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Performing *MANUAL* in the library

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What happens when a library with a mission to present art receives a proposal for an experimental project that does not fit easily into its regular exhibition venues or programming, and which raises multiple questions and concerns about the library's ability to host the project? This article focuses on the challenging proposal of *MANUAL,* by the artists Adam Kinner and Christopher Willes, for a library-based, sensorial artist's project for the Webster Library of Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, exploring how the project evolved over time and how it navigated the library's institutional framework. To answer the question above, and to offer an understanding of *MANUAL*, this article draws on interviews with the artists, published reviews of its performance in Canada and elsewhere, and an interview with the exhibition coordinator for the project when it was presented at the Library of Birmingham in the UK in 2024. I argue that if a library maintains an open mind and open lines of communication with the artists involved, the benefits of hosting such a project will far outweigh any potential risks.

This article is a revision of a presentation given at the ARLIS UK & Ireland 2025 Conference, 'Stacks, Studio & Beyond: Artists in the Art Library', Limerick School of Art & Design, Ireland, July 1-3, 2025.

Introduction

The Webster Library of Concordia University is centrally located in downtown Montreal, Canada, and presents exhibitions throughout the year that showcase artwork by students, academic and administrative staff, university associations, and groups that are not affiliated with Concordia. As a research university with a student body of approximately 45,000, our exhibitions are intended to enrich student learning by providing a showcase for a variety of artistic and cultural experiences.[1] In 2022, the library received a proposal for the presentation of an experimental and performative artwork by the artists Adam Kinner and Christopher Willes, entitled *MANUAL,* in the library under the auspices of the Offta live art festival.[2] As an exhibition, the project was atypical in many ways – it would not include two- or three-dimensional artwork to be shown in the library's vitrines or display cases; it was not a virtual exhibition that could be hosted on our website, nor was it an audio or audiovisual project that could be presented in our Audio Stairwell. It involved artists and participants performing in the library's public spaces and with its collections. (fig. 1) After two weeks of discussion and email exchanges with the artists and the library administration, we accepted the proposal and agreed to serve as a creative and immersive platform for Kinner and Willes's series of intimate, covert, and guided interactions with the public.

For this first performance of *MANUAL*, at the Webster Library, I had the opportunity to coordinate its presentation in the library and to take part in the performance itself. *MANUAL* was a great success, and more than fifty performances took place over three short days. After the festival closed, the artists continued to develop and present *MANUAL* in other libraries and festivals across Canada, and in England, Scotland, Thailand and Japan, with plans to revisit some of these countries and to travel to Finland and Switzerland.[3] This article focuses on the initial development of *MANUAL* as a library-based, sensorial artist's project, how the project evolved over time and how it navigates the library's institutional frameworks.

1. Details about the size of Concordia University's student body are based on its most recent enrolment figures (2023-2024), see: "Concordia in Numbers," Concordia University, https://www.concordia.ca/about/fast-facts.html. For details about the Webster Library's exhibition policy, see: "Webster Library Exhibition Policy & Procedures, Policy G-18," Concordia University Library, last updated January 13, 2023, https://library.concordia.ca/about/policies/G-18.pdf. For documentation about the *MANUAL* exhibition held at the Webster Library in 2022, see: "MANUAL: Adam Kinner + Christopher Willes," Concordia University Library, https://library.concordia.ca/about/exhibitions/archive/item.html?id=29015.

