Rosalie D. Gagné: A Contemporary Alchemist

Edited by Patrice Giasson

Neuberger Museum of Art

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Purchase College, SUNY
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This publication accompanies the exhibition Rosalie D. Gagné: A Contemporary Alchemist (September 18—December 22, 2024) curated by Patrice Giasson, the Alex Gordon Curator of Art of the Americas, and organized by the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, SUNY. Funding for the catalogue and exhibition was generously provided by the Alex Gordon Foundation, with the support of the Alex Gordon Estate. The artist has also received funding from the Conseil des arts et de lettres du Québec and the Canada Council for the Arts.

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Cover image: *Règne artificiel III* (*Artificial Kingdom III*), 2017, detail. Photo: Michel Pinault.

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Giving Freedom to Matter: An Introduction to the Art of Rosalie D. Gagné

Patrice Giasson

> For as long as I can remember, observing nature and experimenting with matter have always been valuable tools of knowledge for me. Sometimes, I imagine that if I had not worked in the field of visual arts, I would have been active in the sciences, and that if I had been born in the Middle Ages, I like to think that I would have been an alchemist.
>
> Rosalie D. Gagné[1]

When artist Rosalie Dumont Gagné left her hometown of Québec City in 1996 for Mexico City, she probably did not imagine the impact it would have on her life and career, or that she would live there for more than half a decade. The artist was eager to find a new horizon against which to develop the sculptural skills that she had honed during her art studies at the University of Laval in Québec, where she earned her undergraduate degree in fine arts. Rather than going to Europe or the United States, she chose Mexico. She felt herself to be in the right place at the right time: in the 1990s, the Mexican contemporary art scene was booming, and the city—including its world-famous Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México—had much to offer.[2] With more than twenty million inhabitants, Mexico

1. From an unpublished artist statement shared by the artist.

2. For many, the existence of a contemporary art scene in Mexico began in the 1990s. The National Center for the Arts (Centro Nacional de las Artes or CNA), which houses the Multimedia Center fostering electronic art studies, was inaugurated in 1994; the Carrillo Gil Museum opened its doors to the most vanguard contemporary artists; and the Museo Ex Teresa Arte Actual launched new performing and sonic art programs. Research centers such as Curare Espacio Crítico para las Artes, dedicated to the study and curating of art, also opened in that decade. Scholars including

City contrasted with what Gagné had known in Québec and opened up new possibilities for her. "Mexico was bigger than Paris, bigger than New York, and it was this kind of place where big cultural hype happened, where very contemporary ideas emerged, and where the installation-art movement was really flourishing,"[3] recalls the artist. After enrolling at the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas (School of Visual Arts), Gagné benefited from the tutelage of established professors and also befriended a group of young artists united around La Clínica Regina (Regina Clinic), a former medical clinic, where they explored new artistic practices. Gagné speaks enthusiastically about gatherings on the rooftops of the Clínica, where the new generation generated fresh ideas in a festive ambiance.

Gathering on the rooftop at La Clínica, 2011.

The Clínica offered a platform for open discussion, away from the classroom, along with studios and exhibition spaces in the heart of the city.[4]

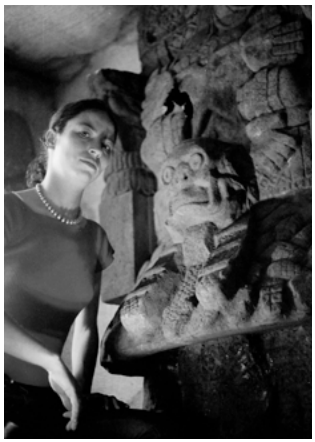
The city itself helped connect her art practice to everyday life and the working class. When asked in a recent interview about living in Mexico City, she stated that she was stimulated by the energy that emerged from the vibrant urban environment. Another fascinating aspect of Mexico, said the artist, was her encounter with the rich art left by the ancient Mexicans, what some still refer to as Pre-Columbian or Mesoamerican art. This interest was expressed in her large-scale stone sculpture;

Olivier Debroise and Cauhtémoc Medina published new scholarship and eventually rewrote the history of contemporary art in Mexico through their groundbreaking exhibition and publication *La era de la discrepancia: Arte y cultura visual en México, 1968–1997* (Mexico: UNAM, 2006). Along with these institutional and scientific advancements, several artist-driven underground and independent art centers, including La Panadería and Temístocles 44, emerged. Private galleries such as the Kurimanzutto Gallery, founded by Mónica Manzutto, José Kuri, and leading artist Gabriel Orozco, were established. Finally, important collectors including Eugenio López Alonso, who later created the Jumex Foundation and its emblematic Jumex Museum, began to collect the work of contemporary artists.

3. Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Rosalie D. Gagné are from her video interview with the author, November 28, 2023.

4. The name Clínica was borrowed from that of a medical clinic operated for nearly forty years by Dr. Mendoza Cantú to serve the working class. It was thanks to the efforts and direction of Andrés Mendoza, the grandson of the physician, that the Clínica became an independent art center.

Gagné photographing *Microcosme*, 2000.



The artist next to a replica of Coatlicue at La Clínica, *ca*. 2000.

The artist sculpting *Caracol Lunar* (*Lunar Snail*), 1996.

Untitled, 1995, detail.

Caracol lunar (*Lunar Snail*), 1996–97 (p. 55),[5] which required laborious hand carving. The captivating piece combines two images, that of a *caracol* (snail), an ancient symbol found in the art and calendars of the Aztecs, with a *molcajete*, a utilitarian object still used today in rural communities to ground corn for tortillas. Absorbed by the *molcajete*, the *caracol* caves in on itself. The two forms are intertwined, resulting in a single image. Neither sacred nor utilitarian, the work is exemplary of the conceptual trajectory Gagné would follow over time.

Prior to her arrival in Mexico, the artist had experimented with metal structures into which she placed balloons filled with liquids:

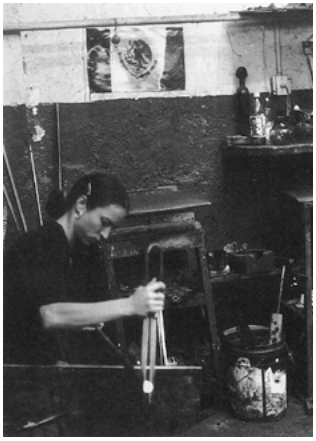
> I was exploring rigid structures filled with balloons containing colored liquid. But these works were very precarious, and the balloons would burst every time. Then I ran into a flower shop and saw a vase made of metal wire into which glass had been blown. The technique and the tension were similar to the experiments I was doing in my art. So when I arrived to Mexico, I looked for those workshops.

Thanks to professor and artist Jesús Mayagoitia, who taught at the Escuela National de Artes Plástica, Gagné was introduced to one of the oldest glass-blowing workshops in Mexico, Carretones.[6] This was

5. Created in 1996–97, this work was later exhibited in 2005 in the sculpture garden at the Universidad de las Américas, Puebla, Mexico.

6. For information about Carretones' history see "Diálogo entre una técnica ancestral y la visión contemporánea del diseño," La Jornada Virtu@l, April 5, 2003, accessed January 23, 2024, https://www.jornada.com.mx/2003/04/05/02an1cul.php?origen=cultura.html

The artist with her teacher Jesús Mayagoitia in Mexico City, 2000.



Working in Carretones with melted glass, México City, 1998.

