



# WHAT IS ART FOR?

AN EXHIBITION AND MAKER SPACE

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**Warren G. Flowers Art Gallery**  
**Dawson College**

4001 Maisonneuve Blvd W # 2G.0  
Montreal, QC H3Z 3G4

<https://www.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/art-gallery/>

## *What is art for?*

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## What is art for?

Our world is an extraordinary and challenging place to be right now, for all creatures. We are experiencing unprecedented numbers of human migrations – 123.2 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced from their homes in 2024.<sup>1</sup> Political violence is on the rise, with armed conflict in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, street riots across American states, and a 40 percent surge worldwide in civilian deaths in 2024.<sup>2</sup> Every 12 minutes, a civilian dies in armed conflict; every 14 hours, a human rights defender, journalist, or trade unionist is killed or disappeared.<sup>3</sup> The climate catastrophe is pushing globally important ecosystems – coral reefs, glaciers, ocean currents, and the Amazon rainforest – towards the point of no return.<sup>4</sup> Species are dying: we could lose as many as 500 kinds of bird in the next century in an ‘extinction crisis’.<sup>5</sup> The Northern Hemisphere’s summer 2025 already feels like an inferno,

following on the heels of the 10 hottest years on record;<sup>6</sup> forests across Canada are in flames. Across the globe, we are burning down our beautiful home.

In this context, what is art for?

How can individual and collective creative acts weigh in the balance against such devastation and grief – and is that even art’s job?

Let’s find out, together, suggests this installation at the Warren G. Flowers Art Gallery at Dawson College, in Montreal, Quebec: *What is art for? An exhibition and maker space.*

On show are digital and material works by artists worldwide, who took up this same question in the spring of 2020. Like this moment, that moment was crazy: we were dealing with COVID 19’s rampant spread, devastating losses, inequitable access to health care, inadequate PPE (personal protective equipment), limited supply of vaccines – and some vaccine skepticism, too. Pandemic injustices abounded, making more visible structural racism and more urgent the Black Lives Matter movement. Those of us not on the front line were often scared and isolated, at home.

In that lonely and disconnected context, I put out a call on social

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency, *Refugee Data Finder*, June 12, 2025. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. *UN News*, “Civilian deaths in conflict are surging, warns UN human rights office,” June 18, 2025. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164541>

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Human Rights. *Human Rights Count*, June 2025. <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/b12adf1ee3a840b7a23d089050c3bd80>

<sup>4</sup> Jonathon Watts. *The Guardian*, “This is a fight for life: Climate expert on tipping points, doomerism and using wealth as a shield,” June 24, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2025/jun/24/tipping-points-climate-crisis-expert-doomerism-wealth>

<sup>5</sup> Phoebe Weston. *The Guardian*, “Extinction crisis could see 500 bird species vanish within a century – report,” June 24, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/jun/24/extinction-crisis-could-see-500-bird-species-vanish-within-a-century-report-aoe>

<sup>6</sup> World Meteorological Organization. “Global climate predictions show temperatures expected to remain at or near record levels in coming 5 years,” May 28, 2025. <https://wmo.int/news/media-centre/global-climate-predictions-show-temperatures-expected-remain-or-near-record-levels-coming-5-years>

media, “who wants a kit of art materials to explore the question, ‘what is art for?’ as part of a collective project?” Response was swift and emphatic. In just a few days I’d reached the limit of my supplies, mailed off 100 kits, and was soon returned works by 81 artists, in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, and abroad. Using my provided trove of biodegradable materials – papers, cloth, embroidery floss and needle – was optional: 56 artists did; 15 returned digital works, seen at Dawson on iPads, and 10 sent works both digitally and materially. Through their visual contributions and occasional complementary texts, the artists suggested that art is for

*Breathing, embodying*

*Comforting, connecting*

*Honouring nature*

*Raging, dreaming, making change*

At Dawson College, *What is art for?* asks the same question of new visitors-as-artists at this particular moment, turning the gallery into a maker space, complete with a supply of biodegradable and upcycled materials for all to use. New artworks will join the Dawson installation, further elaborating the conversation.

