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JADE BOYD

This article explores a collaborative, community-based project that fuses both arts-based feminist and visual sociological perspectives through a collaboration with five women in leadership roles in a drug user union, Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU). VANDU is situated in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, British Columbia, in Canada's poorest urban neighbourhood. Through writing, photography and collage-making, participants in this study resisted dominant representations of women who use criminalised drugs by focusing on activism, family, friends and the spaces they live and work in. This paper contributes to a growing body of critical and feminist scholarship interested in using creative and visual methodologies and collaborative community artworks as tools for developing alternate perspectives about the lives of marginalised women.

This article explores a collaborative, community-based project, *Creative Explorations in Everyday Embodiment*, that fuses both arts-based feminist and visual sociological perspectives. Drawing upon tenants of creative ethnography and community-based research, the project engaged with five women in leadership roles in a drug user union, Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU). VANDU is situated in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, British Columbia, located on the west coast in Canada's poorest urban neighbourhood. Over the span of 4 months, during weekly group meetings, we collectively developed a creative art project drawing on themes that emerged over time through brain storming, focus groups, mapping, creative writing, community walks, photography and collaging. The central theme that emerged, marginalised women in leadership roles, is explored in this article. The first section of this paper discusses the setting of the study, the methodology and the research process. The second section discusses the findings drawn from the activities described above including the photographs and collage-making that women participants developed and presented to their peers.

VANDU AND THE DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE

Women of VANDU are considered to be bodies 'at risk' due to their social location in the Downtown Eastside, their drug use and their vulnerability to violence, transmitted diseases and homelessness (e.g. see Boyd 1999, 33). Compounding its status as an inner-city neighbourhood marked by visible drug use and poverty, Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, located on unceded Coast Salish indigenous territory, is renowned globally as a site of violence against poor and indigenous women (BBC International 2003; Culhane 2003). In fact, in 1997, the Downtown Eastside was declared a 'public health emergency zone' due to high rates of intravenous drug use, overdose deaths and HIV/AIDS infection rates (Boyd, Osborn, and Donald 2009; Culhane 2009; Wood and Kerr 2006). Responding to these crises in 1997, VANDU emerged to advocate for change in drug policy and to ensure that the experiences of those most affected were represented at the local, national and international levels. Similar to other drug user unions around the world (e.g. in the Netherlands, United Kingdom, United States, Australia and Thailand), VANDU is a peer-run organisation that seeks to improve the lives of people who use criminalised drugs. VANDU offers education, harm reduction services and ongoing weekly meetings, such as the SALOME/NAOMI Association of Patients, British Columbia Association of Patients on Methadone and Western Aboriginal Harm Reduction. VANDU is at the forefront of advocating for the human rights of people who use criminalised drugs and for an end to punitive drug prohibition (VANDU 2014). The VANDU board consists of both men and women who use or have used criminalised drugs. Although men outnumber the women who participate in VANDU (mirroring drug use rates in Canada), women have a strong voice on the board and in some of the groups that meet at VANDU. Women representing VANDU regularly speak at public community events and conferences in and outside of the Downtown Eastside, as well as to the media about the harms of drug prohibition and the potential for drug user unions to effect change.

Jade Boyd is currently a research associate with the Urban Health Research Initiative at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS. She has published in the areas of media representation and culture, mental health and addiction policy, deviance and regulation, and creative methodologies and urban spatial practices.

The negative impact of drug prohibition is recognised internationally by critical scholars such as Room and Reuter (2012) who explore how criminal justice initiatives and international treaties have ‘arguably worsened the human health and wellbeing of people who use drugs by increasing the number of drug users imprisoned, discouraging effective countermeasures to reduce harm and creating an environment conducive to the violation of drug users’ human rights’ (Room and Reuter 2012, 84). Other critical scholars, such as Alexander (2010), have brought our attention to the racialisation of drug laws and policy and its ongoing impact on black men in the United States. Although these researchers greatly contribute to our understanding of the negative impact of drug prohibition, they do not provide a gender analysis. Rather, women are absent from their discussion. In contrast, feminist scholars extend critical analysis to reveal how drug prohibition is gendered.