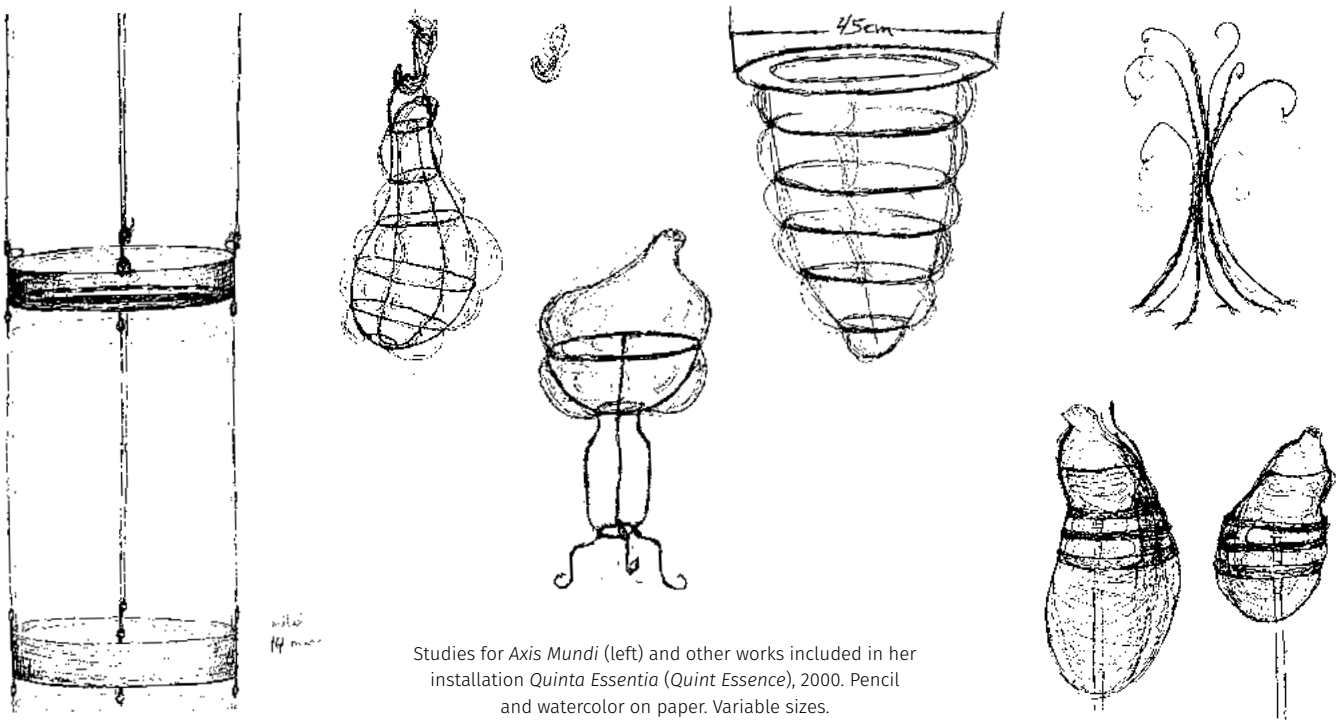
the beginning of a long period of exploration with blown glass objects, and her study of the flexibility of hot glass inflated into a metal structure. While some of the metal structures were welded by the artist herself, others were found objects that she gathered in the city.

One of her earliest glassworks, *Corazón molido* (*Ground Heart*), 1997 (p. 57), confirms the conceptual path that her art practice had taken. It consists of a found meat grinder topped with a glass object resembling a human organ blown into one of Gagné's handmade metal grids. The imprisoned heart, on the verge of being pulverized, suggests the sorrows of love, while the work's title itself somewhat humorously alludes to ground meat. The glass mimics meat's malleability as it prepares to take its ultimate shape, creating an impression of eternal tension.

The artist acknowledged that it was in Mexico where she fully developed into an art practitioner, and where she began to showcase her work. Her first solo exhibition, held in 2000 at the Casa del Lago in Mexico City, was *Quinta Essentia* (*Quint Essence*). The title reveals her initial interest in alchemy—manifested through the use of eccentric glass vases, liquids of all sorts, objects that look like those of a chemistry laboratory—with ventures into biology and spirituality, and the exploration of complementary concepts such as organic and inorganic, solids and liquids, natural and artificial worlds. *Quinta Essentia* included works such as *Axis Mundi*, 2000 (p. 61), whose title refers to the ancient geocentric belief that a line through the center of Earth connected it to the heavens, and the latter revolved around the planet. Standing vertically inside the gallery, like some sort of vertebral column,

the work stimulates, in Gagné's words, a "connection between the universe of the microcosm and the macrocosm." The sculpture features a column of seven handmade jars, whose thickness is similar to examples from Mexican markets, which the artist filled with a liquid tinted orange-gold. As the jars ascend, the color becomes lighter but opaquer, "as if getting closer to the sun," and the volume of liquid decreases. Interestingly, the liquids seem to emphasize, or engage with, the apparent liquidity found in glass when being blown or when it spills out from the artist's metal structures. The use of liquids and tints would become more frequent in her work.

Also from that first exhibition is *Microcosme* (*Microcosm*), 2000 (p. 62), her first large blown-glass-in-found-metal sculpture. It contains a mass of water filled with aquatic plants and other living forms. Gagné, who was raised close to a forest on the outskirts of Québec, developed at a very young age a deep interest in nature, which explains the fascination for the organic world that appears in all



Studies for *Axis Mundi* (left) and other works included in her installation *Quinta Essentia* (*Quint Essence*), 2000. Pencil and watercolor on paper. Variable sizes.