I am particularly delighted to be able to show the work at Dawson College, an educational institution with a rich history of teaching to and learning with diverse populations, and of serving as training ground for our artists- and scientists-to-be. Dawson, like my home institution of Concordia University, supports both the evidence-based education that will help us understand and potentially mitigate climate breakdown and extreme social injustice, and also the holistic development and humanistic skills that encourage us to empathy and engagement, towards collectively creating a more

just future for all.<sup>7</sup>

This catalogue aims to serve as a portal to the ideas embedded in *What is art for?* We list the names and homeplaces of those 81 individuals who created the original works and accompanying texts. Their words form the basis of concrete poetry/instruction score created by artist-educator Jacob Le Gallais, and also appear in the contribution of artist-educator Pohanna Pyne Feinberg, who visually references her cut paper artistic practice as she embodies the ‘container bag’ theory of curation.<sup>8</sup> Exhibition curator Natalie Olanick writes on the role of the Warren G. Flowers Gallery as an enlivened exhibition site; my own text on art as gift explores the mythologies and politics of making art now. Prompts to creative engagement – breathing, connecting, listening, dreaming – amid Tina Carlisi’s deft design invite you to see this catalogue as its own form of kit and to use it as a maker space, as you invoke and inscribe your own considerations of ‘*what is art for?*’ Especially now.

**Kathleen Vaughan**

**Project originator, artist, educator**

<sup>7</sup> Nandini Chatterjee Singh et al. “A new education agenda based on The International Science and Evidence Based Education Assessment,” *npj Science of Learning* vol. 10, no. 24, 2025. [www.nature.com/articles/s41539-024-00288-w](http://www.nature.com/articles/s41539-024-00288-w)

Photographs and videos of all contributions to *What is art for?* can be found at <https://re-imagine.ca/what-is-art-for/> via this QR code.



The website offers images and texts from contributors, as curated by Kathleen into the four categories of breathing, embodying; comforting, connecting; honouring nature; and raging, dreaming, making change, as well as further discussion of the project.



Some suggest that art is a gift.

Certainly, there are gift resonances in *What is art for?* The project began in the spring 2020 COVID-19 pandemic from my desire to connect with and perhaps offer something helpful to artists, my tribe. So many of us are independent workers whose exhibitions, performances, teaching gigs were shut down, our worlds and earnings reduced. With the continuing income of a full-time academic job, I was (and am) privileged. I hoped that if I shared some materials from my own stash, created small, mailable kits to send out on demand<sup>1</sup> and in response to the invitation to think about ‘what art is for,’ I might both offer resources and bring people joy. The task could be fun: a question so big, the materials so mundane, that stakes seemed reassuringly low. I thought that this kit might serve as a gift in the way that French sociologist Alain Caillé defines it, as “any provision of goods and services carried out, without guarantee of reciprocity and with a view toward creating, maintaining,

or regenerating a social bond.”<sup>2</sup>

I mailed 100 kits of materials that could be used or not, could be given away or discarded, and were an offering towards the creation of a visual response to the question “What is art for?” – specifically in our time of pandemic. Included was an addressed envelope, so that folks could if desired mail me their artwork, contributing to a collective statement. Over the summer of 2020, 81 artists<sup>3</sup> returned works, some more than one.

Pieces arrived at my studio in carefully packaged envelopes, boxes, and pouches. Sometimes, a local artist chose to hand-deliver their contribution: we were so happy to meet, even briefly, masked, and at arm’s length. Some sent digital works via email. I was honoured and touched by people’s creativity and generosity. By the thought, care, and time they invested in their work. By their gifts to the project, to me. As I gingerly unwrapped each precious bundle, I felt

<sup>1</sup> I established *What is art for?* as a participatory research project through my Concordia University Research Chair in Socially Engaged Art and Public Pedagogies (2016-2021), whose funding paid for postage and supplementary materials. Participants signed forms consenting to their participation in the project, which included my own ongoing engagement as artist, scholar, curator, educator.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Caillé, *Anthropologie du don. Le tiers paradigme* (Paris: La Découverte, 2007 [2000]), 124.

<sup>3</sup> Later in the fall of 2020, after the deadline for return of artwork and the design of the grids and webpages, two sisters mailed some pieces which are included in the Dawson display, belatedly bringing the total number of artists participating to 83.

and continue to feel a pleasurable obligation to the works and to those who offered them.

