

FOREMAN

Bande à part / Kids these days

by Zoë Chan, curator

Youth studies

“Youth” or “adolescence” is commonly understood in North America as the prolonged period after childhood, where young people explore and experiment with their identities in preparation for adulthood, preferably within the formative, protective structures of family and school. It is interesting to note, however, that this view of youth is a relatively recent one.¹

Many still-pervasive ideas about youth grew out of psychology, anthropology and sociology, fields that came to the fore only in the twentieth century. Within the social sciences, young people became a category to be studied, understood and conceptualized. G. Stanley Hall’s *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (1904) introduced the influential notion of adolescence as an inevitable period of “storm and stress.” According to this perspective, youth is the pre-socialized precursor to the civilization of adulthood. Margaret Mead refuted Hall’s essentializing argument of youth as universally tumultuous in *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation* (1928). Mead argued that young people in non-industrialized societies serenely underwent specific rites of passage that marked their entry into adulthood. Though Mead’s study is criticized for glossing over existing intergenerational conflict and for romanticizing so-called “primitive” peoples, her argument that the supposed turmoil experienced by youth in North America was in fact due to *social* rather than *innate* factors—namely, that industrialized societies no longer had collectively agreed-upon rituals marking the passage from childhood to adulthood—remains an important one. Erik H. Erikson contended in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968) that youth was marked by a search for authentic personal identity. According to Erikson, it was important that parental and societal structures provided a sympathetic and unrestrictive context for these explorations in order to avoid lasting identity confusion. In his writings on the psychology of the child around the same time, Jean Piaget described adolescence as a necessary cognitive stage, where the capacity to have abstract thought is developed, in particular, the ability to consider a reality removed from one’s immediate and concrete present, resulting in a capacity to consider the future, hypothetical situations, and oneself in relation to others. In the wake of such studies, youth has become indelibly linked to ideas of inner conflict, authenticity, personal exploration and idealism within the collective imagination. Going well beyond the social sciences, these notions of youth are articulated, affirmed and consolidated across a wide range of visual culture, including literature, film, television, advertising, music, contemporary art, and so on.

The Québécois and Canadian artists featured in *Bande à part / Kids these days* employ methodological strategies that call to mind those used in the fields of psychology, anthropology and sociology, which can be seen as suggestive of the enduring impact of these disciplines on current perceptions of youth. In these youth-focused artworks from the 2000s, artists observe or communicate with their young subjects, or investigate existing documents as traces of youth subjectivities within the North American context. The works in *Bande à part / Kids these days* display an interest in documenting young people—their bodies, expressions and movements, as well as their tastes, thoughts, clothing styles, methods of communication and leisure activities. The subject matter of youth appears to often provide artists with the opportunity to explore certain questions regarding their own lives or art

practices. Even as these artists perhaps inevitably “other” young people and youth cultures through these studies, at the same time, the resulting artworks suggest an underlying desire on the part of the artists to capture the “essence” of youth or affiliate themselves with the coveted values typically associated with youth: freedom, escape, authenticity, expressivity, idealism and creativity. These popular ideas are further enunciated in the fiction and non-fiction books on youth on display in the Gallery and in the exhibition’s accompanying film series.

Finally, *Bande à part / Kids these days* concentrates predominantly on representations of young femininities, serving as a reminder that the period of youth is intrinsically inflected by gender.² *Bande à part / Kids these days* offers various views on youth and gender as social, cultural and discursive concepts that are nonetheless experienced as *lived* processes. In other words, youth, like gender, is not only constructed by those who study it, but also by the young subjects themselves, who, in various ways, actively perform, physically embody and acutely feel it. *Bande à part / Kids these days* aims to explore this phenomenon.

Other girls

Over almost a decade, **Guillaume Simoneau** has documented high school students from Lévis, Quebec, on graduation night, resulting in a series of formally posed portraits that belie the emotional and alcohol-fuelled chaos of the actual “bush party” event. Lit with the camera’s flash in stark contrast with the nocturnal setting, Simoneau’s photographs highlight the liminal status of his teenage subjects who appear poised before a nebulous, uncertain future. Youth is perceived as a time so fleeting and precious that it becomes crucial to capture and pin it down. While abstracting this highly fraught event, the series also frames the small details that differentiate the girls—inward-turned toes, a beer bottle set aside in order to pose “properly,” the hands on hips of one, the awkward stance of another—offering hints as to their personalities and perhaps even their potential futures.

Other artists turn to the study of ephemeral traces of youth cultures, with a particular interest in self-expression. In *Screaming Girls* (2005), **Jo-Anne Balcaen** edits together found footage of early rock ‘n’ roll concerts in order to explore female fandom, which is revealed as a highly performative ritual of an almost feral nature. These early demonstrations of fandom are emblematic of the phenomenon of youth culture, which emerged in the post-war era and marked a clear divide between the young and the old in terms of musical tastes and socially acceptable behaviour. While in *Screaming Girls*, Balcaen removed the audio in order to better foreground the girls’ gesturality, for *Concert Posters* (2007), she alludes to the element of sound by showcasing the words cried out by fans. Her pastiche of the cheaply produced rock concert poster functions as a kind of mini-archive of the visual culture of rock, one that is instantly recognizable and evocative of specific bands for music fans simply through its fonts.

