL adventure will undoubtedly have repercussions on the Deaf artistic community and its allies. Who will represent them? Who will form the next generation?

I would be remiss not to deeply thank Tiphaine for all her patience throughout this process, as well as Elizabeth Sweeney for her work and allyship. Together, we were able to conceptualize the exhibition with Deaf visitors at the forefront of our minds, without neglecting the needs of hearing people either. *We Knock on the Table* aims to embody a comprehensive overview of SPiLL's entire journey since 2009.

3. For this project, Artex-te received financial assistance from the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, enabling us to hire interpreters to host Tiphaine's residency, and to continue our collaboration with her in the organizing of the exhibition. Without this significant support, the project would have been impossible.

I would particularly like to highlight the significant contribution of Paula Bath and Tiphaine Girault in bridging gaps between our communities, and for making dialogue possible despite our language barriers. I also want to acknowledge the interpretation work of Josée Bower. Thanks to her presence, we were able to truly connect with Tiphaine.

Artex-te still has much to learn and work on in terms of accessibility. However, each project that centres diversely-abled artists and their art represents a step in the right direction.

- **Manon Tourigny**, Artistic and General Director at Artex-te

# We Knock on the Table: 17 years of SPiLL PROpagation

SPiLL PROpagation started 17 years ago, with the goal of infusing Deaf arts into the arts ecology and bringing both Deaf and hearing arts and cultures together. It was led by multilingual co-founders, Tiphaine Girault a Deaf artist originally from France, and her wife, Paula Bath, an anglophone sensory anthropologist and retired sign language interpreter. They were first inspired by artistic practices developed by Josette Bushell-Mingo at Tyst Teater ("Silent Theatre"), a national touring Deaf theatre company in Sweden. Here they encountered Deaf and hearing artists working together without the use of interpretation. Instead, the artists were called upon to work through the confusion and communication barriers, and find new ways to create together.

**Spill:** *to make a mess, to spread out, to flow, to take up space.*

When SPiLL started in 2009 there was very limited organizational support for Deaf arts and artists in Canada, mostly in Ontario, and there were no integrated arts organizations actively developing new ways for Deaf and hearing artists to blend their practices.

I first met Tiphaine in my role as Accessibility educator at the National Gallery of Canada, 20 years ago and subsequently, I was one of SPiLL's first board members. We have collaborated and worked interdependently over the years, and it is this relationship that I credit for my motivation to learn sign language (albeit, still quite intermediary). Our most recent collaboration was *Re{verbe}*, an exhibition hosted by Concordia University in 2024.

To fully appreciate the work of SPiLL PROgration it is important to understand the broader context they are situated in, that is informed by both phonocentrism and audism. *Phonocentrism* is generally understood as the superiority of speech over written or sign language, first identified by Jacques Derrida in 1967. (1) *Audism* was later defined by Deaf researcher Tom L Humphries as “*The notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears.*” (2) Together these concepts shed light on how speaking and auditory environments oppress Deaf space, the existence of signing and sign languages.

When hearing people are unable to use sign language when communicating with deaf people, the support of interpreters or captioning allows for understanding, but at a cost. These accommodations center spoken and written language in the space, reduce deaf expression and understanding and remove the opportunity for direct embodied communication through sign language. It is not that one language is inferior to the other, but rather the recognition that signing and speaking are different yet parallel modalities that are not interchangeable or translatable.

Throughout my history with SPiLL, I have been honoured to be invited in, to sit around the table with many Deaf and hearing artists. Through these experiences I have learned a unique LSQ (Langue des Signes Quebecois) custom: to knock twice on the table before eating. This is the sign for “bon appetit” and it is signed in harmony with others to start a shared meal. When developing Spill, Tiphaine and Paula recognized the absence of knocking at most dinner tables in Quebec. They did not vibrate.

1. **Derrida, Jacques**, *Of Grammatology*. (ver. 1998) Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967.

2. **Humphries, Tom L.**, *Audism: The Making of a Word*. N.p.: Unpublished essay, 1975

They lived in a world where signing Deaf people primarily existed in spaces and environments that prioritized speaking and hearing, and where the clinking of glasses replaced the knocking of fists.

Throughout SPILL's work, they have developed innovative artistic practices that deconstruct phonocentrism and audism and offer up new ways of working for us all. Through collaboration with Deaf thinker and artist Jolanta Lapiak, the group came to deepen their understanding of these concepts and set a path forward for their artistic practice.

