

**OCTOBERIVER'S COMMUNITY ART WORKSHOPS FOR *LEARNING WITH THE ST. LAWRENCE*: EXPLORING ENVIRONMENTAL THEMES THROUGH ARTMAKING AND INTERVIEWS IN POINTE-ST-CHARLES**

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**Abstract**

Our illustrated team text profiles *OctobeRiver*, a series of fall 2021 weekly outdoor art workshops and oral history interviews that considered the St. Lawrence River as ecosystem and urban imaginary. Hosted by the Pointe-St-Charles Art School, Montreal, *OctobeRiver* was part of *Learning With the St. Lawrence (LWtSL)*, a multi-year, SSHRC-funded interdisciplinary research and creation project: four different workshop leaders each designed and led a Saturday event very different in theme and materials. Following an overview of the larger project by Dr. Kathleen Vaughan, Concordia University professor of Art Education and *LWtSL* principal investigator, two workshop leaders profile their activities and outline their preliminary research observations.

Jacob LeGallais explores the outcomes of his workshop, which addressed issues of the St. Lawrence River as an urban waterway, highlighting its role as a shared environment for human and non-human inhabitants. His activity took up the question, "How do we provide for a diverse number of lives within limited space?" He describes how participants visualized their feelings, experiences, and hopes for the River via paper cut collage artworks using a variety of hand-decorated papers and reclaimed materials.

Dave LeRue unpacks his interest in how this process of sharing affected the kinds of responses given in interviews, and the extent to which art making can be a method for reflecting on greater social questions. He describes how the artists worked across skill

levels and difference, and how different kinds of participants were treated in the “classroom” of our four wall tents.

We conclude by looking ahead to the project’s work that is still to come.



**Fig. 1.** On the St. Lawrence River near Montreal. Photo: Kathleen Vaughan.

### **Project Overview - Kathleen Vaughan**

My artmaking and research are place-based, informed by the intersections of social, cultural, natural, historical, political and personal realities. In the spirit of the land acknowledgements that preface and ground place-based work such as ours, we would like to affirm that we are increasingly attentive to our relationship with the land, skies, and



waters around us, including Kaniatarowanenneh, the Mohawk or Kanien'kéha name for the big waterway also known as the St. Lawrence River.

My work 'thinks with' the insights of feminist geographer Doreen Massey (2005), who saw places as intersections of social and economic networks, and as collections of ongoing stories that are in the process of unfolding. Indeed, I have for some time been working with stories, images and sounds in my creative and research work, and since 2016 with questions related to the St. Lawrence River as it is experienced – or not! – in my home Montreal neighbourhood of Pointe-St-Charles.

