

# AWAKENING: seeing beyond the frame

Lorna Bauer, Marie-Claire Blais, Nadège Grebmeier Forget,  
Alicia Henry, Tau Lewis, Michaëlle Sergile, Eve Tagny

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“That wall,” Showerim kindly explains, “prevents you from seeing. It prevents me from seeing too, but also from being seen.”

— Showerim Coooco in the documentary *Le mur invisible* (2020),  
by Laurence B. Lemaire

“So the wall is there, what do you do? You did not build the wall. Our world is constructed in ways that we inherit, which are unjust, unequal. How do we deal with that? By breaking it down and building up something else.”

— Kapwani Kiwanga, in an interview with Carolin Köchling titled  
*It can be broken down* (2018)

*Seeing* requires more than *looking*. In his 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger reminds us that what we see—how we interpret what’s before our eyes—is affected by what we know and believe. In her essay on photography a year later, Susan Sontag reflected: “What determines the possibility of being affected morally by photographs”—and I would add here by works of art in general—“is the existence of a relevant political consciousness.” The more than 150 years of feminist struggles combined with condemnation of the racism that affects Black women differently depending on where they live should make it impossible to look away. With this sensibility in mind, I invite you to truly *see* the works in this exhibition.

The *frame* is both a material and conceptual device that is used literally and metaphorically: it directs attention by demarcating the periphery of an image, blocking everything beyond it, or by designating the limits of a subject, power, or identity. In this sense, going beyond the frame is akin to coming out of the closet or breaking the glass ceiling. It means rejecting labels, models, and definitions in order to assert oneself and take one's rightful place. Through photography, sculpture, performance, textiles, collage, and video, artists Lorna Bauer, Marie-Claire Blais, Nadège Grebmeier Forget, Alicia Henry, Tau Lewis, Michaëlle Sergile, and Eve Tagny each uniquely defy prescribed norms and conventions. Their works shift perspectives to engage with what lies beyond the frame. They resist the constraints that define the mental and physical spaces of those who identify as women. When confronting these works, we are invited to recognize the blind spots that underlie our own judgements—these “walls that prevent us from seeing”—and to rethink how others can be and present themselves as women. The esthetic strategies adopted by these artists go well beyond issues of representation to offer other formal and material explorations that express the pressures exerted on bodies that exist at the crossroads of multiple force fields.

Anne-Marie St-Jean-Aubre, Curator of Contemporary Art

Translation: Jo-Anne Balcaen

## 1. MARIE-CLAIRE BLAIS

Lévis, Quebec, 1974

### *L'ivresse des profondeurs*

#### [The Intoxication of Depths]

2021

Pigmented whiting powder and acrylic base on jute canvas

366 x 610 cm

Property of the artist

Before devoting herself to painting and the visual arts, Marie-Claire Blais studied architecture, which is evident in her pictorial approach that focuses on the play between material, colour, light, and space. *L'ivresse des profondeurs* is comprised of eighteen unstretched canvases crisscrossed by rectangular forms that resemble wooden bars used to build canvas stretchers. Their arrangement produces a kind of gushing and folding effect, while the diaphanous pastel colours create a floating, airy sensation. Standing before this landscape, with its faltering horizon that continuously pushes the limits of the frame, we might wonder: are we intoxicated by the dawn's promise of a new start, or is that the song of twilight that heralds the dark depths of night? Suspended in this liminal space, we are left to interpret the work's conjecture in light of our unique experiences, our life history, and our knowledge.

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## 2. LORNA BAUER

Toronto, Ontario, 1980

### *...air is where effort goes...once our effort is spent...this crowded air...No.1-17*

2021

Blown glass, metal

Variable dimensions

Courtesy of the artist and the Nicolas Robert Gallery

Lorna Bauer is interested in systems that impose order and classification to living things. Her research has led her to the botanical illustrations of Margaret Mee and the work of landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, two figures who promoted the preservation of Brazil's indigenous plant species, although an

inherent contradiction exists in the domestication of plants or their fetishization through images. Developments in glass manufacturing led to the fabrication of greenhouses that facilitate not only the cultivation of flowers outside of their native soil, but also their hybridization and large-scale commercialization. The gleaming, sensuous quality of Bauer's tinted glass sculptures give literal form to the vital breath they hold, albeit contained by a metallic, corset-like structure. These works metaphorically translate ideas around the constraint and tensions that have marked, and continue to mark, the bodies and lives of women.

