



Summer Grief: Carla



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Katja Mater

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feature

What is grief like? We asked Staci Bu Shea to edit a series of writings from individuals who have faced the loss of someone deeply important to them. Read Staci's introduction to the series [here](#).

Published every Thursday through the early weeks of summer, each writer offers a glimpse into how they shape and are shaped by grief, and every text is published with a photograph by the artist and poet S*an D. Henry-Smith. Below, Katja Mater documents encounters during the last days of sorting through the belongings and cleaning out the house of Katja's mother, Carla.





S*an D. Henry-Smith, ear, 2023; the head of a sunflower lays face down on a wood table. Unique ridges and valleys sprawl out from the stem at the center, covering the back of the sunflower. Small leaves are tapered around the edge and branch out from the larger stem.

12 May 2023, 20:07

Early on I read *De Dingen die je Vergeet, Rouwen voor Beginners* (“The Things you Forget, Grieving for Beginners”) by Gijs van der Sanden, where he describes departing with his parents’ house as losing a third parent. That really resonated for me. In three weeks I will no longer be able to go home. We have been moving Carla out bit by bit over the last year, trying to put so much love into the details. I can no longer do things for her, but at least I can make sure to find new places for her things.

Carla would say she was rather lazy than tired (“liever lui dan moe”), a Dutch expression. She invented all kinds of tools to make her life easier. A private tool just for her, so no instruction manual. Finding her inventions around the house, I often have no idea what these things were used for. Why is there an elastic band sewed to her rain jacket just below the zipper? What was the case filled with dentist mirrors for?

My hands feel sticky with dust from leafing through many dusty books. I started to go through them, looking for the signatures of my parents. They had a habit of signing the books with their names. My mom would write Carla de Bruijn, ECGT de Bruijn, later Carla Mater or C Mater, sometimes just Carla, then a little bronze-colored sticker with Carla Mater, and after the divorce, back to Carla de Bruijn. My dad only M. M. or M Mater, never Marius.



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Marking Time
Carla Mater

A Quiet Life
C Mater

Goodbye to All That
M. M.

As A Man Grows Older
M. M.

Ik eet, ik eet, tot ik niet meer kan (“I eat, I eat, until I can’t anymore”)
M. Mater

De hoogmoedige doden (“The haughty dead”)
M. M.

A Woman of My Age
Carla Mater

A Favorite of the Gods
C Mater

Langzaam Kromgroeien (“Growing slowly crooked”)
M M

Parents and Children
M. M.

Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant
M Mater

The Optimist’s Daughter
Carla

De Witte Heks (“The White Witch”)
C Mater

Het Leven is vurrukkulluk (“Life is deliiiiightful”)
E C G T de Bruijn

Vroeger is dood (“Before is Dead”)
M M



23:54

We found the nest while emptying the attic. That's where we started. It seemed to make sense to start at the top of the iceberg, but also with the things out of sight, less charged, to not change anything (yet) in the equilibrium of her things. All that she had last touched, we could not (yet) move or take.

After taking out some boxes at the end of the day, we saw it. Or I saw it. Meike had been sitting next to it for hours but thought it was a rolled up carpet.