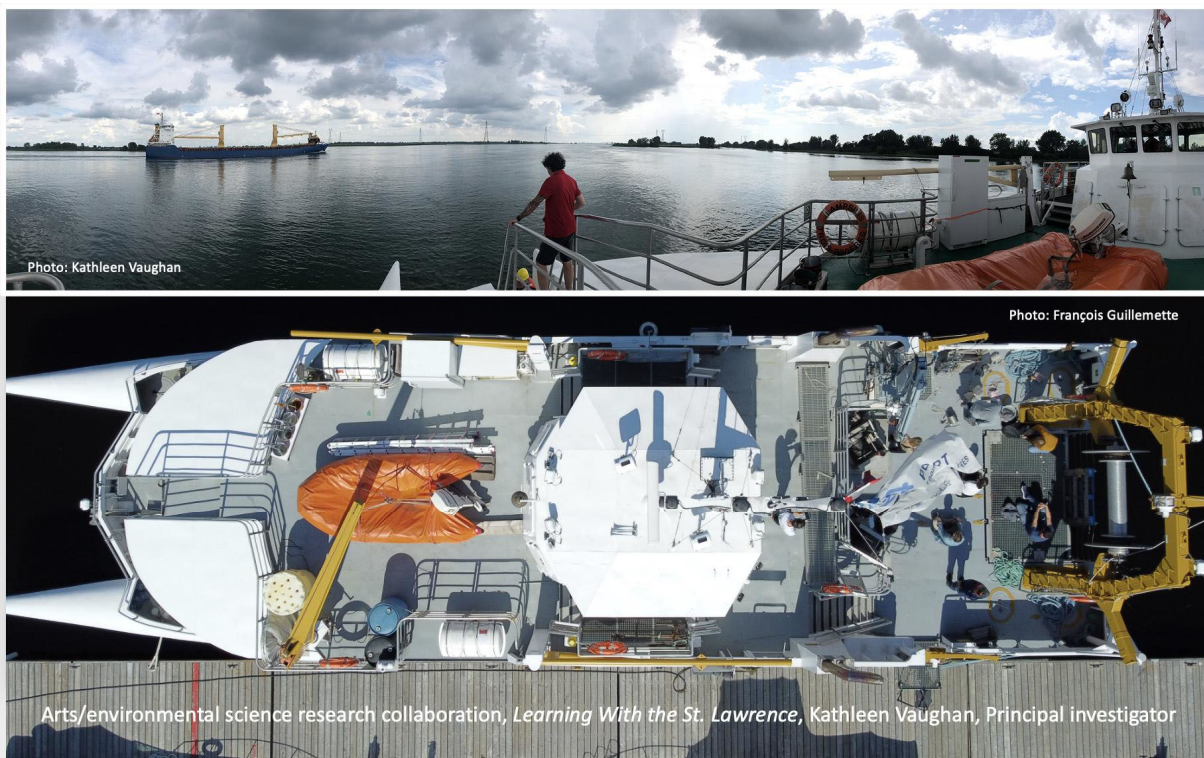


**Fig. 2.** The inaccessible St. Lawrence River shoreline at Pointe-St-Charles. Photo: Kathleen Vaughan.

In the case of the Pointe, access to the River is cut off by the adjacent highway and railroad yards, while the shoreline has been physically filled in over the past 200 years so



that it is now hundreds of metres away from the location suggested by our earliest local maps. So, while the River is physically close to the Pointe, and its proximity has played an important role in the historical formation of the neighbourhood, it does not factor into daily lived experience here. I wanted to close that distance for myself, at least metaphorically, by better understanding how the river works as a dynamic system, and knowing more about the environmental and scientific realities of the river in the present day. I turned to environmental scientists to help me fill real gaps in my knowledge.



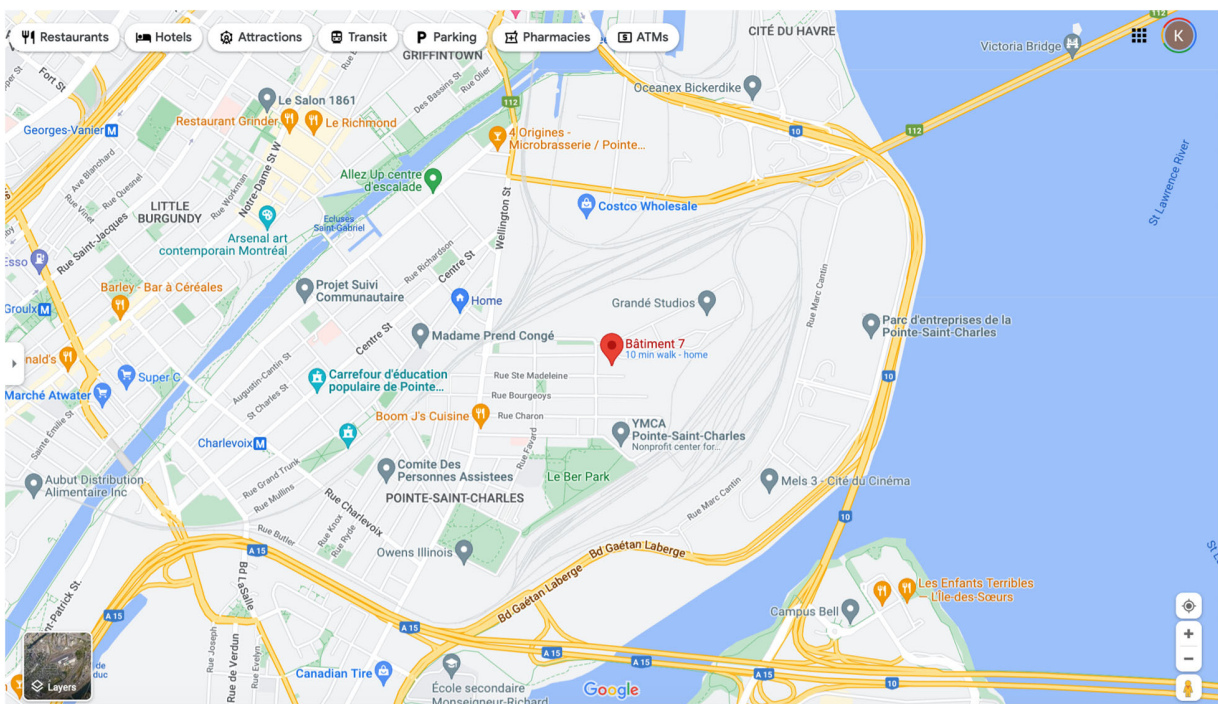
**Fig. 3.** Panorama of the St. Lawrence River as seen from the Lampsilis, photo: Kathleen Vaughan; aerial shot of the Lampsilis at Trois-Rivières Marina, photo: François Guillemette.

