



Performance "Symptôme #1," Shayo Detchema, Confluence Nocturne, Péristyle Nomade, *L'écho d'un fleuve*, summer 2010

Freedom by Expression

From painting to video to performance art, Montrealer **Shayo Detchema** moves beyond the label of HIV-positive artist.

BY LAURETTE LÉVY

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FÉLIX BOWLES

“The disease had become a painful cry and art was my only way out. As a multi-disciplinary artist, my work is a series of evolving self-portraits.”

These words from the artist sum up the artistic process of Shayo, a 30-year-old Montreal woman who has been living with HIV and hepatitis C for 16 years. Raised in a family and school environment focused on the arts, she had her first exhibition of oil and acrylic paintings at the age of 21. Since then, she has continued her exploration through installations involving mixed-media sculpture and assemblage. Throughout her varied works, Shayo has tried to come to grips with what has become her daily life—the disease, its symptoms and the medications she takes every day.

Most recently, Shayo has turned to video and performance art to express her frustrations and reflections on life with HIV. She felt a need to break down the isolation caused by having HIV and decided to express herself through her body—a very physical way of reaching out to others. The result of her experimentation was her first film, *Elisa+*, a series of tableaux of the artist filmed in 2009. By staging her own body, Shayo found she was able to communicate what had otherwise been incommunicable.

The première of *Elisa+* took place last fall at the inaugural edition of *VHsion*, an HIV/AIDS film festival organized by Shayo and other HIV artists and activists from Montreal. The two-day festival included performances and films from Canada, the United States and Africa. (Read more about *VHsion* in “Lights, Camera, Action” in the Winter 2010 *Positive Side*.)

Following this short film, Shayo was invited to participate in *L'Écho d'un fleuve*, an urban art event that took place this past June. For the occasion, she produced her first performance piece, “Symptôme #1.” Shayo, dressed in white, lied abandoned on a mattress covered with a white quilt (an allusion to the AIDS Memorial Quilt that began in San Francisco in 1987 and now includes additions from more than 35 countries). Viewers were invited to leave a comment or symbol using one of the markers attached to the edge of the quilt by red ribbons of varying lengths.



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At the side, a small suitcase lay open with objects symbolizing Shayo's HIV status as well as a headset playing an unusual soundtrack. Photos were hung on a wall, and scattered on the floor were slips of paper with the evocative opening words from a song

by the great French singer Barbara (the stage name of Monique Serf): “Dying and falling asleep are definitely not the same thing.”

During the evening-long performance, many people wrote or drew messages of hope and tenderness on the fabric as well as on Shayo's clothes and the exposed parts of her body. Some curled up against her on the mattress. It was such an intense experience that it took Shayo more than a half-hour to regain a sense of reality after the performance. By creating such an intimate environment and allowing herself to be vulnerable, she felt the spontaneous comfort and love from audience members.

Until recently, Shayo has presented her work predominantly in the HIV community. “Symptôme #1” allowed her to enter the larger arts world. Shayo does not like to be labelled an “HIV-positive artist,” even though her status is central to her art and despite her involvement with different AIDS service organizations since 1994. She does not hide her HIV status, but she doesn't see it as the primary or defining part of who she is. She also rejects the label of “activist artist” although she acknowledges that disclosing her status is a deliberate act. She knows how important it is to get out from the shadows if you want to make a difference.

Encouraged by the success of “Symptôme #1,” Shayo plans to continue in this direction. She is working on several projects with another performance artist because, she says, “Performance has become essential for me, as it allows me to fulfil a desire to communicate with my audience.” +

Shayo invites you to visit her interactive website at www.shayo.ca

For more info about the *VHsion* film festival, go to www.vhsion.com