I've returned to the project my own energies and resources, curating the submissions into four themes, and hiring people to photograph the pieces and realize the grid-based design for *What is art for?* as it appears on my website. I've written and spoken publicly<sup>4</sup> about the project and helped usher its public display at the Warren G. Flowers Gallery, organizing an accompanying maker space. I aim to further the gift, extending to visitors the chance to consider what art is for, *now*, inspired by the original artworks and using a fresh trove of sustainable materials.<sup>5</sup> I aim to ensure that

<sup>4</sup> See also Kathleen Vaughan, “*What is art for ? | À quoi sert l’art ? : A socially engaged collaboration in a time of pandemic.*” In *De l’art engagé au Québec : éthique et esthétique de l’utile | Of socially engaged art in Québec: Ethics and aesthetics of the useful* (Centre d’arts actuels Skol/Centre Sagamie, 2023), 189–203.

<sup>5</sup> Materials for *What is art for?* at Dawson are biodegradable and upcycled, some sourced through Concordia University’s Centre for Creative Reuse (CUCR), which diverts usable materials from the waste stream to provide free supplies to makers within and beyond the University; some, again, from my own stash supplemented by purchases supported by my current Concordia University Research Chair in Art + Education for Sustainable and Just Futures (2021-26).

this work continues to move into the world.

In this way, I am truly perpetuating the work as a gift, according to the understanding offered by cultural theorist Lewis Hyde:

“...[A] cardinal property of the gift: whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept. Or, if it is kept, something of similar value should move on in its stead, the way a billiard ball may stop when it sends another scurrying across the felt, its momentum transferred. You may keep your Christmas present, but it ceases to be a gift in the true sense unless you have given something else away. As it is passed along, the gift may be given back to the original donor, but this is not essential. In fact, it is better if the gift is not returned but is given instead to some new, third party. The only essential is this: the gift must always move. There are other forms of property that stand still, that mark a boundary or resist momentum, but the gift keeps going.”<sup>6</sup>

Hyde and other thinkers have also identified the shadow

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983/1979), 4.

side of the gift, which can include coercion, trickery, bribery, intimidation, sacrifice, and loss. Indeed, fairy tales and other cautionary stories remind us that the emotional bond of the gift must be accepted with care. Hyde and others also identify the devastation that colonialism has wrought on – for instance – First Nations potlatch traditions, with colonial powers prohibiting both the giving away of property and the expression of culture that potlatch embodies. I consider those darker elements as important to acknowledge as we work with the premise of the ‘gift’, but they were not what was – or IS – most present to me in *What is art for?*

Rather, *What is art for?* resonates with the generosity of many socially engaged art works, which embody positive answers to the question, what is art for? As curator and writer Mary Jane Jacob commented:

“I am moved to think about the personal, unspoken, unseen, uncountable and unknowable, latent, or even unrealized benefits offered by art. This demands trusting in the processes that art objects, installations, and actions set in motion, and recognizing the timeframe that an art experience can occupy. An effect that can be launched with as little as one work of art,

one moment, can span as much as a lifetime.”<sup>7</sup>

I am indeed hoping that this gift of *What is art for?* will resonate with those who see in person or online the wonderfully diverse and beautifully wrought artworks, the exhibition or its documentation, and who engage with this catalogue as a prompt to our guiding question and a gift of a kind itself. I invite you to take what you wish from what’s on offer and then pass a gift on to others. Keep the gift going; keep alive the question of what art is for.

Kathleen Vaughan

<sup>7</sup> Mary Jane Jacob, “Reciprocal Generosity,” in *What We Want is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art*, ed. Ted Purves (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 3.