In 2018, I spent 10 days as an embedded artist aboard the Lampsilis, a research catamaran based in Trois-Rivières with two environmental scientists who do field work to explore issues related to water and fish, with a specific focus on the St. Lawrence – respectively, Dr. François Guillemette and Dr. Gilbert Canada of the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières. This trip sparked a SSHRC grant of which I am the primary investigator with five collaborators and additional student research assistants. We have titled the



project *Learning with St. Lawrence*, with two primary research goals: First, we want to generate an understanding of the complex realities at play in the St. Lawrence River adjacent to Montréal in order to enhance citizens' awareness of and engagement with the river at our shoreline and through its 1200-kilometre flow. Second, we are exploring the potential and limitations of arts-science interdisciplinarity for generating meaningful research approaches to dynamic and complicated social issues.

We began our collaborative work in late 2019 with a collaborators' planning weekend at Concordia University, where we exchanged our hopes for the project and spent time along the St. Lawrence. However, just a few months later, the pandemic forced us to shut down our planned public-facing events and made being together to work on this project unfeasible.



**Fig. 4.** Google map of Pointe-St-Charles, with red pin being the Pointe-St-Charles Art School – and showing the relative distance to the St. Lawrence. Screen shot: Kathleen Vaughan.

We were able to re-start public-facing work in the summer/fall of 2021, and planned a series of free, outdoor (COVID-safer), bilingual art workshops about the River, where we would document participants' visual engagement with and stories about the St. Lawrence.

We partnered with the Pointe-Saint-Charles Art School, a not-for-profit art school in the Bâtiment 7 community-owned building, along what would have once been the river's shoreline. The map pictured above demonstrates just how much the land has been filled in over the years, and the many infrastructures that form the Pointe and cut it off from the River.



**Fig. 5.** Our line-up of Saturday workshops (poster, right, designed by Tricia Enns); and our work site, with activities proceeding rain or shine through the month (photo, left, by Nina Pariser).

We named the series of workshops *OctoberRiver | FleuvOctobre*, which each Saturday throughout the month provided an occasion for locals or visitors to participate in a 90-minute art activity exploring an idea or material relating to a theme or topic about the River. To protect ourselves from the elements, we purchased four party tents that also welcomed passers-by to stop in and see what we were doing, and perhaps sign up for an upcoming workshop. Each session was open to 12 participants who registered on a first-come, first-served basis, and we averaged about 10 per session. After each workshop, the research team would ask those participants who were willing a short series of questions to



learn about their relationships with the River, and any role that the art-making might have played in their own understandings.



