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## CAT Conversations and the Rita L. Irwin Award for Art Teacher Dissemination of Knowledge

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# MAKING DISCOVERIES CONVERSATIONS

## CAT Conversations and the Rita L. Irwin Award for Art Teacher Dissemination of Knowledge



High School Visual Arts Classroom at Shekou International School, October, 2020 Reproduced with kind permission from SIS, Shenzhen, China

It was teaching a small class of kindergarten students in Seoul, South Korea that led me to the realization that I was meant to be a Visual Arts Teacher. In kindergarten, the expectation is that attention is given equally to all of the core subjects, but inevitably, most of my lessons found their way back to activities that required colouring, cutting and pasting, and my favourite; decorating the classroom. I've always felt that classrooms engage learners best when they are full of colour and adorned with student's artistic personalities. One student, Chris, who was a quiet, thoughtful student, is indelibly etched in my memories. During our circle times each morning, when we gathered to share how we were feeling, what we had done the evening before and what we were looking forward to that day, Chris rarely shared more than a few words. But one day, he told our group about a garden he had visited with his parents full of his favourite flowers, cosmos. I had no idea what cosmos were, so I asked him if he could draw a picture of them. Chris stayed back from recess that day working on a series of images and when he presented his images of cosmos to me, I was speechless. It was like the soul of the flowers lived right on that page; the vibrancy of the crayon strokes, the delicate choices of the colours, I knew in an instant the flowers that he loved so much. When Chris's mother came in during that year, for parent interviews, she asked so many questions about Chris's ability to verbalize, his mathematical skills, his reading progress. "But have you seen his drawings?" I asked. "His art is amazing!"

When I officially became a Visual Arts teacher in secondary schools, that excitement for relating with my students through art-making, the passion for promoting my subject and the love of decorating my classroom (and the rest of the school) followed me, as it does with many art teachers. But what surprised me about teaching art in the current education system, was the same thing that subverted me with Chris' mother's questions; the subjugation of Visual Art classes in deference to other subjects and along with that or because of that, the solitary experience of Visual Art teachers within schools. In my Ph.D. research with Concordia University, one of the aspects of my study is tapping into the Art Teacher voice. Through my research, I have had the privilege to interview Visual Art teachers, teaching throughout the world about their experiences. Most of them, like my experience, are working as the sole art teacher in their school. The creativity they have shared through digital tours of their art rooms and sharing of examples of student's work or teaching strategies have both surprised and impressed me, with their resilience to promote the value of the subject, their determination to support and inspire students and their ability to embrace creativity and have fun. It has been an inspiring, affirming and an absolutely delightful experience.

Amy



**Tour of Claude Monet's Secret Garden at the Young Associates Rendezvous Event at the Vancouver Art Gallery, July 2017, Photo: Thanushi Eagalle. Reproduced with kind permission from the Vancouver Art Gallery.**

Life encounters can shape one's future just as much as one's interests and desires. There is a memory from my days in the kindergarten which remains as vivid as if it had happened yesterday. I remember being in our colorful little classroom, standing at my table with a large sheet of glossy white paper in front of me. I cannot recall the surrounding soundscape or even the other children but I am fascinated by the hands of my teacher who pours some deep blue, cherry red and white, and asks us to glide our fingers through the paint. I have a visual memory of the curving lines in blue and purple forming, but most powerful is an embodied feeling of pure joy as I dip my hands into the color and feel the cool, creamy thickness of the paint on the tip of my fingers. My hands softly glide over the now slippery surface of the paper. My fingers wiggle as they dance and swirl with the paint, somehow I know to let go and play with the paint while together we magically let a whirlwind of blues and purples appear on the page. This painting from my kindergarten days has long disappeared, thrown away during a spring clean-up, but this does not matter; the significance of this moment does not reside in the materiality of the end product but rather in the strong embodied memory of my joyful encounter with paint.

It's interesting how, during my adolescence, all I wanted was to enter the field of medicine but most of my spare time was spent drawing flowers and horses, painting still lifes, taking dance classes, and studying the piano. By saying 'yes' to life encounters, I gravitated back to the arts and studied art history. To be honest, I do not recall wanting to become an art educator during my early years at university. Life again offering opportunities changed all that; I got a summer job as a museum educator and mediator in a contemporary art museum. It was a revelation, a world opened up for me. I loved being constantly with and among the material presence of paintings, the boldness of sculptures and the scale of installations. And although it happened decades ago, I still remember vividly my first gallery tour with a large public. Being a good student and dedicated art historian, I still see myself enthusiastically talking about the paintings in the superb Alfred Pellan retrospective at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Yet somehow, without being able to fully articulate what I was experiencing and feeling quite nervous at first, I knew that being an 'educator' asked something else of me, it asked me to enact a different kind of relational space. Of course I had been trained to engage in dialogue with the public, but I soon realized how the educational situation is complex, messy, unpredictable....and also beautiful in the possibilities it can generate. That is when my becoming art educator began, and when I say 'becoming' I draw from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who in *Mille plateaux* (1980)/*A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), refer to becoming not in terms of an end point but rather of being 'always in the middle'. My 'becoming art educator' is an ongoing journey thanks to more than twenty-five years as an art museum educator (in the photographs, I am thinking along with tour participants at the Vancouver Art Gallery), fostering generative art encounters with teacher candidates, exploring ideas with graduate students, and conversing with wonderful peers as co-editor of *Canadian Art Teacher*.