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### 3. NADÈGE GREBMEIER FORGET

Montreal, Quebec, 1985

#### *Wanton Pink*

2020

Inkjet print on glossy photo paper, makeup

94 x 76.8 cm

Property of the artist

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### 4. NADÈGE GREBMEIER FORGET

Montreal, Quebec, 1985

#### *Libertine Blue*

2020

Inkjet print on glossy photo paper, makeup

124.5 x 81.3 cm

Property of the artist

Nadège Grebmeier Forget is known for her performances that disrupt the normative behaviours that are associated with the traditional image of femininity. In parallel, she creates drawings, paintings, and collages using pages from fashion magazines, as seen in the two works presented here. Grebmeier Forget defaces the white models who pose before the camera by directly applying nail polish remover to her freshly printed photo enlargements. She first erases their features before “embellishing” them with makeup, which she

applies with her fingers. The terminology of painting is in fact quite similar to the language of cosmetics; both deal with textures, pigments, colours, and reflections. Although makeup is primarily a medium, it is also a cultural practice with its own body language, which, reiterated and exaggerated here, is deeply inscribed in the works.

The result is a series of “damaged” portraits that manage to remain strangely seductive due to their colour palette and balanced composition. This ambiguous beauty reflects the negotiation that takes place during their production. Grebmeier Forget seems to challenge internalized reflexes by engaging in a physical confrontation with the images—a recurring strategy in her work. While the desire to please may be inseparable from the culture of cosmetics, here, their usual use is subverted. Rather than correcting flaws or highlighting certain features, the makeup floods the entire page, obliterating the models underneath. It’s as if Grebmeier Forget has lost herself in the sensual pleasure of manipulating a familiar medium and was unable to stop, thus derailing an otherwise expert choreography until it literally runs off the page.

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## 5. ALICIA HENRY

Illinois, United States, 1966

### ***Brown, Red, White, and Blue***

2012–2015

Mixed media

Variable dimensions

Property of the artist

American artist Alicia Henry looks at the body as a medium of communication in works that emphasize the face as the primary site of expression. She creates “layered” portraits in which different materials are superimposed in ways that suggest that identity is never unique, that it is always composed of many added elements. The works presented here are characterized by frontal views that provoke face-to-face encounters; added to this are hollowed eyes and stitches that are also sutures that fuse together cloth remnants steeped in memories passed on from generation to generation. By emphasizing the exterior of the body as an envelope, the face as a kind of mask, Henry’s works suggest the hidden existence of a yet-to-be-grasped interiority. In the work’s

title, *Brown, Red, White, and Blue*, it's difficult not to infer a reference to different skin colours to which the addition of blue might not only evoke marks of violence, but also act as a springboard to ironically question the relevance of a vocabulary that has drawn barriers between communities. As a humanist, Henry believes in the power of what unites us as human beings and hopes that her work encourages people to reflect on their way of being in the world.

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## 6. MARIE-CLAIRE BLAIS

Lévis, Quebec, 1974

### *Entrevoir le jour 4* [A Glimpse of The Day 4]

2014

Dyed jute canvas

101.6 x 101.6 cm

Property of the artist

Marie-Claire Blais addresses notions of fragility, vulnerability, transparency, and the quality of attention through the formal properties of a material—in this case, textiles, which are generally associated with crafts and the domain of women—rather than through representation. Here, she has pulled out threads from a piece of black jute fabric, carefully holding back to avoid the moment where the structure of the weave would completely collapse. The resulting gaps and openings offer glimpses at another side of things without exactly revealing it. Like rifts or wounds, they are also openings that allow the gaze to escape.