*"With sign language having space and place in social life, a separation between people vanished. We no longer thought of social life as being me (a hearing person) and Tiphaine (a deaf person) working for the inclusion of deaf people in the arts. Instead, we pivoted. We were now meeting on a common ground, between spaces and between language. We both love the arts and sign language. That was our collective center. Our life. And we started co-creating from here." (3)*

- Paula Bath

With Jolanta they came to also define a phonocentrism deconstructionist *"which is a creative person who, through their work, is transforming phonocentrism and redefining practices and processes to induce social change."* (4) This is exactly who they are as artists, and through their work, they have also infused these values in broader artist ecologies and with a growing number of deaf and hearing artists.

**Propagation:** *to propagate, to pollinate, to grow and multiply, to disseminate, to progress, to expand.*

3. Bath, Paula, "Deconstructing Phonocentrism." in *SPILL PROpagation*, 24. Alma, Quebec: Centre SAGAMIE, 2023

4. Ibid, 25

I had the privilege of seeing *A Glimpse of Me* in 2019. It was a polyphonic moment between three Deaf immigrants to Canada, each expressing their lived stories in different languages: Iranian Sign Language, comic drawing and spoken English – simultaneously. I still remember the discomfort and panic I felt, as the work started, with no interpreter or captions in sight. I actually wondered if I needed to harness my ‘hearing saviour complex’, and alert someone to this obvious mistake. Once I accepted this new reality, that no one was there to interpret for me, I let a mix of curiosity and effort take over, as I watched drawings take shape on the stage, artists expressing themselves through sign, and animated projections, all weaving together. I didn’t catch everything and I wasn’t meant to. My methods of communication were not prioritized, and it was then that I started to really understand the ways phonocentrism affected all aspects of social life and art. And while I missed signs I didn’t know – I witnessed a new artistic practice emerge that night and I understood the stories, experiences and feelings of Deaf people in profound ways, directly from them, in ways that I had never experienced before.

In Canada, you can count the number of arts organizations led by Deaf artists on one hand. Tiphaine and Paula wore many hats, and worked tirelessly to evoke as much change and innovation in the arts as possible. Their work in the sector was transformative as was the support they provided to Deaf artists through artist skill development and Deaf art-focused residencies.

For a small arts organization, whose first head office started as a backyard shed in Gatineau, their list of initiatives and “firsts” is nothing short of astounding:

- First Deaf curator at the City of Ottawa art Gallery, **Perceptions**, and first signed exhibition panel text and labels
- First Deaf-led performance in LSQ, Yvon Kader, performed *La Nouvelle Scène*, Ottawa

- First Deaf-led artist run center, and first one to join ARCA
- First Deaf artist residency program, hosting 3 residencies in 2 cities.
- First Deaf co-directed ASL performance, *The Tempest*, at The Citadel Theatre, Edmonton
- First inclusion of Deaf arts organization in an NFB documentary, *The Dance of Words*
- First Deaf art installation, *RythmScape*, at the Ottawa Art Gallery
- First acquisition of Deaf art, *RythmScape*, at the Ottawa Art Gallery
- First Deaf artist-run organization on operating funding at the Canada Council of the Arts
- First Deaf arts organization to be shortlisted for the National Gallery of Canada's Lacey Prize

This is just a sample of some of their many accomplishments, but their impact is most felt by Deaf and hearing artists, who SPiLL brought together, around the same table. Through their various projects and residencies, artists were able to deepen their practices, be empowered and supported, learn from each other, and grow. This growth and empowerment happened because the power dynamic between Deaf and hearing artists was shifted and shattered, to place Deaf ways of being as central. Spill gathered artists from across the country, broke rules, made new ones, hosted joyful family gatherings, and throughout it all, made sure everyone was included.

*Fist - heart - splat*

This exhibition at ArtexTe celebrates the life of SPiLL PROpagation which existed from 2009-2026. While it marks the closing of a chapter for SPiLL, it also documents all of the energy and advocacy that will

As we look out into the art landscape today, we can see the impact of their legacy: an increased number of Deaf-led arts organizations receiving funding, Deaf-arts residencies and training programs, and new groups of artists working to integrate Deaf and hearing arts practices. The genre of art Tipahine and Paula wanted to see exist – now exists. And this shift is to be celebrated.