*Art expands*

*Art is for expressing the utterly inconceivable*

*Art is nature and vice versa  
a dreamscape of the forest floor.  
It is a signal of existence  
A fabric of my thoughts with the  
shapes and forms of our world.*

*Art is for communicating*

*Art is a necessity  
a synchronous, gravitational relationship.  
A reflection of our own inner nature  
a conversation with the self...with each other...  
with THE other.*

*Art is for being childlike  
It is knowing that I am not  
perfect and that my work  
does not need to be perfect.  
Meeting our minds where  
they are at  
Art can heal the heart when  
everything is not ok.*

*Art is where my heart is*

*Art is for reflecting and refracting  
a response in the form of creative action.  
You have to act as if it were possible to  
radically transform the world  
Peaceful public protest...that is our right.*

*Art is to express a feeling*

*Art serves to extend time and empathy*

*Art is for remembering  
to accompany us in life.  
An attempt to connect  
the experience to other's  
experiences  
to engage, with others,  
with myself, with the  
past and the future.*

*Art is survival  
a way to make a part of myself visible.  
A means to bring people together  
connection, emotion, reflection, elevation,  
celebration.*

*Art is for connecting  
a way to learn to be a better human being.  
Something that allows us to engage with  
the thoughts of others  
It lives, it grows, it dies.*

*Statements by WiAF contributing artists, 2020,  
Selected and assembled by Jacob Le Gallais*

*We invite you to ....*

- 1** *Imagine a world where art is how we communicate and show us what that would look like.*
- 2** *What might help us change, repair, or begin again? Show us!*
- 3** *Gather/ assemble pieces that feel connected, even if you don't know why. Let the meaning emerge later.*
- 4** *Make visible a feeling you can't name.*
- 5** *Some questions have no answers. Create something that asks one of those questions.*
- 6** *Slow down...repeat...undo. Let time stretch across the surface of what you're making.*
- 7** *Use your x-ray vision to show us what is not normally seen even if always present.*
- 8** *Make a container that holds your grief and joy for the world.*
- 9** *Let your non-dominant hand lead the way for a change.*
- 10** *Choose and use colours you don't [yet] love ... and see what happens.*
- 11** *Create a portal to a world without hate, fear, inequity, or global warming!*
- 12** *Look around you and choose one thing to draw as though you love it better than anything in the world.*

## breath holds meaning

intrusions

recovery

revealing

pulses

access

home

### To share breath

Layered, cut, shaped, stitched, folded, written, recorded and vocalized, these works bear witness to a time when we found ourselves exposed, at the edge of a precipice, amidst a global pandemic. This exhibition reminds us that art holds meaning across time, just as breath holds meaning across time and space.

weaving

remains

### To raise questions

Should we presuppose that art is an action with a purpose? Can our compulsion to mark, erase, layer, color, compose, print, press, weave, carve, layer, fragment, facet, beat, strum, sing, and dance be understood as a desire to be heard as undulations of our collective memory resounding into the future?

scars

solace

<sup>1</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin and Donna Jeanne Haraway,

<sup>2</sup> *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (Ignota, 2019). Ursula K. LeGuin and Donna Jeanne Haraway. Preface in *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (Ignota, 2019).

### This exhibition is

A frame, a receptacle, a vessel, an invitation, a memory, a future envisioned.

### To receive

Amidst ravages of fear, isolation and distrust, what is art for? opens space for the other story. It is the life story, amidst waves of despair, that reveals crests of generosity and visions of hope. It is the story that voices resolve and nurtures the silent sublime.

### To discover anew

Please enter, “both within and without … where we reckon with fear and uncertainty to return with lessons to share”, we make memories that will shape how “we envision how we might re-world our world.”<sup>2</sup> Let’s meet, share materials, improvise, experiment, listen, observe, interpret, amidst an open-palmed inevitability towards that which will be discovered anew.

unfoldings

afflictions

inhalations

Pohanna Pyne Feinberg

## Art by us

Looking at art is not a common or usual activity. Given that, what is the value and role of museums and art galleries in contemporary life? The traditional role of the museum is as a place of record and history; the art gallery has at least two roles – as a commercial venue where the goal is to sell works and as a not for profit, artist-run center where the goal is to offer artists opportunities to present their works of an experimental or political nature. The reception to the work is meant to be one of critique and commentary. Within the history of these spaces as well as in their current practices, definitions are questioned and interventions or unconventional exhibitions are presented. From the *Salon des Refusés* of Paris 1863 to *Shame and Prejudice: A Story of Resilience* by Kent Monkman presented at the McCord Stewart Museum, artists and curators have worked within parameters to introduce innovative or challenging ideas and social change.