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## 7. EVE TAGNY

Montreal, Tiohti:áke, Mooniyang

### ***Of Roses [how to embody the layers of time]***

2022

Installation, mixed media

Variable dimensions

Property of the artist

Standing before an empty stretcher—in a nod to the many Dutch still lifes and other decorative, feminine portraits that have been painted since the Renaissance—performance artist Eve Tagny mimics the stance of a young English rose, and in an accompanying video deconstructs our preconceived ideas of it. If the rose has become the emblematic flower of England, reflecting the ideal of a pure, fresh-skinned young woman, the symbolization of this virginal beauty can only be achieved through plant hybridization and the hard work of those who cultivate them, namely in Kenya, Tanzania, and Ethiopia. But this “natural” beauty is illusory and often odorless, the result of a skillful construction that responds to the desires of mostly white, Western consumers who demand perfect, long lasting flowers (and bodies), at a ridiculous (economic and physical) cost. As a result, out of the vast range of rose species, only a few varieties are favoured by the cut flower industry. Tagny’s research demonstrates that it’s impossible to separate the rise of this symbol from the colonial expeditions that led to the establishment of English botanical gardens filled with transplanted specimens. Although pleasant to look at, they were mainly used by manufacturers that rely on plant-based ingredients, including the cosmetics industry, which in turn contributed to filling British coffers.

Tagny’s installation draws a parallel between gardens as a form of domesticated nature and the control of bodies that must conform to pre-established norms, confined to assigned spaces and domains. Tagny makes a gesture of reparation by refusing to sideline those who toiled in the shadows, spending decades in servitude, cultivating plants for the benefit of White people. In her videos *How to hybridize an English Rose* and *Of Roses*, Tagny performs actions inspired by gestures of care and support and places Black bodies, words, and knowledge centre-stage. Liberated from their finality, her movements form an estheticized sequence that expresses a rhythm more in keeping with the performer’s own ethos, therefore expressing her agency, independence, and creativity.

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## 8. EVE TAGNY

Montreal, Tiohti:áke, Mooniyang

### *How to hybridize an English Rose*

2020

HD video, color, sound

15 min 17 s

Property of the artist

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## 9. EVE TAGNY

Montreal, Tiohti:áke, Mooniyang

### *Of Roses – How to embody the layers of time [fragments of a bibliography]*

2021

HD video, color, sound

1 h 5 min

Property of the artist

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## 10. MICHAËLLE SERGILE

Chicago, Illinois, 1995. Of Haitian descent.

### ***We Wear the Mask***

2019

Cotton and acrylic weaving, wooden support, adhesive vinyl, soundtrack

Variable dimensions; 4 min 43 s

Property of the artist

Laughter as a strategy of survival and resistance against the injustices experienced by African-American women is a point of departure for Maya Angelou, who, in her popular spoken-word adaptation of the poem *We Wear the Mask*, written by Paul Laurence Dunbar in 1896, adds passages of her own poem *For Old Black Men*. Michaëlle Sergile translates Angelou's voice in the form of threads that blend different skin tones from brown to beige. The weaving they create hangs from a wooden rod reminiscent of a domestic clothes drying rack. This detail echoes Angelou's homage to Black domestic workers, to Rosa Parks in particular, and to all of her ancestors who, by suppressing their feelings behind a smile, by swallowing their frustrations and masking their pain under laughter, buried the insults they received on a daily basis. The poet and activist explains that hiding behind a façade, a mask, allowed them to preserve an intimate part of themselves that gave them the strength to carry on and to keep their race, their people, alive.

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## 11. MICHAËLLE SERGILE

Chicago, Illinois, 1995. Of Haitian descent.

### ***To Hold a Smile***

2022

HD video installation (colour, sound), cotton blanket, cotton thread, wooden support

Variable dimensions; 6 min 9 s

Property of the artist

In *To Hold a Smile*, Michaëlle Sergile adds her own words to those of Dunbar and Angelou, continuing the dialogue in creole, the language of her native country. Embroidered on an eiderdown quilt, a source of comfort and protection, the words become a hymn, a lullaby that reminds us of the past while alerting us to the currency of their message. Completing the installation is a video that shows a close-up of a friendly smile that, as the minutes pass, becomes more tense, to the point where its sincerity comes into doubt. What does a smile reveal—or hide? Historically, the rules of propriety forbade white Western women from laughing because showing one's mouth and teeth was considered immodest. Laughter—incompatible with the self-restraint that was required in all circumstances—showed carelessness and a potential loss of self-control. On the contrary, laughter as a strategy for survival reveals an impressive ability for self-control—another sign of the duplicity of a behaviour that might seem mundane today. But is it?