**Fig. 6.** Workshop participants at work during two creative sessions. Photos: Kathleen Vaughan.

The atmosphere of the workshops was warm and invigorating in light of lifting pandemic restrictions, and the research team was thrilled to create art with members of the community once more. Each workshop, designed by its facilitator, proposed varied kinds of engagement and asked participants to reflect on their relationships in a variety of ways.<sup>21</sup> In *Puppets and Projections* led by artist and art therapist Nina Pariser, participants made plastic puppets based on the fish of the St. Lawrence that were then put in a shallow Tupperware container and rocked back and forth while being recorded on a slow-motion iPhone video setting, bringing the puppets to life by making them appear to float among organic and inorganic matter. In *Building Bridges* (image left, above), instructor Rachel Pochat Selby built a model river and provided many materials to participants, such as sticks, pinecones and rope, to design and build their own bridges. Next, we will hear directly

<sup>21</sup> *Riding Kaniatarowanenneh on a Two-Row Canoe* was cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances. We hope to re-schedule it at a future event.

from the other two workshop leaders about their development, delivery, and experience under the tents: Jacob Le Gallais and then Dave LeRue.

### **Sharing the St. Lawrence with Other-Than-Humans - Jacob Le Gallais**

“Sharing the St Lawrence with More-Than-Humans” focused specifically on urban wildlife and the presence of non-human animal life in the city. I conceived of this as relating to the St Lawrence River, but also to the Lachine Canal, which for the purposes of the workshop I conceptualised as a tributary of the Saint Lawrence and therefore essentially the same body of water. The Lachine Canal is one of the physical barriers of the city that separates Pointe-Saint-Charles from neighbouring Little Burgundy and Griffintown, and at one time was an industrial artery that provided direct access from the St. Lawrence to the interior of the city and adjacent factories. (In Fig. 4, above, the Lachine Canal is the thin blue diagonal line in the upper left of the frame.)

The guiding question that framed the activity was “How do we provide for a diverse number of lives within limited space?;” a query that is increasingly relevant in an age of globalization and urban expansion in the face of the anthropocene which has come to frame my work as an artist/researcher.





**Fig. 7.** Seagulls along the Lachine Canal. Photo: Jacob Le Gallais.

This workshop asked participants to visualise their feelings, experiences, and hopes for the River via the creation of cut paper collage artworks. To aid this endeavour, I created a variety of hand-decorated papers for the participants to use, and offered paint, crayons, and markers among other things to create intricate assemblages (fig. 8). I also encouraged them to seek out a variety of reclaimed and natural materials on site to incorporate into their work. I began with a brief introduction to the workshop and informal q&a, during which I showed some examples of my own collage works engaging with the same subject (fig. 9). For the artmaking process, participants were completely free to express their own thoughts and feelings regarding urban wildlife and the river as a shared environment. Beyond the provided materials and the directive that the work should be a collage, the only parameter they were given was a 9 x 12 inch format.





Photos: Elliott Morrice

**Fig. 8** (above). The workshop begins. Photos: Elliott Morrice.**Fig. 9** (below). Samples of Jacob Le Gallais's cut paper/collage artworks of urban wildlife. Photos: Jacob LeGallais.

Photos and artwork: Jacob LeGallais







Photos: Jacob LeGallais

**Fig. 10.** At work, exploring materials and meaning. Photos: Jacob LeGallais.

I noticed that after we began almost every participant began to work against this constraint in some way, adding materials to build out their paper, such as cut outs or frames that made the work appear bigger. While unexpected and unplanned, this action against the provided directive is something I have now begun to expect and encourage in other workshops. I began to see participants pushing against constraints as a metaphor for the ways urban wildlife negotiate urban space. We set up boundaries, attempt to box non-human lives into a format that works for us, but in the end, this will always be negotiated and subverted.

