

Dreaming of Swimming: The artistic process takes on Parisian pollution

Seattle-area artist Donald Fels is helping French middle schoolers imagine a different future for their polluted local river - and maybe themselves.

By Don Fels

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Editor's note: This is the second installment in an occasional series about the artistic process.

For the past two years, the Conseil General of Seine Saint Denis has brought me to Paris to work as an artist, with 12-year-old kids in Neuilly sur Marne, a suburb in the *banlieue*, the city's poorer periphery. Neuilly, as the name implies, is a town along the Marne river, home to a vibrant mélange of families, most of whom migrated to Paris from former French colonies, others from places such as Sri Lanka, Poland, Portugal, Russia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Most of these immigrant families are people of color. Almost all their children were born in France.

The parents work a variety of jobs: cooks in restaurants, pharmacists and engineers, caregivers, nannies, delivery people, taxi drivers. The families are large. The school, the College Honore Balzac (a college in France is a middle school.) is large as well, and it is also shabby, raucous and loud. Some of the kids come from troubled home lives, but for the most part the students are infectiously positive and upbeat.

I am the first foreign artist to participate in this decade-old French artist-in-middle-school program. But I have long worked with kids, in schools and out.

The Conseil General is roughly akin to our County government. It is elected directly by the populace, with divisions that oversee such areas as education and culture (both relevant to my being here). Seine Saint Denis, the regional governing body is a French department, one of the smallest in the country, but it has a long illustrious fighting history of far left politics.

The Seine Saint Denis leaders used to call themselves Communist, now they are Socialists. Either way, they see themselves as pugnacious and dedicated to providing resources for the disenfranchised people they represent. The people who run the two programs I've been involved with — *In-Situ* and *culture au college*, both administered under the aegis of Seine Saint-Denis — believe deeply in the power of culture to make a difference in the lives of immigrant kids and integrate them into French life.

Both programs target middle-schools because at that age the kids are old enough to understand and appreciate the conceptual underpinnings of art, but young enough to be less self-conscious about expressing themselves. The programs are part of a brash attempt to bring kids closer to the border of mainstream society. Artists of all disciplines participate: dancers, video artists, rappers, sculptors and cartoonists, as well as other visual artists like me. The artists spend time with the kids in classrooms and take them on field trips into Paris where they get to explore the world famous cultural institutions that few of them has ever stepped foot in.



Balzac College students visiting Malmaison, site of Empress Josephine's legendary rose garden. Credit: Don Fels

Each year the *In-Situ* program, which I was part of last year, brings 10 artists to as many middle schools. The program I'm with this year is much larger; I am one of 300 participating artists.

When I arrived last year, the program's suave, dignified and handsomely turned out director told me, as if against type, that I was there to "cause trouble," to "shake things up." The schools were far too rigid, he said. The art program was in place to create an "un-structure."

This is no insignificant task. The French school system is run from the national Education Ministry, which stresses memorization, lots of repetition, testing and numerical ranking. The Conseil General (though also a bureaucracy beholden to and funded by the French government) operates this guerilla art program entirely outside the national system, and uses no grades or testing. Under the current government of the Socialist Francois Hollande, it has become a national model.

Last year I was given a bare classroom — aka *atelier* — told that kids would visit the classroom, and that after a while I could come up with things to do with them. In all my years as an artist in schools, I had never been given such a vague and open-ended mandate.

Rather astoundingly, the kids arrived and together we dreamed up a project. For two months they worked with me and a perfumer to create and name a scent. Each of them received a bottle of Rosephine (I designed the packaging) and were, justifiably, very proud of their work.

Before this project I had zero experience with perfume, so I learned right along with the kids. The idea grew out of a larger project that I brought with me, one that we worked on together, and that I am working on still. It has to do with Empress Josephine's rose garden (1805-1815), which we visited along with natural history museums and perfume laboratories.

Once we decided on the perfume project, I received extraordinary support through the *In-Situ* program, which made it happen, and happen very well. *In-Situ* staffers found a perfumer with teaching experience, covered the cost of producing the perfume once we came up with our formula, and its package.