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## 12. TAU LEWIS

Toronto, Ontario, 1993

### *Opus (The Ovule)*

2020

Various recycled and hand dyed fabrics, recycled leather, acrylic paint, recycled polyester batting, jute, metal frame, PVA glue, secret objects, safety pins, metal hooks, wire

309.9 x 223.5 x 640.1 cm

Collection of Nish De Gruiter

A self-taught artist, Tau Lewis recently made her mark on the contemporary art scene with incredibly labour-intensive sculptural and textile-based works. She describes her time in the studio as an intense process that is both creative and healing. Through hand-made works that re-purpose salvaged materials, she honours the memories and vital energy they carry by using them as the basis for imaginary worlds that are inspired by science-fiction and bring her personal visions to life.

Her monumental sculpture *Opus (The Ovule)* imposes itself immediately. Both softly coloured and textured, and monstrous with its bulging eyes and oversized tongue, it boldly occupies whatever space is available. Lewis perceives it as a protective matrix, a repertoire of wisdom and knowledge, an open and

welcoming being. Its presence could be qualified as expansive or brazen, but considered from another angle, its gentle, determined state seems to express strength: the kind that comes from the conviction of one's rights and from hard-won experience. In her essay on the work of Alicia Henry, author Kimberly Wallace-Sanders addresses the challenge of separating representations of Black women from the stereotypes and pathologies that they have become associated with, to instead view them from a perspective of resilience and plenitude. We might see that the artist responds to this injunction materially: *Opus* celebrates the beauty, joy, and resilience of Black women—a reference suggested by the title that names part of the female reproductive system, and by the sculpture's features. According to the artist, the work also embodies a non-gendered image of maternity as not only a biological process, but also one that involves caring, feeding, comforting, and transmission. In interviews, Lewis asserts that art should not provide an escape, but should offer a departure. *Opus*, which concludes this exhibition, also invites us to rid ourselves of the restrictive categories that bind our bodies and minds and to envision a future that is open to new possibilities.

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### 13. NADÈGE GREBMEIER FORGET

Montreal, Quebec, 1985

***Il n'y a pas de sens ultime à l'intérieur de moi :  
An appearance of participation (2010-2013)***

**[There is no ultimate signification inside me:**

**An appearance of participation (2010-2013)]**

2021

Multichannel video installation (colour, sound), prints on adhesive vinyl, monitor, tablets

246.4 x 382 cm

Video recordings:

- *Nature's Path (Séquence 41 : S'enregistrer, pour et avec Ève)*, October 29, 2013, 31 min 8 s
- *Creamy Deluxe*, February 18, 2013, 19 min 25 s
- *Creuse (Séquence 29 : Observation à distance)*, February 23, 2013, 15 min 3 s
- *Juste Looking (Séquence 37 : Observations à distance)*, May 6, 2013, 19 min 25 s

Property of the artist

Nadège Grebmeier Forget shatters accepted ideals of beauty and female behaviour in durational performances where an abundance of sugary foods, artificiality, and archetypes are emulated and consumed, resulting in excessive displays that reject the idea that women are simply objects to be visually devoured. Her performance practice is reproduced for the first time here as an installation in which the initial exuberance is transposed through the process of accumulation and layering. A multitude of images and videos from the artist's public and private performances from between 2010 and 2013, 2014 and 2017, and 2018 to 2021 are brought together in three large-scale murals in the Museum's common areas. Grebmeier Forget has adapted her approach—based on gleaning photo and video images that she confronts with the reality of live action—to the production of billboard-sized panels as a way to underline the persistent gap between perfection and reality, between exteriority and interiority.