I have selected four participant's works that vividly showcase their engagement with the ideas of the River and its dependent wildlife. Here, you can see two individual's work that spoke to bird life, specifically herons. Herons were discussed in the introduction to the activity because their presence is a good indicator of water health, because it means there are prey species like fish and amphibians that will sustain them. Amphibians can only

survive in water that has a content of pollution that is lower than a certain amount. While we know that much of the St. Lawrence around Montreal and the Lachine Canal has been polluted, herons have become more present as efforts have been made to clean the water, and these two pieces spoke to that relationship.

“Every time I’m on my bike along the Lachine Canal, I’m hoping I will see a heron”



It's a sign that things are ok ecologically...there is a sense of reassurance in seeing a heron" -from participant interview

**Fig. 11.** Participants' collages and statements celebrating the resurgence of heron/frog-supporting ecosystems. Photos: Jacob Le Gallais.

The next pair of images (Fig. 12) showcases works that accentuated the versatility of the provided materials. The participant's work on the left makes dynamic use of layers that hide the urban wildlife, requiring a viewer to physically move components of the work to see the work entirely. On the right this participant attempted to use all the materials they selected including all off cuts. The participant on the right spoke about this in their individual interview as being both part of their everyday art practice, and reflective of their feelings regarding the health of the river and pollution.

"I think the biggest issue I think is facing the river is the cleanliness of the water"



"Without the water, nothing else can exist" -from participant interview

**Fig. 12.** More participants' collages and statements. Photos: Jacob Le Gallais.

### **Imagining the St. Lawrence - Dave LeRue**

I come to the *Learning with St. Lawrence* project as a researcher and artist interested in how landscapes and cities are imagined by everyday inhabitants, which I approach through my painting practice and community teaching. I currently work and teach in Pointe-Saint-Charles, but I live in Verdun and see the River every day on my drives to work and school. Since moving here in 2020, I spend most warm nights along the lively chain of parks that have been built up at the River's edge, which has made the St. Lawrence factor more into my conception of life in the city.





**Fig. 13.** Dave LeRue beginning his workshop (photo: Charlotte Boatner-Doane); demo of oil pastel drawing on mylar by Dave LeRue (photo: Dave LeRue).

In this workshop, I was interested to see how participants imagined the St. Lawrence River in their daily lives, given that the site of our making was in proximity to the River, yet cut off by nearby infrastructures. We began by discussing this proximity, and some proposed initiatives by local activist organisations to make the River more accessible in the Pointe. I then presented a technique to use oil pastels on a transparent paper called mylar. The pastels apply easily to the paper and can be mixed with a finger or a tissue, but behave like paint when activated with a low strength solvent such as mineral spirits. I also showed some basic compositional techniques that would allow students to use photographs as inspiration to make their own compositions, or, as the paper was transparent, they could also choose to trace the photograph and bypass drawing decisions. I thought this was a good compromise to allow more experienced artists to push the process further, while giving newer artists a simpler way to enjoy the painting process. On each table, participants had a choice of photographs to work from. Some were taken from the shoreline, some from

online sources such as Google Earth and some were aerial shots taken from a drone by the scientists on the Lampsilis.



Photos: François Guillemette

**Fig. 14.** Aerial shots of the St. Lawrence River where it meets the St. Maurice, at Trois-Rivières. Photos: François Guillemette.

When we were discussing the available photographs, I shared some of the ecological discussions our research team had when we visited the Lampsilis in 2021. The scientists shared that the St. Lawrence is actually many rivers coming from multiple sources, and they explained that the water from these sources have different densities and do not mix, at least when they first flow together. The bulk of the River is made up of water from the Great Lakes, which is out of frame here. The greenish-blue colour is water from the Outaouais River, which flows past Montreal from the north, and the dark water (a ‘boreal tea’ containing leaf matter) comes from the St. Maurice River. In addition to having different aesthetic characteristics, these separate rivers also have different ecologies and levels of pollution, ranging from clean enough to swim in to heavily contaminated. This latter was made clear via an interactive demonstration about e-coli by one of the scientists, who showed how a small pipette of the water from the most polluted part of the River contains much more bacteria than a much larger quantity of water from cleaner sampling spots. The scientists also showed us the Montreal sewage outflow pipe on Google Maps, whose effluent is visible as a thin band at the end of the east end of the island all the way to the estuary, where the freshwater and saltwater mix.





