

ACTIVISM



Pierre Allard (left) and Charles Sylvestre move an old stove while setting up for Fin Novembre at Place Émilie-Gamelin yesterday. The event, organized by Socially Acceptable Terrorist Action group, provides meals and overnight accommodations to the city's homeless. PHIL CARPENTER THE GAZETTE

Fin Novembre no flash in the pan

Group has been raising awareness about social, economic inequity since 1998

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THE GAZETTE

Long before the Occupy movement suddenly coalesced, a group of Montreal artists and activists has been drawing annual attention to much the same underlying issues.

Each November since 1998, in fact.

Artist Annie Roy, of the Socially Acceptable Terrorist Action group, pinpointed the common thread as "this totally unbearable situation of the gap between rich and poor."

"There must be a place for events that are dealing with big problems, social issues," Roy said Thursday on the eve of the Fin Novembre public action organized by her team of activists.

"Montreal should have not only events that are good for

tourism."

Fin Novembre begins at 7 p.m., Friday, in Place Émilie-Gamelin, near the Berri-UQAM metro station, and runs for 10 days.

Its mission, Roy said: "To bring street people and the general public together, and to mobilize people against the wealth gap that perpetuates social exclusion."

Roy, Pierre Allard and other artists of like mind started out focused on the homeless by warming socks in stoves and handing them out to street people — and quickly moved on to serving the city's street people warm food, music and a positive vibe.

Each year, Roy said, "we have occupied the urban territory to scream with art at the indecency, at what preoccupies us with the world, at who

rules the world" — and to ask: "Why is there so much injustice? Why do so many people have too much?"

When the group started the actions, there were an estimated 15,000 homeless Montrealers. Now there are twice as many, Roy said.

The group always tries to raise awareness with some panache — music, dance and other forms of expression and entertainment.

"It's our way, because we are artists."

Friday night, once the crowd has been warmed up with what's expected to be a flamboyant circus performance by the troupe Fogorasto, a video project will pose the question: "When will we have had enough?"

Organizers hope to put together, edit and screen some answers from participants the same night. The opening-night show will feature such artists as Paul Cargnello, Ivy, WLOVE, Isabelle St-Pierre, David Marin and Ève

Cournoyer, hosted by François Gourd and Toxique Trottoir.

The tent city that has sprung up in Victoria Square since Oct. 15 mirrors "this refugee camp in downtown Montreal that we started in 1998," Roy said, sometimes with 200 people sleeping in tents. For Maggie, 50, a street person "for about a year," it's an annual event to savour: "Many, many people look forward to it."

At past such actions, "there was a lot of food; they gave away a lot of clothes."

She added: "The staff was very, very friendly. They would help you find clothes, and boots, and stuff like that. Practical stuff. It was very, very well-organized. And there was no violence, nobody fighting."

Maggie said she studied early childhood education at McGill University in the early 1980s, and later fell on hard times.

"We all have different stor-

ies about how we ended up here."

Held for more than a decade as État d'Urgence, the event last year had grown to 450 volunteers, 125 artists and 162 businesses "giving us a lot of food and material," Roy said.

"It was very big and tiring for us to search for money year after year, and not be able to be sure that we would have enough to make it. It was a lot of stress."

"We're proud of that, that it lasted for a long time — well, it's a quarter of my life."

Roy said organizers decided to move on, cutting back from a budget of \$150,000 to about \$75,000 and re-naming the event — though the underlying goal is unchanged.

"We need to have, I would say, a revolution," she said. "I don't want it in blood. Or a violent one. But I would really like it to start with a commitment that it is unbearable and not OK at all that some people can make billions in profit, have so much money that they

don't know what to do with it, and that much of the community sleeps outside. It's not normal.

"The Canadian banks, only for the last nine months, made \$17 billion in profits. It is too much money for corporations while people are in this situation. It's unbearable.

"It looks like there's not a ceiling to it, while poverty is growing and growing and growing."

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ROY TALKS ABOUT OVERNIGHTER VIDEO

Annie Roy of L.A.T.S.A. (Socially Acceptable Terrorist Action) talks about the video installation to be screened from dusk to dawn at Place Émilie-Gamelin on Berri St. Friday. montrealgazette.com/videos