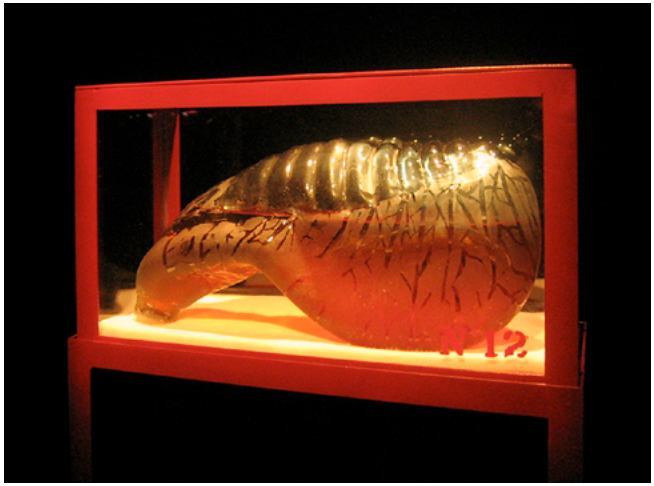
(Left) *Microcosme* (*Microcosm*) and (right) *Système circulatoire* (*Circulatory System*), both 2000.

her work. Indeed, *Microcosm* artificially re-creates a contained environment with living species, similar to what biologists do in their laboratories. But the work remains a conceptual glass sculpture, whose shape resembles a drop of water. Here, the "glass drop" contains many drops of water, constituting a clever metonymic inversion, in which the contained becomes the container.

Also presented in her first exhibition was *Système circulatoire* (*Circulatory System*), 2000 (p. 63), a wall installation consisting of units connected to each other through a system of tubes. These units are made with glass blown into small metal grids that fit over teat cups for milking cows. Interestingly, each unit is not filled with white liquid that could remind one of milk, but with red liquid that resembles blood. This juxtaposition of maternal references and blood brings to mind passages from William Blakes's *The Book of Urizen*, in which he speaks of the creation of the world: "The glove of life-blood trembled. Branching out into roots. Fibrous writhing upon the winds. Fibres of blood, milk and tears."[7] Along with this alchemical reading, Gagné's installation also echoes a system for blood transfusion. But, contradicting what the title *Circulatory System* suggests, the work only simulates a connection between the units, and the liquid remains trapped in each individual glass form. Gagné's time at La Clínica Regina certainly suggests a possible trigger for this interest in a "clinical aesthetic": in fact, the artists' workshops there were located in the very same rooms where doctors had once practiced for more than four decades.

This clinical aesthetic was further manifested in her second Mexican exhibition, *Cuerpos Trasmutados* (*Transmuted Bodies*), presented during the 2001 Visual Poetry Biennial in Cuernavaca. This installation, which featured uncanny objects displayed in a dimly lit ambiance, incorporated several found objects that she had gathered from the Clínica, such as *Lavamanos* (*Hand Wash*). The work consists of a pre-surgery wash basin, capped with three hand-blown receptacles, each filled with a different colored liquid. In this case, the liquids are allowed to pass through the faucets, and the visi-

7. William Blake, *The Book of Urizen* (Lambeth: printed by the author, 1794).



Left to right: *Lavamanos* (*Hand Wash*), *ExCroissance* (*OutGrowth*), and *Espécimen #12* (*Specimen #12*), featured in the exhibition *Cuerpos transmutados* in the Visual Poetry Biennial, Cuernavaca, Mexico, 2001.

tor is invited to activate the flow through a system of pedals, making it Gagné's first interactive work. As the three liquids mix when flowing, and slimy, brownish liquid is created in the large receptacle under the sink. The Spanish title plays on words that ironically echo the popular expression "Lavarse las manos" (Wash your hands), which means not taking responsibility for something, and is frequently used to mock politicians or speak of political corruption. Here, the brownish liquid personifies the object of corruption.

The other works featured in *Transmuted Bodies* also included strange objects, such as *Espécimen #12* (*Specimen #12*), a rippled glass piece whose melting form resembles that of a larva. Half-filled with a red, bloody-looking liquid, the work is boxed atop a pedestal. Sealing the object and calling it *Specimen* offers, according to the artist, the idea of protecting the visitor from the specimen and the specimen from the visitor, "like a virus or microbe that would need to be isolated." The exhibition also included a floor work titled *ExCroissance* (*OutGrowth*), an amphora-like object again filled with red liquid, and whose shape resembles that of *Specimen*. Overflowing objects that appear alive would resurface in several of her works in the coming years. The larva shape, for instance, reappeared in 2017 in her monumental inflatable outdoor sculpture titled *OutGrowth #2*. Through this mimicry of life forms, the artist expresses her interest in biology and Nature—she insists on capitalizing the term to signal its importance—while exploring

Celluhotel (*Cellhotel*), detail, 2004.

dichotomic and interrelated concepts such as natural/artificial, form/function, static/dynamic.