Artwork: Charlotte Boatner-Doane, Photo: Nancy Long



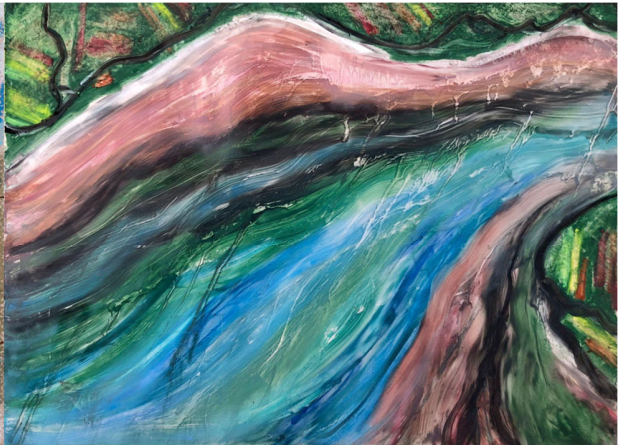
Artwork and photo: Nancy Long

**Fig. 15** (above). Artwork (left) by Charlotte Boatner-Doane and (right) Nancy Long.

**Fig. 16** (below). Aftwork (left) by Zoe Compton and (right) Amy Atkinson. Photos: Nancy Long.



Artwork: Zoe Compton, Photo: Nancy Long



Artwork: Amy Atkinson, Photo: Nancy Long

Participants generally responded well to the making, and each seemed to take up a different orientation to the River given what they wanted to reflect on. We had participants who were new to making, participants who dabble occasionally, and participants who make art daily or almost daily. This method of creation seemed to pose different challenges to everyone, with new artists having an easier way to enter the creative process and more experienced artists finding it difficult to control the painterly aspects of the pastels. Because we were in a relatively small group, I was able to engage individually with makers and help with issues as they came up, such as demonstrating how to draw a cloud, or how to get a straight crisp line using scrap paper as a stencil.



Post-making interview data showed that participants were happy to come and make together, and each shared a variety of perspectives about the river orally and artistically. Some were River enthusiasts, actively wanting to spend time with the St. Lawrence as often as possible. Others did not think much about the River, but through the workshops they began to develop, share, or conjure ideas about the St. Lawrence that they had not had before. Some discussed how the River makes them happy and demonstrated in their drawing's examples of the River on a sunny day. Others were interested in the physical division of water, and the ecological issues facing the St. Lawrence. As a researcher, I was interested in how each participant interviewed seemed to be moved through the process of making, and I wish to explore the role that creating art objects can have in qualitative research in future activities.

It was refreshing to find a way to gather and to make together in the time of pandemic. Holding these workshops outside began as a way to ensure everyone's safety and to reduce risks of transmission but being together in the tents rather than in a traditional classroom space exposed us to the elements of Pointe Saint Charles – the rain, the wind, the hot and cold – and, as some members on our team remarked, made the natural world feel unusually close as we engaged in artistic making about the natural world. It also kept the atmosphere light and social. Artists across skill levels helped each other, and seemed to genuinely enjoy themselves, which opened up to further discussion about the method at hand. Artmaking became a communal and meditative activity, which inspired me to take this more seriously in my own research. While it is difficult to parse what might have been generated by just asking participants about the River, it is likely that artmaking and communal gathering generated discussions that would not have happened otherwise.