2. Kinner and Willes's proposal came via Claudel Doucet, Artistic Director and Co-General Director

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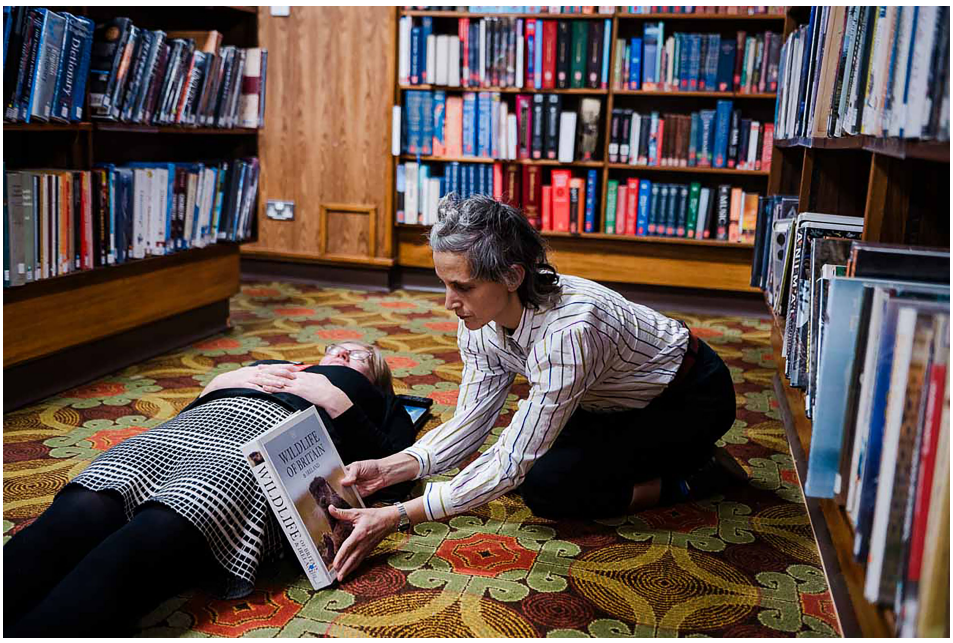


Fig. 1. Adam Kinner and Christopher Willes. *MANUAL* performance. Photo credit: Brian Hartley, 2023. Performer: Hanna Sybille Müller. Courtesy of the artists.

Method

My research is based on an analysis of documentation about *MANUAL* supplied by Kinner and Willes, published reviews of *MANUAL* and an online interview with the artists in April 2025. To better understand how the project evolved after it was presented in the Webster Library, in May 2025 I carried out an online interview with David Stokes, the exhibition coordinator for *MANUAL* when it was presented at the Library of Birmingham in 2024. Ethics approval was received for both interviews from Concordia University's Office of Research before the first meeting. I also carried out bibliographic searches for material on *MANUAL* in major library databases (including Art Index, ARTbibliographies Modern, and JSTOR), as well as online resources (such as Google Scholar and Érudit), but no further articles, books or other publications were identified. I hope, therefore, that this article will contribute to the existing body of literature on Kinner and Willes's project in a meaningful way.

Setting the stage

In their initial proposal to the Webster Library, Kinner and Willes described *MANUAL* as follows:

> Two people meet and sit next to each other in a public library. With headphones on, they are guided through a series of tiny actions – a manual for their meeting. Silently, they look at books together. They read to each other and flip through an elaborate, home-made book that contains the traces of many readings. They listen to music that holds a ghostly presence in the space. And as these activities progress, they create a web of reflections on the act of listening and the intimacy of reading together. By the end, the viewer is left to reckon with the books not as objects but as shared experiences in time, and the public library as a site of collective memory.[4]

MANUAL is a one-to-one performance that lasts between 40 and 45 minutes. It takes place in several stages and in numerous locations within a host library. A participant is initially greeted by a stage manager near the entrance of the library; they then listen to a short poetic recording before the two begin a walk-through of the library together. They take time to observe several architectural spaces and features and listen to obscure, naturally occurring sounds over the normal ambient noise of the library. Eventually, the stage manager asks the participant to close their eyes, to imagine that a distant sound is actually a river, and then to take ten deep breaths before reopening their eyes. By the time the participant opens their eyes again the

of La Serre, which is an organization that supports emerging art practices. See: "Mission," La Serre, https://laserre.ca/en/infos-2/ and: "Offta," OFFTA, https://offta.com/en/.

3. See: "MANUAL," Christopher Willes, https://www.christopherwilles.com/manual and "MANUAL," Adam Kinner, https://adamkinner.ca/manual/.