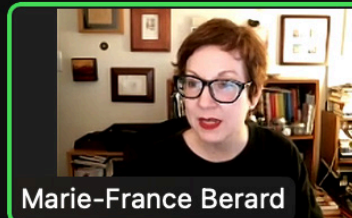
## 20.2 Theme: **TWENTY/VINGT (20) : CAT is 20 years old! Le CAT a 20 ans!**

We seek contributions that consider and reflect on the growth, impacts, inspirations, celebrations, and challenges that 20 years have brought. What is the value of 20 years of experience? What could the next twenty years unfold? What lessons have we learned in 20 years of education? What creative work has emerged? What are the impacts or reverberations that publications have made in 20 years?

If you are a seasoned teacher, we want to hear about your experiences in art education, successes, milestones, and challenges you have overcome. If you are a new teacher we would love to hear about your goals, dreams, mentors that you have learned from, and how you see art education evolving in the next twenty years

Submissions may include opinion pieces, scholarly research papers; creative content such as artworks, creative writing, photo essays, and/or visual explanations of the creative process, reviews of books, exhibitions, or resources. Topics may touch on various areas related to art education and may be either theoretical or practical in nature.

Nous souhaitons recevoir des contributions qui prennent en compte et réfléchissent à la croissance, aux impacts, aux inspirations, aux célébrations et aux défis des 20 dernières années. Quelle est la valeur de 20 ans d'expérience? Que pourraient nous révéler les vingt prochaines années? Quelles leçons avons-nous apprises lors de ces 20 années d'éducation par et avec l'art? Quels travaux créatifs ont émergé? Quels furent les impacts ou conséquences



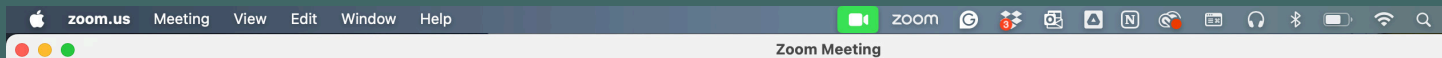
Marie-France Berard



Nancy Long



Amy Atkinson



Marie-France Berard



Nancy Long



Amy Atkinson



# CAT Conversations

When Rita Irwin and Mike Emme approached us with a proposal to highlight the work of Canadian Art Teachers in the pages of CAT, we both knew it was a fantastic idea. But we also have learned through our experiences as art teachers and co-editors that there is as much to value in conversation as in the written word. Opportunities to actually see each other and visually sharing ideas, processes, and artworks provide fertile environments for and inspire the publication of the articles. The opportunities we have had to talk with each other and to our submitting authors, to pose questions and dissect ideas and viewpoints, are when it seems that the connections are most alive, most relevant and most impactful. And so, we proposed the idea of using the emerging technology of zoom, to create a space for sharing, a virtual window into the art teacher scene in Canada, a joining of visual art teachers across time and distance. We hope you join us!

In designing CAT Conversations, we wanted to take into account:

- The generosity of Dr. Irwin's award and the desire to acknowledge and hold space for as many art teachers in Canada as possible;
- The already substantial workload of art teachers and how to mitigate any added motivation and time required to write an article (creative or scholarly);
- The desire to disseminate and share Visual Art strategies, ideas, knowledge and understandings as widely as possible;
- The desire to attract Visual Art teachers, students and art educators interested to participate and engage in the sharing of creative knowledge and expertise.

Our CAT Conversations will be a biannual ZOOM Event in spring and fall. There will be an open call, inviting all interested visual art teachers, art educators and art students to submit abstracts for presentation. We are also working with provincial/territorial Art organizations to ensure our reach is as inclusive as possible. Our CAT conversations will be approximately 1h30min zoom sessions with 5 presentations (by those selected) for approximately 10 minutes each, with time at the end for Q&A and open conversations. It is our hope that these will be open presentations, and all those who are interested are encouraged to attend.

The 5 art educators selected to present at each event will be awarded the Rita Irwin Award. As well, following each CAT Conversation, the subsequent issue of Canadian Art Teacher will highlight the event and share conversation excerpts, summarize key ideas and honour the Rita Irwin award recipients. Each of the 10 yearly selected presenters will receive a special invitation to flesh out their talk and, with support from the Canadian Art Teacher peer mentoring editorial team, have an opportunity to publish their work in a published issue of Canadian Art Teacher

CSEA/SCEA is pleased to announce there will be 10 Rita Irwin Awards awarded annually with a value of \$150 per award.