Throughout I worked closely with the College Balzac's primary art teacher, Wilfried Genetine. From the beginning, I was informed by program staff that I was not in the school as an art teacher, but rather as an *artiste* who would model art-making and art-thinking. I took this to mean that I would share my process of thinking through and carrying out ideas with the kids. I demonstrated brain-storming to them, from which the notion of making a perfume emerged.

True to the brainstorming model (and to my way of working as an artist), I didn't worry that I

had no actual idea how to produce a perfume. Wilfried, the gifted, kind and generous art teacher, has become a fine friend. I have little doubt that the success of last year's venture was the result, in large measure, of *In-Situ's* support, and of our close collaboration in the trenches. Thankfully, Wilfried's English is far superior to my French.



Scent testing in College Balzac's chem lab, an essential part of perfume development. Credit: Don Fels

The school principal, a passive force through it all, surprised me in the end by asking program staff if I could return this year. Which is why I am writing from Paris now, having just finished working at College Balzac again. I wasn't able to work with the same students this time, nor did I enjoy the same level of support I received from the Conseil General. Being one of 300 teachers is much different than being one of 10. Unlike last year, nobody was assigned to help shepherd my project.

I collaborated this year once again seamlessly with Wilfried, and with the chemistry teacher in whose class we created the perfume last year. The results this time were less spectacular, but not unexpectedly so. It's very late in the year, so the kids are thinking about the end of school. And we began with a predetermined project, which I was required to develop and submit to the Conseil General for approval last spring.

The school is near the Marne River, which is polluted to a degree that swimming is no longer allowed. My project, "Dreaming of Swimming" — they kept my English title — had the kids examining the condition of the river and its watershed and imagining a different future for both. In other words, our project came from me, not out of consultation with the kids, which I would have much preferred.

Getting these 12 year olds to imagine a future different from the present was difficult. "Why should we care about pollution?" one of them asked me one day. Because it could make you and many others sick, I replied. I had hoped to help the students become activists, and perhaps someday they will be. For now, though, they seem mostly to have folded the new environmental and perhaps artistic awareness into their already overburdened lives. To them, I think, the sorry state of their nearby river was just another in a long list of unfortunate conditions which they accept and ignore.

I showed them some 50-year-old photographs of kids swimming in the Marne, in floating enclosures, not unlike those being proposed for Seattle's waterfront. I expected outrage over the fact that they don't get to have the same fun, but none was forthcoming.

On the other hand, once we got to work they drew fanciful renditions of riverine frolicking and water parks along the Marne — again, not unlike those giddy looking illustrations prepared by the Seattle Waterfront promoters with kids eating ice-cream, etc. But most of what we did together was map-based. I wanted them to realize how central the river is to the geography of

their town.

Each student drew a map of how they thought the Marne moved through Neuilly, where it flows in relationship to where they live and to the school. Then we consulted actual maps. (I asked the people at Neuilly sur Marne city hall to provide a large map and a spokesperson who could talk to the class about what was being done to clean up the river. They declined, apparently none too willing to draw attention to the toxic state of the river.) Since no big map was forthcoming, we created our own, mosaic style, each student drawing and coloring a section. We used the maps to explore how pollutants could reach the river from such places as the nearby industrial and agricultural zones.

Even with the predetermined project, there was room to maneuver. And part of my mission was to show them how the system could be gamed, as it were.



One day I asked the kids what they would like to do next? They replied, "play a game." So we invented and together they made The Neuilly sur Marne Board Game. With the chemistry teacher I helped the class develop a list of sources of the river pollution. We had visited the local water treatment facility, so they knew how water could be cleaned. They made a

stack of cards to accompany the game. Draw a pollution card, it's back so many steps; get a card that shows a cleaner river, move forward. Each student made a swimmer game piece for tracking his or her progress along the game's river course. Playing the game engendered lots of sporting cheers and laughter.

Wilfried told me he was sure that the kids would see the Marne in a very different light now and into the future. I have no way of knowing if that's true. But I do know that art can provide a way of seeing the world that might otherwise be unknown or unavailable. Here in Paris, I am often told that Americans are pragmatists, not thinkers. Artists furthermore are often characterized as hopeless dreamers. For me, "Dreaming of Swimming" was a way to demonstrate pragmatic dreaming and collaborative thinking.

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