A feminist perspective allows us to understand how all women, but especially women suspected of using illegal drugs, are regulated in ways that differ from men (see Kensy et al. 2012; Paltrow and Flavin 2013). The regulation of women is gender specific; it centres on ‘reproduction, mothering, double standards of morality’ and ‘social and legal subordination’ (Boyd 2015, 12). Thus, illegal drug use is mediated by race, class *and* gender (and other social locations), in conjunction with the legal, social and cultural environment in specific historical eras. Nevertheless, women who use illegal drugs are commonly framed as an at-risk population, and the *diverse experiences* of these women, including those who live in the Downtown Eastside, are often rendered invisible (Boyd and Boyd 2014; Culhane 2009, 2011). Thus, the complexity and range of experiences of women are under explored, including their artistic creativity and their community and political activism. When first setting out to work with VANDU women in leadership roles on a creative project, I initially sought to understand their movement in and outside of the Downtown Eastside and to provide a space for them to identify other themes that they wanted to explore further. As is discussed below, the project unfolded over a period of 4 months, as the women brought forward their interests and experiences through their creative works.

THE PROJECT

In the spring of 2013, myself and a research collaborator¹ visited with some of the women at VANDU who informally expressed interest in collaborating in a research project about their leadership

roles in the organisation and their activities and movement in the Downtown Eastside. I was familiar with the Downtown Eastside and VANDU (including its goals and members) and had worked on a number of interdisciplinary art projects in and outside of the neighbourhood. In keeping with VANDU’s principles for researchers working with them and the goals of feminist community-based research, I discuss in detail some of the aspects of the research process in this section. We met with the board to explain the framework of the research and creative project. VANDU is a unique peer-run organisation in that it has developed guidelines for researchers who wish to work with them. The VANDU guideline, ‘Research and Drug User Liberation’, states that ‘researchers can play a positive role when they act as supporters, allies and partners of this movement for liberation’ (VANDU 2014). However, they note that ‘research is political... The relationship between the researcher and the researched is not in and of itself empowering or liberating...’ (VANDU 2014). Therefore, we met with the VANDU board and the women interested in the project a number of times to talk about the research. The research proposal went through several levels of ethics approval at VANDU and was also approved by the University of Victoria’s ethics board.

Following a board meeting at VANDU in early August 2013, four women participants interested in the project suggested we begin our weekly research meetings in early September 2013. At the suggestion of the women, another woman in a leadership role at VANDU was invited to join the group. Thus, five women worked together on the project every Tuesday for an hour and a half over 4 months. VANDU offered us both space and support for the project. Although it was not my original intent to work specifically with indigenous women, three of the women identified as First Nations, one as Métis and one as white. Two participants were in their late 50s, one was in her 40s and two were in their mid-30s. The demographics of the group were determined by the women themselves through invitations and availability. The participants were provided with lunch and a small honorarium each meeting. Eating together each week provided a shared space to greet each other and to talk outside of the project.

The first meeting consisted of going over again the information sheet about the project, the consent form and time commitment. The following week we conducted a brainstorming session and wrote down the themes that the women wanted to pursue in the upcoming focus groups. The focus groups were conducted over three group meetings. The themes that

emerged in the focus groups became part of the creative art project: barriers and benefits to movement and well-being in the city; political and community engagement; and opportunities for support in VANDU (see Boyd and Boyd 2014). This paper focuses on the creative project that emerged following the focus groups, brainstorming and mapping because the photographs and collages serve to illuminate how visual culture and experiences of drug use have intersected for the participants. As will become apparent in the discussion to follow, family, VANDU, the Downtown Eastside and creative writing featured strongly in some of the women's artistic projects. Following the completion of the creative activities previously listed, the five women collectively decided to each create a collage representing the themes that emerged in the weekly meetings and their own personal experiences as women in leadership roles in VANDU.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT AND METHOD

As noted above, feminist researchers offer alternative perspectives and/or have drawn from alternative methods for analysis of marginalised women (Culhane 2011, 2011; Pratt 2010; Pratt and Kirby 2003) and women who use criminalised drugs (Bungay et al. 2010; VANDU Women's Care Team 2009) in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. This article draws from this work, as well as from the work of visual sociologists and other social researchers who value 'participant-directed visual' projects (Mannay 2013, 138). Scholars examining visual culture emphasise the way representation and practices of looking are linked to relationships of power (Hall 1997). They recognise that society, culture and social relationships can also be studied through the examination of visual representations, codes and spectators (Sturken and Cartwright 2009).