At the end of 2001, Gagné returned to Québec, traveled outside North America, and eventually established herself in Montreal, where she completed a master of fine arts at the University of Concordia. *Celluhotel* (*Cellhotel*), 2004, was created after a long trip to India. The title was inspired by the "cell hotels" that had expanded in Asia, and that confined the tenant in an extremely tight but also intimate environment. Learning of these hotels prompted the artist to create a similar contained environment that could only be experienced by a few visitors at a time. *Cellhotel* consists of a small domed construction made of transparent fabric, with a Roman arch as the single low entrance. It is a sort of sacred architecture, says the artist, "made with the idea of creating layers of experience: you can experience it from the outside with this little veil, or you can go deeper and be at the heart of the piece." *Cellhotel* is immersive and meditative, indicative of Gagné's interest in Buddhism and meditation. Once inside, the visitor hears a sound emerging from a large breast-like glass container hanging from the ceiling and containing an opaque white liquid (similar to milk) dripping into a metal receptacle. Interested in the phenomenology of perception as explored by Maurice Merleau-Ponty,[8] the artist seeks to stimulate visitor's senses. In *Cellhotel*, one can feel the environment both visually and sonically. The work can also be read as a sort of water clock, says the artist, "but it doesn't register the time, because as opposed to a water clock, where you could see the water accumulating in the lower part of the system, here the water evaporates before the container actually fills up," suggesting a notion of impermanence.

With time Gagné's projects became more interactive. In 2005 she began working on her installation *Murmures internes* (*Inner Whispers*) (p. 71),[9] which consists of seven clay sculptures converted into sound devices. The artist was living at the time with her Mexican companion. She spoke Spanish and French at home, and English at school. Gagné was interested in exploring the multicultural reality hidden behind the dominance of English in international settings, such as Concordia, "with students coming from places like Russia, Korea, the Czech Republic.... I was struck by the fact that when people go back to their mother tongue, they become more connected to their real being, their sense of

8. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Gallimard: Paris, 1945).
9. On view at FOFA Gallery, Université Concordia, Montreal, 2005–6.

self. There's an extra level of honesty, maybe, or authenticity. So I wanted to explore that." Installed on a platform (or placed into the walls in a later iteration, —*Attracteurs étranges* (*Strange Attractors*) of 2008)—, *Inner Whispers* allows the visitor to connect with each piece individually and generates an intimate relation by stimulating several senses. The visitor is invited to come close to each work and listen to the sound, feel the texture of the clay with their hands and, while placing an ear close to the orifice, smell the aroma of beeswax that the artist had applied to the surface.

Since clay was a new sculptural medium for Gagné, she opted for the more archaic forms of making—rather than a pottery wheel—by piling up coils of clay and slowly shaping them into sculptures resembling ancient amphoras. Though not made of glass like her previous works, their biomorphic shapes recall the melting aspect of her earlier glass pieces.

Pendulum of 2006 is similar to *Axis Mundi* in its expression of her interest in cosmology—the place of humankind and Earth in the universe. The work was inspired by the Foucault pendulum, conceived in the nineteenth century as an experiment to demonstrate the rotation of the Earth. Gagné's *Pendulum* features a glass sculpture swinging from a cable, which will be motorized for the exhibition at the Neuberger Museum of Art; thanks to movement detectors, it will start swinging when a visitor enters the gallery. As the work moves, the bottom of the sculpture touches a circle of sand on the floor. The tender touch of the pointed metal tip caresses the sand, leaving a trace that resembles female genitalia. The work is meant to be meditative and awaken different emotions. The sculpture holds an organic white substance that is similar to that of *Cellhotel* and could be interpreted as mother's milk. *Pendulum* also conveys a sense of tension from the barbed wire that contains, or embraces, the glass. The combination of these two materials grew out of Gagné's dissatisfaction with the clean appearance of the glass works that she first created in Montreal's workshops. The glassblowers she had worked with in Mexico recycled materials such as old bottles and took a loose approach that gave a raw finish to the blown glass. Bubbles and impurities were part of the objects, and she appreciated that quality. In contrast to the Mexican practice, Québecois artisans used pure silica, and "they were looking to create objects that were crystal clear, pristine as they could be." She felt that because the end result was so tame, the possibilities were limited. The recycled glass mixture she had worked with in Mexico was disobedient—it would not follow the glassblower's