4. Adam Kinner and Christopher Willes, MANUAL (MANUEL) unpublished OFFTA proposal, 2022.



Fig. 2. Adam Kinner and Christopher Willes. Documentation of the performance work *MANUAL* (video still). Videography by Albédo (OFFTA, Montreal) and Sam Scrivener (Take Me Somewhere Festival, Glasgow). Performer: Hanna Sybille Müller. Vimeo, uploaded on August 18, 2022, https://vimeo.com/740785851/909564ff09. Courtesy of the artists.

stage manager has been replaced by a performer, and it's at this moment that *MANUAL* really begins. Participants have often reported that they felt disorientated by this prologue: in her review of *MANUAL* at the 2023 Take Me Somewhere festival in Glasgow, Elspeth Wilson noted that

> When I reopened my eyes at the start of the performance, it already felt like something had shifted, that I'd transitioned into a different way of being in the library, and this invitation compounds my sense of slipping into a new relationship with the space.[5]

5. Elspeth Wilson, "Reviewing 'MANUAL'," Diverse Critics, *Take Me Somewhere*, *TMS News*, November 30, 2023, https://takemesomewhere.co.uk/tms-news/2023/11/27/diverse-critics-elspeth-wilson.

MANUAL

For most of the performance of *MANUAL*, the performer communicates with the participant solely through a series of messages written in a notebook. *MANUAL* is structured around several performer-led activities that are based on pre-arranged visual and auditory cues. (fig. 2) The visual prompts are drawn from photography books selected from the library's own collection and the auditory cues from immersive recordings which the participant listens to on headphones.

(fig. 3) What begins as a thought-provoking combination of familiar images and sounds eventually gives way to unexpected and incongruous juxtapositions of abstract photographs and audio material. Towards the end of *MANUAL*, the performance moves to a different area of the library, where the participant is invited to take part in an unscripted word association game based on an abstract image from a library book. This is the first and only time the performer and participant speak to each other – and even then, it's in whispered tones. As *MANUAL* comes to an end, the performer leaves while the participant listens to an 'epilogue' recording, in which the performer invites the participant to continue wandering, and to think about the library as a social space where people come and go, and where books reflect shared experiences. The stage manager waits for the participant near the library entrance to collect the headphones, to offer the participant a list of references consulted in the performance, and to invite them to leave comments in a guest book.

The theatre scholar Jenn Stephenson participated in *MANUAL* when it was presented at the Webster Library, noting, in her article "Games with Ghosts in the Library", that

> *Manual* [sic] largely presented a familiar dramaturgy of participation as we are directed to look, really look. A gift from early twentieth century Russian formalism, this is the ostranenie of the art frame that uses participation to displace the ordinariness of life [. . .] but as an academic who spends a lot of



Fig. 3. Adam Kinner and Christopher Willes. *MANUAL* performance. Photo credit: Manuel Vason, n.d. Performer: Adam Kinner. Courtesy of the artists.

> mundane time in libraries, the experience of aesthetic defamiliarization blossoms into affection and I am reminded by *Manual* [sic] that a library truly is an everyday miracle in action.[6]

MANUAL has a dreamlike quality that can be both calming and unsettling. In Sam Moore's *frieze* magazine review of the performance at the Library of Birmingham, part of the Fierce Festival, they observed that it 'rendered the institutional building simultaneously a profoundly intimate and overwhelming space, full of strange sounds and free associations', and that 'it was a profound experience, felt within the body yet ephemeral all at once'.[7] David Stokes also had the chance to participate in *MANUAL* during the Fierce Festival. Despite his years of work at the Library of Birmingham and his familiarity with its spaces, Stokes was not prepared for such a striking experience, and it left him feeling transported. Stokes said he needed a few minutes to reorient himself to the day-to-day reality of the library once the performance had ended, echoing my own response to *MANUAL* when I had experienced it at the Webster Library two years earlier.[8]

From my interview with Kinner and Willes, I learned that *MANUAL* was conceived in 2019 during an OFFTA-supported residency at the Mitchell Library in Glasgow, Scotland.[9] While it was being developed, over the following few years, they brought in the choreographer Hanna Sybille Müller as dramaturg.[10] Müller helped to transform some of Kinner and Willes's ideas into embodied, library-based actions, and she performed *MANUAL* with them and other artists at the Webster Library in 2022.