Similar to Mannay's study on mother and daughter dyads who worked together to create 'photographs, collages, maps and stories to communicate their everyday lives and ideas of the future', participants in our study also drew from photographs, mapping, collage and narrative 'to express their perceptions of their social and physical environments, their everyday lives' (Mannay 2013, 136, 138) in the Downtown Eastside. Rather than assuming that the researcher or the reader will readily understand the multiple meanings behind images created by participants, critical researchers have long recognised that participants should be invited to explain the 'visual images that they create' (Million 2013, 138; Rose 2010). Participants in this study were asked to comment on their photographs, mapping and collages after they were completed.

This study also draws upon tenants of feminist community-based research methods and was influenced by critical performance ethnography, which recognises embodied and creative practice as crucial sources of cultural knowledge and meaning-making (Conquergood 1991, 1998; Denzin 2003; Donkor 2007; Pollock 2006). Originally, it was thought the project might include performance; however, the women ultimately chose other avenues of expression. Nevertheless, the ethics outlined in performance ethnography fit with the methodology, as the process of research and creation should benefit marginalised subjects and/or contribute to more 'enlightened or involved citizenship' (Soyini 2012, 191). For example, Dwight Conquergood's model of inquiry calls for creativity, critique and citizenship, as in 'civic struggles for social justice' or 'imagination, inquiry and intervention' (Conquergood 2002, 152). Aspects of performance ethnography, then, parallel some aspects of feminist community-based research methods which privilege participant subjectivity and voice, self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher and a shared aim towards advancing social justice (Fals-Borda 1991; Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network 2005; Nyden and Wiewel 1992; Reinhartz 1992; Salmon et al. 2010; Tandon 1988). Similar to Culhane, in her detailed reflection of her creative performance project in the Downtown Eastside, the researchers in this study did not expect to 'overcome the fundamental political, economic and social differences between' themselves and the research participants but to hopefully create 'experiences of ethical engagement in the context of embodied, affective relationships that [...] may have the potential to be politically productive in the mutually constitutive realms of affect, memory, political power and economic survival' (Culhane 2011, 13). In this project, women in leadership roles at VANDU and their movement in and outside of the Downtown Eastside were explored, but creatively interpreted as the weekly meetings progressed, with the experience of creative process and reflection as a primary goal. However, as other critical researchers have noted, participatory research also includes 'an element of guidance' (Mannay 2013, 139). For example, due to financial constraints, the materials provided for the creative project were not limitless and the author had an initial interest in the movement of the women through the city landscape and their leadership roles at VANDU, which was communicated to the participants.

Collaborative projects can bring to the foreground differences in power and place; however, creative art projects can also provide a sense of belonging for a group and their membership. Collaborative and community-based research can bring together vulnerable populations with social justice goals (Ontario Arts Council 1998).

Broadly defined, community art projects are a collaborative creative process between a community artist/researcher and a specific community (Ontario Arts Council 1998), such as the women in leadership roles at VANDU. It is a collective method of art-making, engaging both artists and self-defined communities through collaborative, artistic and research expression. It is as much about *process* as it is about the artistic and research product or outcome. Collective and community art and research provides a unique way for groups or identified communities to express themselves and to share their findings with the public. It is also a unique way for specific groups like VANDU to create awareness raising (to members and the public) and engender inclusiveness. bell hooks notes that when working within community, projects should include the joy in the struggle. She states: ‘That joy needs to be documented. For if we only focus on the pain, the difficulties which are surely real in any process of transformation, we only show a partial picture’ (hooks 1994, 249).