Pendulum, detail, 2006.

dictates and seemed to have a voice of its own. (It is interesting to note in this context that, years later, Gagné's reactive immersive installations would include machines endowed with artificial intelligence that were capable of making their own decisions.) Since it was not possible in Québec to make glass the way she had in Mexico, she used a material—barbed wire—that could itself create tension with the glass. The poetic and harmonic result emphasizes the conceptual opposition between the fragile-looking glass and the metal barbed wire that appears to pierce it.

A year after creating *Pendulum*, Gagné began her investigation into the universe of ventilators and polyethylene sculptures. Like the glass works, these plastic sculptures are handmade, fragile, transparent, and conceptually share a "breathing dimension." But while the glass works were blown and frozen into their final shapes, the plastic sculptures are kept in movement through air from the ventilators they are attached to.

Alvéole (*Alveolus*), from 2007, was her first work involving a ventilator. The sculpture breathes, inflating and deflating, and resembles one of Louise Bourgeois's gigantic spiders. Visitors are invited to go underneath *Alveolus*, where they can hear the gentle and almost comforting sound of respiration, as if in a womb, and see their reflection in a mirror hanging under the belly of the creature. As Nathalie Bachand explains in her essay in this catalogue, works such as *Alveolus* and *Inner Whisper* mark

Alvéole (*Alveolus*), 2007, detail of the mirror hanging from inside the work.

"a turning point toward new biomimetic explorations." *Alveolus* was created fourteen years before the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, when many people had little or no knowledge of respirators. Undoubtedly, the work today conveys another meaning. Originally, says the artist, such pieces were meant simply to explore, and blur, the limits between artificial and natural, synthetic and biological, through lifelike works.

Gagné's works made with plastic and ventilators eventually became major interactive installations, such as her series *Règne artificiel* (*Artificial Kingdom*), initiated in 2009 and followed by three different iterations over the next ten years. The first version consisted of a small-scale installation featuring transparent polyethylene reactive sculptures, which she calls "cells," that hung from the ceiling

Rosalie inside *Règne artificiel* (*Artificial Kingdom*), 2009.

Règne artificiel IV (*Artificial Kingdom IV*), 2020, Grand Théâtre de Québec.

of a small room with a low arched entrance. These works, thanks to movement detectors, reacted to the visitor's presence. As Bachand explains, "no longer constrained by the inertia of the material, the work becomes mechanized and articulated, interactive and autonomous." *Artificial Kingdom II* from 2010 and *III* from 2017 were more ambitious and sophisticated installations, involving, along with the movement detector, a system of colored LED lights that added to the sensorial experience.

The last iteration, *Artificial Kingdom IV*, was installed in 2020 in the Grand Théâtre de Québec and consisted of forty-five inflatable cells hanging from the thirty-foot ceiling. It will be replicated for the Neuberger Museum's Theatre Gallery. Born out of Gagné's fascination with the collective movement of birds flying in a flock, as well as that of swarms of fish that appear animated by collective intelligence, the work's suspended creatures react as a group to visitors' movements, creating a sort of wave as they inflate and deflate, and change color. The effect is always unpredictable.

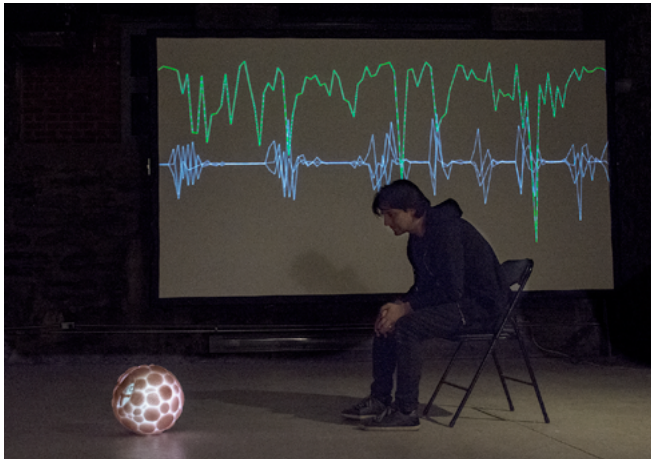
Installations such as *Artificial Kingdom IV* demonstrate the artist's interest in exploring systems and behaviors. Building on that experience, her work took a new direction with *Morphoses* (*Morphosis*), 2018–ongoing, created in collaboration with artist Sofian Audry, who is trained in programming and machine learning.[10] This open-ended project