Kyla Mallet documents written forms of self-expression by youth in her large-scale photographs of notes composed by high school girls. In so doing, she examines communication-oriented “artifacts” from an era now heavily replaced by cellphone texts and various social media sites. *Notes* (2004) offers the reader a series of aesthetic and textual clues for us to decipher who the writer is, or at least whom she wanted her reader to believe she was. Moreover, as records of *realia* that bear imprints inscribed by the teenage authors’ hands, these also display the posturing, play, creativity and *craft* involved in the self-styled construction of youth identities.

This interest in the performativity and creativity underpinning youth cultures is manifest in **Helen Reed’s** *Blue Moon* (2014). Made in close collaboration with its high-school-age subjects, the documentary video shows a teen “wolf pack,” with its high-school-age members from a small town in the American mid-west inhabiting the hierarchical roles of alpha, beta and pups. Part subculture,

part after-school club, part support group, part cult- or commune-in-the-making, this posse of teenagers has imagined and elaborated a collective identity that appears to be inspired by such sources as nature documentaries, animism, werewolf fiction and other teen wolves whom they follow online. *Blue Moon* offers insight into this group's *modus operandi*, showing members animatedly discussing their beliefs and behaviours. This project speaks to the vivid explorations of identity and the desire for transformation that can characterize the experiences of North American teenagers.

Kerri Flannigan too is interested in the experimentation with identity that takes place during youth. In an ongoing exploration of coming-of-age stories, she asks people of her generation to share key moments regarding their sexuality from their teenage years. While the other artists in the exhibition aim for distanced positions where their presence is erased, Flannigan creates drawings directly inspired by these stories, with an unpolished style that embodies the passionate, vulnerable, naive, or alienated perspectives of her subjects' young selves. The empathy of her drawing style and her willingness to enter into her subjects' intimate lives as a kind of observer-participant across time encourages the viewer to also "cross the line" into these teenage worlds and draw parallels with their own experiences.

Many of the projects in *Bande à part / Kids these days* use an approach wherein the artists create specific frameworks that allow viewers to observe how young people respond. In *Le beau, le laid et la photographie* (2011), **Emmanuelle Leonard** asks students in an all-girls school to describe what they consider beautiful and ugly imagery. In answering these questions, the girls display a range of facial expressions that convey varying levels of self-consciousness and self-confidence, the challenge of communicating abstract thought, the desire to perform and please, the struggle to reconcile oneself with dominant discourses around issues of beauty, and so on. The improvisatory, often uncertain nature of their answers is indicative of each girl's process of figuring out their tastes and how to publicly express them.

Althea Thauberger's *Songstress* (2002) features a series of music videos showing amateur female singer-songwriters, each performing an original piece of music. Thauberger eschews the slick style of MuchMusic videos in favour of capturing in a single take the singers' lip-synched performances of studio recording of their songs. Asked to perform in various lush green settings around Victoria, British Columbia, the young women emerge like exotic birds. Striking in the profound earnestness that permeates its featured performances, *Songstress* is a reminder that expressions of youth culture within mainstream media are often packaged and presented to viewers only after aggressive editing and remixing processes, where any signs of difference and vulnerability are filtered out to create more spectacular, celebratory versions.

For *Minor Threats* (2012), **Sarah Febbraro** asked six budding musicians to select a guitar solo from YouTube and learn to play it. She then filmed them playing the solo in a public site of their choice. In this way, the girls ventured from the privacy of practising in their bedrooms to the exposure of performing outdoors. By editing together each girl's public performance with her YouTube "counterpart," Febbraro reveals how this popular site can function as an archive of amateur musical performances but also as a practical pedagogical tool where young people can learn from their online peers. At the same time, the prevailing tentativeness of the performances in the public realm, viewed in juxtaposition with the showy confidence of the online ones, evinces the concrete challenges that may be experienced by youth as they negotiate the outside world.

Notes

1. Before the twentieth century for example, working class and rural young people were normally expected to work and start a family as soon as they were physically capable. With the rise of industrialization and urbanization at the turn of the century, followed by the burgeoning post-World-War-II economy, compulsory education became the legalized norm. The

existing age-based segregation of the school system meant that teenagers were spending more time with peers than with adults, which in turn led to the growth of leisure activities, styles, tastes and vernaculars specific to youth.

2. Highlighting the intricate intersection of youth and gender, cultural scholars Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily propose the term “coming-into-being of gender,” invoking the popular expression “coming-of-age.” Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily, *Gender, Youth and Culture: Young Masculinities and Femininities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 6.

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