Similar to hooks’ comments on partial representation, an indigenous commentator cited by Fleras argues: ‘When urban Aboriginal peoples are researched, it’s often about problems like homelessness and sexual exploitation. There are hundreds and thousands of us living in cities, and there are a lot of interesting things happening in our communities; it’s not all crises’ (Environics Institute, Fleras 2012, 34). Indigenous scholar Dian Million (2013) points out that indigenous women and their families in Canada (and the USA) are subject to violence well beyond the ‘intergenerational experience of residential schools’ and are also under attack via child apprehension by state welfare agencies, ongoing colonisation, criminal justice, neo-liberalism and development. In addition, she argues that gender inequality and violence against indigenous women is ‘more than an attack on individuals’ and can be understood as an enduring ‘feature of colonial power relations’ (7). Yet, rather than eradicate these harms, Million argues that behaviours identified as ‘social problems’, such as drug addiction, alcoholism and endemic poverty, ‘became medicalized and portrayed as colonial trauma’ and ‘the colonized subject became a trauma victim’ (rather than a victim of structural violence) in our present neo-liberal environments (19, 6). Against the background of ongoing structural violence, women in leadership roles at VANDU challenge normative discourses of victimisation while emphasising political change.

Drawing from these alternative theoretical and methodological perspectives, the following sections

highlight the creative process. VANDU’s focus on advocacy and peer-member involvement, including women’s involvement, offered a productive site for such a creative project.

CREATIVE WRITING

Inspiration for the writing component of the project was drawn from poets Bud Osborn and Sandy Cameron (who passed away in 2014 and 2010, respectively) (see Osborn 1999; Cameron 2016). Both were well-known and long-time social justice advocates in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver who opposed drug prohibition and structural violence. Many of the VANDU members are familiar with their writing and activism; in fact, Bud Osborn was one of the founding members of VANDU. VANDU has often conducted writing workshops for their members so that their stories and experiences are recorded, honoured and shared with the community. These writing workshops also have a political component, as they utilise art practice as an instrument for liberation. In the Downtown Eastside, telling stories, writing and the recording of people’s experiences are understood as community endeavours to honour and remember the struggles in people’s lives and the ongoing quest for social justice (Boyd, Osborn, and Donald 2009). In the brainstorming and creative writing sessions, all of the women *collectively* communicated that VANDU provided them with a range of benefits expressed in the following terms:

*A sense of belonging
Empowered through trust
Responsibility
Heroine
In Charge of Lives
A voice for those who are unable to speak for themselves
Education
Skills
Learning
Non-Judgmental
Brings out Your Potential*

The women also identified their *individual* roles in VANDU and in the larger community through their creative writing. For example, one participant wrote

*Female
Successful Empowered
Voice Of Current Illicit
Functioning Drug Consumers
We Are The Women of
VANDU
(Participant P)*

Another participant wrote

*My heart
Was full of holes
Now filled with love,
Empowerment & unity.
Women are very nurturing in spirit &*

*Have a quiet strength.
I'm very blessed to be included with
[women's names deleted]
Doesn't
matter what we do as users.
We lead full & active lives to
empower our community.
(Participant R)*

PHOTOGRAPHY

The group decided that it would be good to walk some of the areas of the Downtown Eastside commonly frequented by them, so we did, and we brought cameras to document sites of importance. The women also took pictures with their own camera (supplied by the author) over the span of 2 weeks, capturing images of their daily movement and activities. Participants then captioned their favourite photographs and also wrote a short piece about their involvement in community action and VANDU. Group members were encouraged to take photographs of anything that marked their day, and a similar open concept was implemented for the collage-making that took place afterwards. However, by then their active, political membership and leadership roles in VANDU and the Downtown Eastside were identified through reflection as the major thematic that informed their final creative works. This does not mean, however, that researchers do not influence creative work for, as Gibson states, 'the researcher, whether physically present or not, is inevitably part of the research world being studied' (Gibson 2005, 3). Photographs, of course, are not simply representations of reality but are rather 'expressive performances of everyday life' (Pink 2003, 55). In other words, group members brought their own creative skills to the project. They made different choices about what to photograph, how to represent their activities, how to integrate and design photographs and words and how much of themselves and their friends and family they would include. Much of their creative

work challenges mainstream representations (visual and discursive) of their neighbourhood and their lives.

The participant who took the photograph of the sidewalk (Figure 1) contextualised her image with this written statement: 'I took this because I work here & everyone I meet. This is what captures it well. Main & Hastings'.

Rather than represent Main and Hastings Streets, the central hub in the Downtown Eastside, as a site of visible drug dealing, homelessness, sex work and violence, as it is typically represented by the Vancouver police and the media (see Boyd & Kerr 2016; Woolford 2001), the participant chose to represent beauty and community through a photograph of a heart mosaic that was part of a community art project.