Makeup (and its parade), as it is applied to the body and face in several of the images selected here, is one of the recurring techniques Grebmeier Forget uses to express the tension between the self and one's appearance. Technology and social media are also used as intermediary tools that create distance between herself and others. While some of these images resemble traditional frontal portraits, others only show pixelated surfaces: like the many illusory fantasies shattered by the artist. Partial nudity, swaying hips, excess, spillage, sequins, eyeshadow, lipstick, ribbons, stockings, and lace are all part of what is recorded via her computer screen, which acts as both an instrument for communication and recording, and a mirror—that is, a self-confirmation tool. In the era of social media, has exhibitionism become an essential element of self-actualization? Each of these image associations gives the impression that we are witnessing a kind of carnage, a destruction of interiorized norms that operate under the surface—hence the conflict we see here.

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## 14. NADÈGE GREBMEIER FORGET

Montreal, Quebec, 1985

### ***Inscriptions enrubannées, pour passages*** **[Beribboned inscriptions, for passages]**

2022

Performative intervention, adhesive vinyl, makeup

Variable dimensions

Property of the artist

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## 15. NADÈGE GREBMEIER FORGET

Montreal, Quebec, 1985

### ***Il n'y a pas de sens ultime à l'intérieur de moi :*** ***An appearance of participation (2014-2017)*** **[There is no ultimate signification inside me:** **An appearance of participation (2014-2017)]**

2021

Multichannel video installation (colour, sound), prints on adhesive vinyl, monitor, tablets

248.3 x 420.4 cm

Video recordings:

- *Rendering On View (Recalling Huston 2016, Montreal Fragments)*, May 27, 2017, 25 min 45 s
- *Oxymorons (Empreinte 9/10)*, April 2, 2015, 38 min 42 s
- *Wallflower Or Something Such As A Tapestry That Is Hung And You*, January 29, 2017, 2 h 38 min 23 s
- *Reflecting On Track No.9 (Screen record)*, August 19, 2016, 2 h 21 min 2 s (five-hour performance)
- *Re-Reflecting On...(Screen record)*, December 17, 2016, 2 h 45 min 38 s (five-hour performance)
- *Hier est aujourd'hui. (Simulacre)*, February 11 to March 13, 2016, 11 h 59 min 58 s (performance of approximately 120 hours)

Property of the artist

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## 16. NADÈGE GREBMEIER FORGET

Montreal, Quebec, 1985

***Il n'y a pas de sens ultime à l'intérieur de moi :  
An appearance of participation (2018-2021)***

**[There is no ultimate signification inside me:**

**An appearance of participation (2018-2021)]**

2021

HD video installation (colour, sound), prints on adhesive vinyl, monitor  
275.6 x 703.7 cm

Video recordings:

- *Disclosed Navigations ou Le carnet, la glace et l'outil (2015-01-25 –  
2022-01-27)*, January 27, 2022, 2 h 20 min 37 s