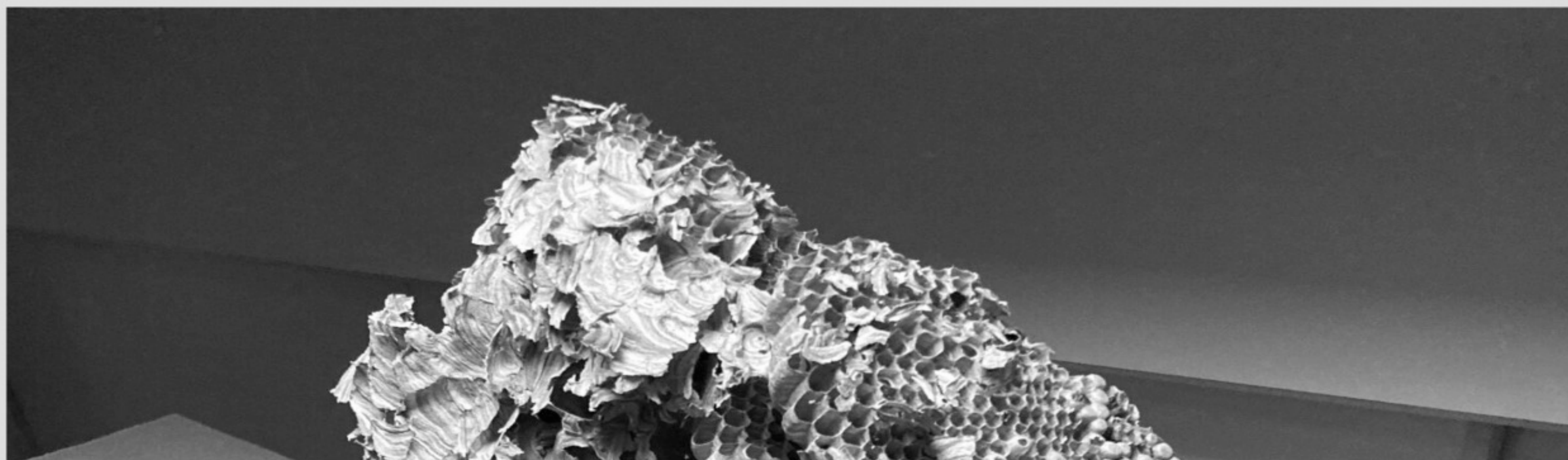
I remember you had wasps in the attic. There were many. We talked about it, I saw them but I also did not really wonder where they came from exactly. Being who you are, you would not exterminate animals even if they were bothering you in your home. You decided to put up with them and give them space to live side by side. And also knowing that wasps will only use their nests once, building a new one the year after somewhere else.

You would have loved this nest, it is huge and unbelievably beautiful.

It was made by paper wasps. They make their nests of plant fibers or dry wood exquisitely, light as paper and super fragile with little bows on the outside in different light brown hues. According to wikipedia most nests are around 20–35 cm big. This nest is a meter and a half by a meter. The outside layers are not the actual nest. It's around 40 cm of pure insulation. Then you get to the nest chambers, the nursery with many floors all connected with hallways and tunnels. I never saw anything like it.

