

UNTITLED (1992), Rose-Marie Goulet with Effets Publics

This is the fifth stop on the Public Art, Public Memory tour.

Before entering the atrium of the J.W. McConnell (LB) Building, take a moment to notice two sculptural elements on its exterior. At the sidewalk level is a large cement “pi” symbol, and a metal letter “z” rests on the column above. Now enter the atrium of the building: you are presently in the middle of *Untitled*, the multimedia installation created by the group Effets Publics, led by artist Rose-Marie E. Goulet.

What is around you? What do you notice? Where is the work? If you take a moment, elements may start to jump out at you. Perhaps the most apparent image is the crowd of letters floating up around the second floor, as if they had drifted and accumulated against the glass, while tiles of text fragments and math equations hover near the elevator.

The J.W. McConnell Building — more commonly known to the Concordia community as the “library building” — houses the R. Howard Webster Library and was completed in 1992. Effets Publics was specifically formed in 1989 to develop a work for this building.

The group was comprised of photographers Alain Paiement and Randy Saharuni, sociologist of art Guy Bellavance, design technician Bernard Denis and Goulet. Responsible for many public artworks around Montreal, Rose-Marie Goulet was educated at UQAM and Concordia where she earned a Master in Fine Arts. Her art practice, which primarily takes the form of public installations, often uses language as a raw material. Goulet recombines textual fragments in architectural space, distancing us from what words mean and prompting us to reorient ourselves to language’s materiality. This installation was developed in accordance with the *Politique d’intégration des arts a l’architecture*, commonly known as “1% for art”. This program ensures the integration of public art in government funded buildings.

The group worked closely with the library building’s architects to integrate the *Untitled* artwork into the design. If you can, look at the floor. Do you notice the white floor tiles interspersed between the grey and red ones in a seemingly random pattern? Or imagine how they would be formed. This is part of the artwork encircling the atrium. The mirrored column situated across from the elevators is at the center of this composition, which travels up to the second floor and is crowned by a swirling grid that resembles a kind of post-modern Tower of Babel. More fragments are scattered throughout the building, as if flung by the centripetal force of the rotating center. You already noticed the giant “z” on the exterior – made from steel grids echoing the architecture – perched above the De Maisonneuve Boulevard entrance; other parts of the work can be found nestled into lounges and reading rooms, only experienced by students and library-goers.

If you can, travel up the stairs leading into the library or take the far-left elevator which leads to the library reception area. You will find three screens integrated into a metal and glass sculptural construction across from the stairs. This section of the artwork is referred to by the artists as "La paroi des livres enchainés," which translates to "the wall of chained books." The phrase refers to the practice of literally chaining volumes to library shelves, a common custom in Europe in the Middle Ages until the end of the eighteenth century. The screens display images and videos on a program that overlaps them in a random fashion, creating reinterpreted imagery. The images depict an array of textual interactions: books, writing and other text-based media from diverse sources are compiled into montages that show language and knowledge in process. Some of the images also depict acts of censorship, such as the banning or burning of books. By evoking the imagery of chained books, the artists raise questions around access to information, and the structural forces that allow or disallow this access.

With fragments of math and language in all different tongues swirling throughout the J.W. McConnell Building atrium and within the Webster Library, we are reminded of the processes taking place on the floors above. At the library, the scholarly record is reanimated by thousands of scholars who comb through, assemble, and reassemble the collective memory archived here in this building. We are also challenged by this work to consider who has access to the information and knowledge that the university safeguards in its libraries and classrooms. Who gets to participate in these processes of knowledge-making, and who gets left out?

To continue this tour, click on *3 Scenes of Nymphs in Canadian Landscapes* by Kenneth Hensley Holmden.