

INAUGURAL DECLARATION

AUDAIN CHAIR FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF RESEARCH AND DISSEMINATION OF THE ARTISTIC HERITAGE OF THE AUTOMATISTES GROUP

PREAMBLE

When, in the history of a society, a group of artists composed of illustrious women and men brandishes, at their own risk, with courage and determination, a set of creations, writings, and values resolutely contrary to those conveyed by their own institutions;

When they do so with the stated aim of emancipating themselves from the political, social, cultural, and religious norms that have guided and constrained the behavior of the individuals who comprise it for centuries;

When, in the history of this same society, the cultural and intellectual legacy of this group paves the way for a true social revolution, led by an entire generation that reappropriates it to better rebuild its own culture, institutions, and ideals in tune with modernity;

When it is acknowledged that the members of such a group and the artists with whom they collaborated will have affected the social and cultural history of their society throughout their careers, bringing it into the modern era and forever marking national and international art history:

We are bound to feel, towards this group and those who collaborated with it, a duty of memory that we must collectively honor. As such, we postulate the moral obligation to keep alive the memory of the creations, writings and values that they have passed on to us, in order to preserve them, transmit them and disseminate them for the benefit of those who will follow us, in perpetuity.

In the early 1940s, a small group of Québec artists came together to explore the modern ideas emerging in international art. Inspired by the Surrealists, who praised the creative power of the subconscious, the Automatistes, first known as the Montreal Surrealists, were drawn to the liberating and energizing forms of abstract expressionism, automatic writing, modern dance, and avant-garde theater.

In August 1948, in a Quebec in the midst of the Great Darkness, creativity and freedom were stifled by religious dogmas inherited from the past. It was then that this courageous group of artists loudly and clearly expressed, with a united voice, their categorical rejection of the obscurantism in which the people of Québec had been kept for too long.

Their manifesto, Refus global, would spark a cultural, intellectual, and social revolution that profoundly shook the very foundations of our society—and whose echoes still resonate today.

Refus global did not simply aim to go beyond traditional art. It challenged the parochial society of Quebec at the time, in its call for "resplendent anarchy." This document was first and foremost a call for the advent of modernity in art and culture. While the Automatistes are among the pioneers of abstraction in the history of Canadian art, Refus global stands as the most important aesthetic statement ever formulated by a group of Canadian artists.

Then, passionately affirming the link between artistic creation and the possibility of social transformation, this same manifesto also represented the first clear break with the conservative values of traditional French Canada.

Emphasizing multidisciplinary, the independence of art, the liberation of the individual unconscious, and the transformation of society, Québec automatism was not simply the transposition of surrealist thought to Québec. In the words of poet, sociologist, and psychologist Fernand Dumont, it proved to be "the rebirth of a local culture."

The revolution they called for—an affirmation of the potential of each individual in society and the joyful transformation of the world through art—denotes a capacity to resist the influence of any ideology. This is why the manifesto, like the art of the Automatistes, still speaks to us with such urgency and authenticity.

Paul-Émile Borduas, Madeleine Arbour, Marcel Barbeau, Bruno Cormier, Claude Gauvreau, Pierre Gauvreau, Murielle Guilbault, Marcelle Ferron, Fernand Leduc, Thérèse Leduc, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Maurice Perron, Louise Renaud, Françoise Riopelle, Jean Paul Riopelle, and Françoise Sullivan.

These sixteen artists, including seven women, would spawn a veritable sociopolitical earthquake that would ultimately lead to the Quiet Revolution and the emancipation of Quebecers a few years later.

The legacy of Refus global is an important reminder of our individual and collective responsibility toward culture and creativity. Art has the power to transcend borders, spark important debates, and shape our identity. Refus global calls us to celebrate diversity and listen to the voice of each individual, for this is where the true richness of a society lies.

DECLARATION

Consequently, the following declaration follows:

We recognize that the works of art from all disciplines created by the Automatists, their writings, and the still very current values of individual freedom, spontaneous creativity, openness to international thought, and the questioning of traditions they upheld, form a precious heritage that should be called the legacy of the Automatists;

We recognize that we have, individually and collectively, a duty to remember this legacy and that we must therefore work to promote and disseminate it using the means at our disposal;

We recognize the importance of the objectives pursued by the Audain Museum Chair and express our willingness to collaborate, where appropriate, in the work initiated and supported by it;

We mutually commit our duty of memory and our collaboration to support this Declaration, as well as to the objectives of advancing research, promoting and disseminating the legacy of the Automatists which underpin it, according to the best scientific and museological practices.

Let us conclude with the very words of those whose memory we pledge to celebrate:

“Let those tempted by adventure join us. At the imaginable end, we glimpse [humanity] freed from [all] useless chains, realizing in the unforeseen, necessary order of spontaneity, in resplendent anarchy, the fullness of his individual gifts.

Until then, without rest or halt, in community of feeling with those thirsting for a better life, without fear of long deadlines, in encouragement or persecution, we will pursue in wild joy our need for liberation.”

In witness whereof, we sign, jointly and severally, on this 14th day of October 2025, in Montreal.

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