Even though the participants were in leadership roles at VANDU, their photographs do not focus on drug use per se. For instance, there are no photographs of individuals injecting drugs. This is significant as the iconic image of injection dominates popular culture, law enforcement and media representations in and outside of the Downtown Eastside (Boyd 2008; Boyd, Boyd, and Kerr 2015; Woolford 2001). The photographs taken by the participants do reveal their socio-economic status as poor women (e.g. photos of the interior of buses (Figure 2), of inadequate housing and bleak city landscapes (Figures 3 and 4)); however, the images and their accompanying text also focus on the women's activism, friendships, family (which are not pictured here for ethical reasons), the streets they move through in their daily lives, and a range of activities. Figure 2, titled 'my daily bus ride for methadone', is described by the participant as representative of an important routine that provides a daily break from her neighbourhood, while the image represented in Figure 3 is (re) contextualised as a meaningful place by the participant,

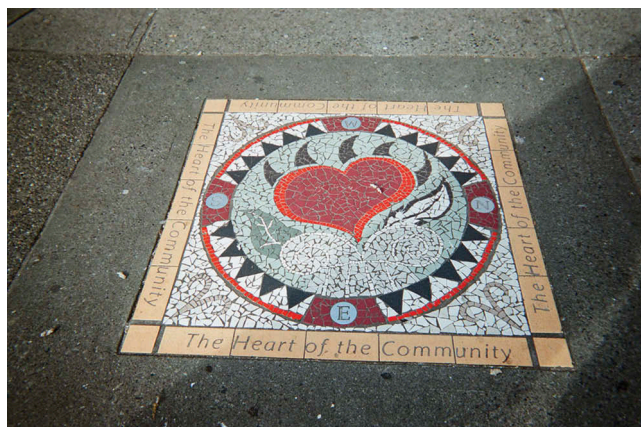


FIGURE 1. Main and Hastings Streets.



FIGURE 2. My daily bus ride for methadone.



FIGURE 3. My first and only home.



FIGURE 4. Rooms.

who labelled it as, 'My back door, first and only home in Vancouver'.

A photograph of a caged dog by another participant (Figure 5) manages to convey a desolate setting that also provoked humorous empathy by the photographer and participants. As well, in response to another photograph

(Figure 6) taken by one of the participants of the intersection of Main and Gore Streets in the Downtown Eastside (an image that could easily be read as bleak by a viewer), the participant noted that the area is a favoured location to sell bannock, which is a quick bread found in First Nations Cuisine in Canada. She writes 'This is where I go & sell my stuff to make a bit of cash. I sell lots

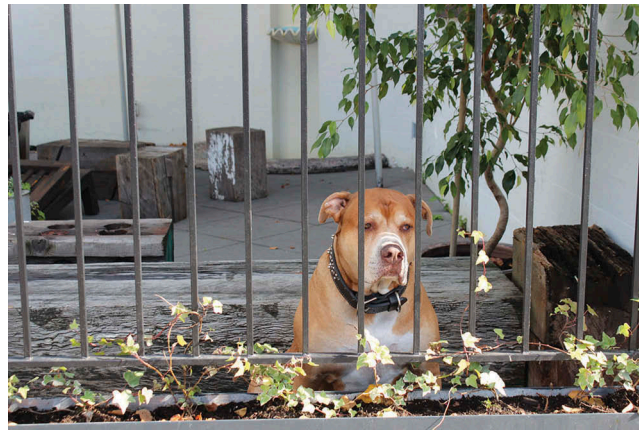


FIGURE 5. Dog.



FIGURE 6. Gore and Hastings Streets.

of bannock on this street. By Gore and Hastings. I usually go into all the Hasting's bars'.