Some responses

In her review of *MANUAL*, Stephenson deftly described the project by what it is *not* – it is not 'exploratory' in nature, as participants are constantly being guided through the library; it is not 'an encounter' in the traditional sense, in which individuals come together to meet and to learn about each other; there is no 'mutual gaze' between performers and participants, and 'the focus of the work is not autobiographical'. Stephenson does, however, argue that the project can be understood through the multiple meanings inherent in its title, that refers to the performer's hands manually manipulating the notebook and library books; their use of gestures throughout the performance, and the idea of a 'manual' as a book of instructions.[11]

MANUAL has evolved since it was presented at the Webster Library, but in some ways it remains unchanged. The artists' proposal (cited earlier), clearly indicates that the project was originally conceived for a public library, rather than

6. Jenn Stephenson, "Games with Ghosts in the Library," review of *MANUAL*, *Play: Dramaturgies of Participation*, June 30, 2022, https://www.dramaturgiesofparticipation.com/the-blog/games-with-ghosts-in-the-library.

7. Sam Moore, "Fierce Festival: The Body as Material," review of the *Fierce Festival*, *FRIEZE*, November 18, 2024, https://www.frieze.com/article/fierce-festival-2024-review.

8. David Stokes (Library Service Manager: Reader Services, Birmingham Libraries), interviewed by the author, May 21, 2025.

9. Adam Kinner and Christopher Willes, interviewed by the author, April 18, 2025.

10. See: "About," Hannah Sybille Müller, https://hannasybillemuller.com/about.

11. Stephenson, "Games with Ghosts in the Library."

an academic library. Similarly, early ideations involving a 'home-made book' and listening to music were replaced by multiple library books and binaural recordings of library-sourced sounds and recordings from nature. Since 2022, *MANUAL* has been performed in many cities internationally, and in countries where English is not the national language. Kinner and Willes train local artists and non-artists as performers when they bring the performance to a new city or country. These performers speak the local language and can contribute their own selection of books to create individualised performances.

Stephenson argues that *MANUAL* is not exploratory in nature, but this does not apply to the practice of the artists: Kinner and Willes carry out original, on-site research into the unique spaces and collections of each new venue prior to performing their work. Although *MANUAL* evolves each time it is presented, the artists' interest in exploring complex relationships with images, texts, sounds and library spaces remains constant. Writing about artistic practices within library spaces, the architecture librarian E. Patelos notes that

> Within architectural theory, a fundamental tenet is that the spaces one occupies have a significant influence on behaviors and thoughts. With libraries, the physical and social space may be another inspirational element and aid in deep thinking for artists.[12]

12. E. Patelos, "Research Intersections within Practice: Artists and Librarians," *Art Documentation* 32, no. 1 (2013): 48.

Institutional frameworks

MANUAL asks its audience to reflect upon how they relate to libraries, but it also holds up a mirror to library workers and shows us the boundaries of our own institutional frameworks. When Kinner and Willes's project was first proposed to the Webster Library, many concerns were expressed: it might disturb our users, and there were security and privacy issues – especially if there were plans to film in the library. Questions about reserving library tables, taking books out of circulation, storage, and who the participants would be were also raised. For example, it was unclear whether the participants of *MANUAL* at the Webster Library would include students – and if not, how would this project enrich student learning? To their credit, Kinner and Willes were very attentive to these issues and were keen to understand them, and I believe their experience at the Webster Library informed them of their future work. *MANUAL* is an iterative process for the artists – they learn from each venue and refine their future proposals accordingly. Stokes mentioned to me that the artists had anticipated many of his libraries' concerns and questions.[13]

13. Stokes, interview.

Kinner and Willes recognise that it's helpful when the institutions they approach are curious about their project, and especially so when there's an advocate for it within the library. Exhibition coordinators, colleagues and administrators at both the Library of Birmingham and the Webster Library tried to adhere to the spirit of the libraries' rules while recognising the importance of being flexible and making exceptions in order to accommodate the project.

Conclusion

When a library receives an interesting but unconventional art proposal, it must assess the potential benefits and risks associated with taking on such a project. Keeping an open mind and open lines of communication with the artists involved ensures that the benefits outweigh any potential risks. Projects like *MANUAL* pose many administrative and logistical challenges, but there are rewards, too. The public will see their libraries and collections in a new light. For artists, the library becomes a valuable incubator for creative research. And as host libraries, we're given an opportunity to critically reflect on our spaces, our holdings and policies, and our roles within the communities we serve.

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