10. Sofian Audry is also an active scholar in the field of machine learning. He recently published a seminal book on the subject, titled *Art in the Age of Machine Learning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), in which he examined artistic practices at the intersection of machine learning and new

Two robots featured in *Morphoses* (*Morphosis*), 2023.

explores the boundaries between artificial and biological life through the study of machine behavior. It involves spherical robots coated with silicone—which the artists refer to as "a skin"—through which one can distinguish a sort of stomach made of motors, from which emerge different light colors and tones as the robot begins to move, or "exist."

These spherical robots—or "creatures," as Gagné and Audry call them[11]—resemble deep-ocean marine life that glows in the dark. They are freely inspired by the drawings of nineteenth-century German naturalist Ernst Haeckel. The artists remind us that their creatures are not programmed to execute specific tasks, but rather are given simple goals, and receive positive reward [expressed by a color] when the action they try brings them closer to the goal. The various possible choices result in diverse scenarios. As the lifespan of the creatures is short (they constantly require rebooting and recharging), the viewer sees them evolve, and hesitate, as they learn extremely basic things such as moving, standing still, moving together, or rolling apart. The artists admit that once the robots are turned on, they are on their own, anything can happen, and Gagné and Audry only have to sit and observe. As Bachand writes, "Our relationship with these three 'bioluminescent' spheres is a form of real exchange that is absolutely new in this production, a priori, very sculptural and independent of our presence." Audry says that they are "challenging the idea of what life



Sofian Audry monitoring the robots in *Morphoses* (*Morphosis*), 2023.

media art.

11. Interview by the author with Rosalie D. Gagné and Sofian Audry, January 17, 2024 (see pp. 93–104). The following quotations from the artists are drawn from this interview.

is [and] maybe this is a kind of life-form." To the delight of the visitor, these works nevertheless remain marvelous in their aesthetic appeal and their ability to elicit empathy. In sum, the artists' poetic approach attests the robots' capacity to shed light on artificial intelligence, making the "machines" less frightening to humans.

The art created by Gagné over the past twenty-five years can be understood against the background of established artists from the Americas, including the Brazilians Ernesto Neto —who creates large-scale minimalist and "spiritual" installations with hanging elements that defy gravity—and the sensory, visual, and sonic experiences of Cildo Meireles. Like Gagné, Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco made found objects a central part of several works. Gagné has also expressed a strong connection with Argentinean artist Tomás Saraceno, whose installations featuring inflatables and aerial glass structures explore the relation between humans and the ecosystem, including the web systems found in both humans and spiders. Gagné's sculptures and installations also connect with the poetic works of the late Louise Bourgeois, such as her large-scale representation of spiders as well as sensual sculptures. But Gagné's more recent projects, including her series *Artificial Reign*, which involve new technologies (sensors and computers), allow connections with artists such as Rafael Lozano Hemmer (based in Mexico and Montreal), who creates monumental interactive experiences. Finally, Gagné's work in progress with Audry attests to a new venture into artificial intelligence and machine learning, and perhaps takes off from the robotic work of other artists. But Gagné and Audry differ in that they move toward giving freedom to the robots by not over-programming them. When I asked the artists what had triggered their interest into machine learning and where they would situate their present research within the rich panorama of digital and robotic art practices, Audry responded:

> I think that we're really bringing something new to the table. A lot of the work that has been done in robotics did not involve learning systems. I'm thinking of some very good work … by those who are our mentors, such as Bill Vorn and Luis-Philippe Demers in Québec, and Ken Rinaldo and Simon Penny in the US.... But we're actually distancing ourselves from their robotic approach, trying to get to this place that's kind of in between the robot, the living form, and the sculptural object. We are aiming towards this hybrid form that embodies indeterminism, by exploring machine learning technologies. And to my knowledge no one else is working like this in Montreal right now.

I would conclude by saying that no matter the historical prisms through which we look at Gagné's work, it is always unique, in constant evolution, and driven by a sincere poetic impulse.