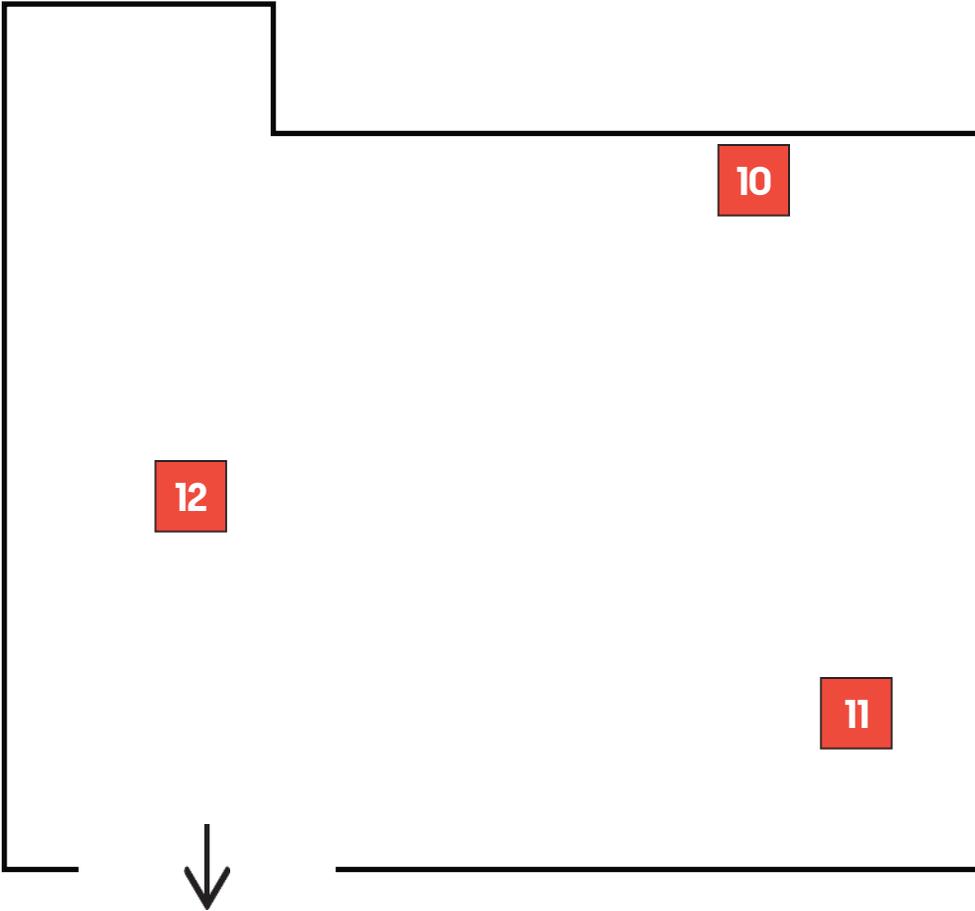
Property of the artist

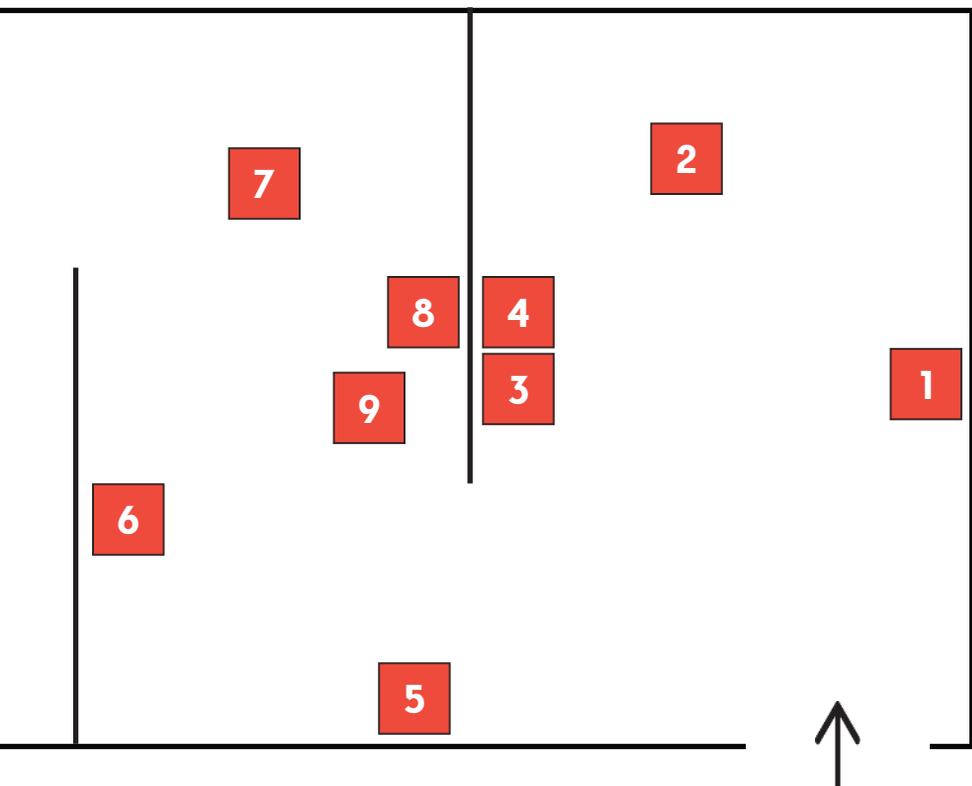
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# FLOOR PLAN

1<sup>st</sup> floor

Salle Després-Liard





# FLOOR PLAN

2<sup>nd</sup> floor, in the hallway

Espace 2<sup>e</sup> étage