Some of the participants' photographs do feature drug-related topics, however. For example, [Figure 7](#) represents a colourful crack pipe dispenser located in a harm reduction service in the Downtown Eastside. In contrast

to sordid depictions of fetishised broken crack pipes or dishevelled people using crack (Boyd 2008), this image of a vending machine, arguably, normalises the consumption of crack and the pipes used to consume it. The colourfulness of the photograph further allows viewers to imagine crack pipes and crack use outside of criminal and criminalised spaces. A similar argument



FIGURE 7. Crack pipe dispenser.

the women's photographs and photocopies of their writings, magazines, coloured pencils, magic markers, glue, tape, scissors and large poster boards were provided. The collages included their writing, illustrations and photographs including those representing harm reduction initiatives (such as a safer crack harm reduction kit and needle distribution); organisations that they volunteer in including VANDU; and activism that they participated in, such as attendance at a national drug user union meeting in Victoria, BC, held during the project (for example, see Figure 9). In addition, the women included photographs, writing and illustrations of their friendships, home life and the streets they travel on. VANDU and its support staff, as well as some of VANDU's history, was prominent in their collages. Indigenous imagery, landmark buildings in the Downtown Eastside area and animals were also present.

One participant writes 'The travels, strengths and experiences of my life here in the DTES [Downtown Eastside]. I love my community & the very special people here. The community & friends I have in my life make me a better person in my travels as a woman, activist, & friend'. Another woman states 'My collage is part of who and what I became from working and being part of an amazing organization'. And another participant wrote 'My collage speaks for itself!'

After the participants completed their collages, the project concluded with the group discussing their work in the form of a visual presentation at a VANDU general meeting accompanied by a written report that was distributed to the rest of the VANDU members. Since then, the work has been presented at various public events such as a public forum in 2014 on 'Drug Prohibition and the Regulation of Pregnancy and Mothering' at Harbour Centre, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC, and the Alberta Harm Reduction Conference in 2015.

CONCLUSION

Marginalised women are often defined and framed as social problems. The five participants in this study would conventionally be labelled as deviant and at risk due to their status as poor and marginalised women who use criminalised drugs (among other things), and certainly the impact of both personal and structural factors that shape their lives in negative ways came up in group discussions (Boyd and Boyd 2014). However, this is not how the women chose to represent themselves or the Downtown Eastside in their photographs and

collages. Instead, they resisted dominant representations of women who use criminalised drugs by focusing on activism, family, friends and the spaces they live and work in. In addition, as the weekly meetings and activities progressed, the women observed that working creatively offered a temporary reprieve from traditional studies that solely emphasised their multiple oppressions and that the creative process itself was enjoyable.

This article contributes to a growing body of critical and feminist scholarship interested in using creative methodologies and collaborative community artworks as tools for developing alternate perspectives about the lives of marginalised women. Like other researchers interested in the research process and creativity as a tool in research methodology, this article has attempted to highlight the potential that feminist community-based creative and visual projects have to not only make embodied experience more present in qualitative accounts of everyday life but also subvert more negative depictions of women drug users (and the Downtown Eastside).

Visual sociologists and other social researchers have argued that 'art is capable of something which academic work is not' (Strandvad 2013, 40). Indeed, creative approaches have the potential to 'attend to some of the details of embodied life that often escape talk- and text-based approaches' (Bates 2013, 36, drawing from Lorimer 2010, 242). Participants' photos, creative writing and their interpretation of their own work offer a complexity through intertextuality of their lived experience that might not be captured in a solely text-based methodology (Hall 1997). Indeed, visual and creative methodologies can provide an alternative space for participants to contribute to meaning-making and direct our attention to the power of image and text. In this study, participants' active presence and perspectives, in the written, photographic and collage work, engaged with and contested normative representations of marginalised women who use criminalised drugs as non-active, non-political or otherwise immoral, deviant and unproductive. Participants from VANDU made clear throughout the project that their lives, though compromised by gendered and colonial violence, poverty, discrimination, poor health and drug prohibition were also shaped and experienced through their political activism, participation in VANDU, harm reduction initiatives, community engagement, friends and family, indigenous identity, and the streets and landmarks in the Downtown Eastside that hold significance for them. Their creative works illuminate these diverse realities and experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank VANDU and the participating VANDU women board members for their significant contribution to the research.

NOTES

1. Collaborator, Susan Boyd, also attended this meeting as she had worked with VANDU in a number of capacities over the last 10 years. She contributed early on to several stages of the project as well as related publications.
2. The collage was photographed by Vancouver-based artist Henri Robideau; see <http://henrirobideau.com>

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