Photo: Dave LeRue

**Fig. 17.** *Imagining the St. Lawrence* participants as they make work. Photo: Dave LeRue.

### **What's next for *Learning With the St. Lawrence* - Kathleen Vaughan**

Our work on *Learning With the St. Lawrence* continues, through the completion of this SSHRC grant and via funds allocated through my Concordia University Research Chair in Art + Education for Sustainable and Just Futures, as well as other external grants for which I will be applying with continuing and new collaborators – five years or more of work to come. In the immediate term, through spring 2023, we are planning more community engaged events with artmaking and science. An activity this summer may be a model: on July 23, 2022, we worked alongside our science colleagues at the Old Port of Trois-Rivières, offering passersby a daylong series of drop-in art workshops – in drawing/painting, cyanotype and poetry – accompanied by science demos and visits aboard the dockside *Lampsilis*. We hope to create future activities aboard and alongside



the Lampsilis, to gather more data including artworks and audio recorded interviews. In the next year, we will deepen our analysis of the data collected, and build on this to create collaborative publications and research-creation projects. As well, we have commissioned a series of artists' *Field Guides* – so far, five artistic interpretations of a geolocated site (or more than one) along the River, with the artist presenting their work in digital form for integration into our project website, <https://learningwiththelawrence.ca/>. We will launch the website itself by November 2022, and add more projects as they occur.

Our work is not done. Given climate change, habitat loss, and species extinctions, the St. Lawrence River continues to need advocates to raise awareness of the multiple challenges being faced by this dynamic system and the Other-than-humans who live with it. Our colleagues help keep us aware of these challenges from their interdisciplinary perspectives. For instance, we were made disturbingly aware of microplastic pollution in the St. Lawrence during one of our Riverside team meetings. Our collaborator, sculptor and professor Kelly Jazvac reached into the sand along the river in Verdun and pulled out a few plastic pellets used in the production of consumable plastic products such as shopping bags and bottles. We spent 20 minutes digging in the sand as the scientists explained how given their size and shape, the pellets look like food to the fish, who eat them.



**Fig. 18.** *LWtSL* collaborator Kelly Jazvak holds out plastic pellets she found along the Verdun shoreline of the St. Lawrence. Photo: Kathleen Vaughan.

We are cautiously optimistic that such remedial and advocacy work will have a positive impact, in part because the pandemic has reminded us all of the importance of engagement with nature to our own well-being and pleasure. And indeed many of our own *LWtSL* activities could not have taken place anywhere but in the relative COVID-safety of the outdoors. But beyond such instrumentality, beyond considering what the River can do for us in terms of, say, drinking, swimming and fishing, *Learning With the St. Lawrence* aims to celebrate and advocate for the River for its own sake. It's in this way that our work continues.





**Fig. 19.** Fishing and swimming in the St. Lawrence at Verdun, Montreal. Photo: Kathleen Vaughan.

## References

Massey, D. B. (2005). *For space*. Sage.

*Learning With the St. Lawrence* is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and Concordia University. In addition to Kathleen Vaughan, François Guillemette, Gilbert Cabana, and Kelly Jazvak, collaborators include community-based filmmaker, Liz Miller and independent curator/doctoral student, Katie Lawson. Artists commissioned to create *Field Guides* include Nikki Middlemiss, Coman Poon, Kite (aka Suzanne Kite), Stephany Hildebrand, and Allison Cameron. The project team also includes additional graduate student assistants: Emilie O'Brien, Tricia Enns, Hana Dawe, Peter Morgan, Victoria Stanton, and Alex Noel.

**Bios**

Kathleen Vaughan (MFA, PhD) is Professor of Art Education and Concordia University Research Chair in Art + Education for Sustainable and Just Futures. She develops studio- and community-based projects, with our connection to the St. Lawrence River being a longstanding theme. <https://www.akaredhanded.com> and <http://re-imagine.ca/>

Jacob LeGallais is a visual artist, educator and doctoral candidate in Art Education at Concordia University, who uses collage and craft practice to explore human-animal relationships, urban wildlife/landscape, and the Anthropocene.

David LeRue is a PhD candidate in Art Education at Concordia University, and an artist, teacher and researcher who focuses on questions of education and the changing city.



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