The documents in this exhibition are part of a larger acquisition of Deaf and disability arts, which Artexte is committed to collecting, and will now be accessible to future artists and researchers. Yet another integration of Deaf and hearing cultures. Yet another first. This exhibition is an opportunity for all of us to knock on these quiet tables, feast on the history of these artists, and disrupt the idea that art is best documented through text.

*Knock knock*

**- EB (E. Sweeney)**

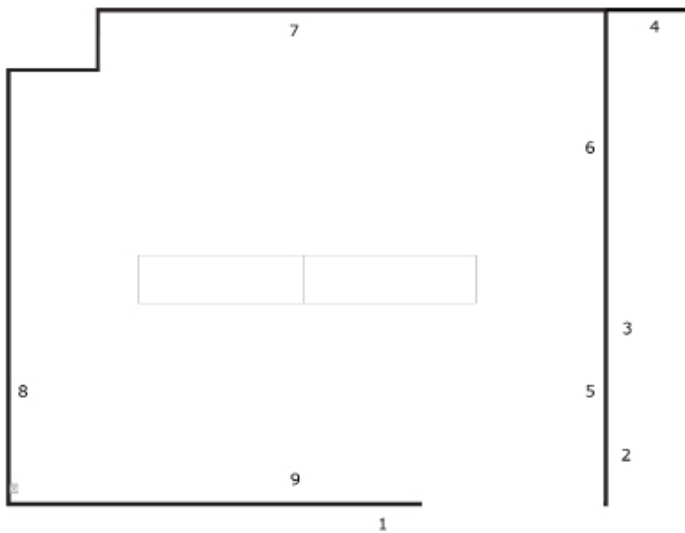


Illustration : Emmanuelle Jacques

# Biographies

Born in France, **Tiphaine Girault** is a multidisciplinary artist. She followed a BFA in comic book at Université du Québec en Outaouais. Along with Paula Bath, she was the co-founder of SPiLL PROpagation, a non-profit organization whose goal is to support and promote the artistic practice and Sign Language art from all over Canada during 17 years.

**Elizabeth Sweeney (EB)** is a neurodivergent, queer, and Acadian artist-curator, who grew up in rural Nova Scotia. She has a BFA in Studio Art from Concordia University (2001), a B.Ed from the University of Ottawa (2005) and an MA in Critical Disability Studies from York University (2012), where she focused on disability arts, representations of disability in the visual arts and contemporary curatorial practice. For the last two decades her visual arts and curatorial practices have been centered on arts accessibility, Deaf and disability arts and aesthetics of access. Her work takes many forms including performance, participatory and relational practices as well as craft, studio and media arts. She has worked with SPiLL since its inception, as a board member, collaborator and as a curator.



1. Illustration by Emmanuelle Jacques
2. Booklet in French with LSQ interpretation
3. Booklet in English with ASL interpretation
4. Video: Becoming Public – Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, 2017, SPILL archives
5. 1st, 3rd and 5th shelves : SPILL archives, 2nd and 4th shelves : Artexte documents
6. Video + Spill Red Book, SPILL archives
7. Video: Le phonocentrisme, vous dites ?? – Sylvanie Tendron
8. Video: La Fabrique Culturelle – SPILL Propagation, SPILL archive 9
- . Re{verbe} + book by Emmanuelle Jacques

# Acknowledgements

Elizabeth would like to thank SPiLL, and everyone at Artex-te, especially Amed.

Artex-te 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.

Artex-te is:

Manon Tourigny (General and Artistic Director), Maude Levasseur (Administrative Director), Amed Aroche (Programming Coordinator), Jonathan Lachance (Documentation Technician), Léa Boisvert-Chénier (Librarian, Collections), Marie-Noëlle Pelletier (Collections Assistant, Archives), Kim Trudel (Gallery Attendant, Communications Assistant)

Contributors:

Mark Lowe (technician), Simon Brown (traduction), Marie Samuel Levasseur (post-production), Emmanuelle Jacques (illustration), Josée Sarah Bower (LSQ interpreter), Tiphaine Girault (LSQ interpreter), Paula Bath (ASL interpreter), Vidéographe, Centre CLARK, VOX,.

Artex-te thanks the Conseil des arts de Montréal, the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec and the Conseil des arts du Canada.



To view SPiLL PROpagation's video archive, scan the QR code.







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ISBN 978-2-923045-78-8

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