*What is art for?* at the Warren G. Flowers Gallery proposes the concept of the gallery as a communal space where the viewers of the exhibition can also be the artists in the exhibition. The works that are on display as the audience comes into space are 81 works, which were made during the COVID pandemic. In the mist of the isolation and anxiety of that period, Kathleen Vaughan created a mail art project where she prepared and sent kits full of beautiful pieces of fabrics, string, threads, and printed images to artists that had responded to a post on social media. The works mailed back to her were made by each person with their creative energy. No one knew what anyone else was making or doing – there was a creative trust and spirit to share their personal expression. The experience of invention and communication was the aim.

After seeing the exhibition, visitors can then sit down in the gallery and create their own pieces of art, potentially becoming part of the installation. The art works on display combined with the activity of making art extend the aim of invention and communication to become a conversation rather than a response to a question or proposal.

The provision of a workspace in the gallery allows for unexpected results, yet at the same time permits fluid, emotionally-rich bonds to be formed between the works on the display, the gallery space, and the audience members. The ability to move between traditional roles opens the discourse on art delving deeper into how we are informed and satiated.

The question, what is art for? is constantly evolving and can be seen from different perspectives. As an audience member, an artist, and a facilitator or curator we shift our view as to how art provides fulfillment.

Natalie Olanick

## Acknowledgements and thanks

*What is art for?* is made possible because of the creativity and generosity of the artists worldwide who contributed their work to this collaborative project. Thank you!

Thanks, also, to Concordia University, which through my two successive research chairs (in Socially Engaged Art and Public Pedagogies, 2016-21, and Art + Education for Sustainable and Just Futures, 2021-26), provided funding for materials, postage, and documentation of this project.

Thank you to our host, the Warren G. Flowers Art Gallery, so generously supported by the Offices of the Director General, the Academic Dean, and Creative and Applied Arts at Dawson College.

With gratitude to Natalie Olanick, curator of this installation of *What is art for?* and Rhonda Meier at the Warren G. Flowers Gallery at Dawson College, for their excitement about the possibility of bringing the project to Dawson. I am deeply beholden to their openness to the idea of turning the gallery into a makerspace alongside the installation, with animation of the gallery and materials accomplished by Concordia University graduate students in Art Education and Dawson College students.

Special thanks to the Concordia University Centre for Creative Reuse (CUCCR) for contributions of upcycled supplies to WiAF's sustainable makerspace.

This catalogue is made possible by the financial support of the Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art, with much appreciation to their emerita research chair and director, Dr. Martha Langford. Catalogue contents and form have been generated by five of us (bios follow), collaborating to consider 'what is art for?' both as the artists envisioned the question then, and as we engage with it now.

**Kathleen Vaughan** (MFA, PhD) is an artist, writer, and Professor of Art Education at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. Her own artwork uses multiple digital and analogue media with a strong textile inflection, complemented by storytelling, and is oriented to environmental and social justice. [www.akaredhanded.com/](http://www.akaredhanded.com/) | <https://re-imagine.ca/>

**Pohanna Pyne Feinberg** holds an MA in art history, a PhD in art education, and has a strong interest in community practice and decolonizing pedagogies. She is currently faculty in Visual Arts at Dawson College. Her personal artistic practice is oriented to paper cutting and cultural heritage. [www.dripdrop.ca/](http://www.dripdrop.ca/)

**Natalie Olanick** (MVS) is an artist, curator, and educator, specifically a faculty member in Visual Arts at Dawson College. She makes paintings that sometimes are accompanied by projections or small objects and bookworks, as well as writing and curatorial projects. <https://natalieolanick.com/>

**Jacob Le Gallais** is a visual artist, researcher, educator, and PhD candidate in Art Education. At the intersection of collage and craft practices, his artwork incorporates mixed-media collage, paper, and textiles, and examines notions of the human-animal relationship, the Anthropocene, and the urban landscape as shared habitat. [www.instagram.com/jacob\\_le\\_gallais\\_art/](https://www.instagram.com/jacob_le_gallais_art/)

**Tina Carlisi** is a Montreal-based artist and faculty in Visual Arts at Champlain Regional College in Lennoxville, Canada. She holds a PhD in Fine Arts from Concordia University. Her interdisciplinary practice spans visual art, performance, poetry, and immersive workshops, investigating the poetic and political dimensions of intimacy. [www.tinacarlisi.com/](http://www.tinacarlisi.com/)

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