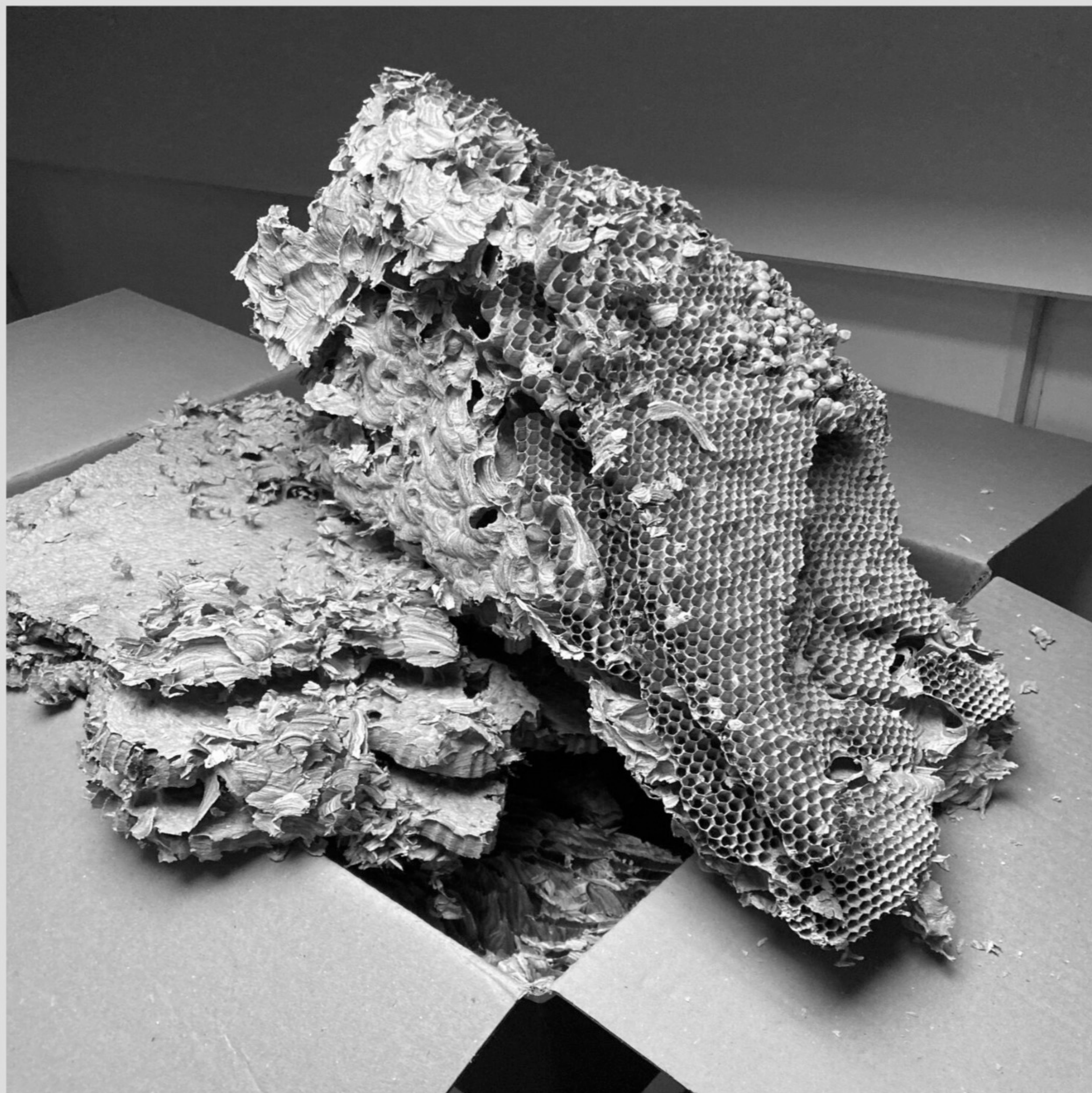
Together with some of her friends we removed the nest on Saturday afternoon on the 1st of April 2023, exactly one year after she died, maybe even around the same time. And now one month later I have 3 moving boxes full of a wasp nest, one more thing I need to decide what to do with.

Since you died I have not slept in my old room, I slept in your bedroom or in your study, I don't want to be back where I was in the last days of your life, when I felt closer to you than to myself.





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A large cardboard box filled with large pieces of an empty wasp nest, stacked and towering above the top of the box. Photo Katja Mater

13 May 2023 6:22

I just woke up in your bed
I see the light, how it hits your curtains
an uplifting kind of light
I will get up now

I am thinking of burying something in your garden, maybe some small things. I have four little stones: one with a hole and a smaller stone stuck inside the hole that I brought for you from Brittany, one with a tiny flower fossil. And two you made from soapstone at a workshop for people who are terminally ill. You only went once and did not like it, I think you were too busy living. But you gave me one and kept these two pink ones. One very round and smooth, one with more corners and hard edges.

Ok, I need to get up. I need to shower, get back to it. But also not get overwhelmed. I know what to do. It will be ok.

8:56

I am recording the sound of the garden.

I was thinking it's funny how we call what we will do today "big steps:" getting rid of the couches, the washing machine, the big table of my grandmother. I feel like we took so many "tiny" steps already that seemed many times beyond measure. Like taking the notes off the fridge, and deciding who among us got to keep the saltshaker in the shape of a blue tit or the egg carton with 6 marble eggs.

10:20

I saw a blackbird in the backyard just now from the upstairs window. Looked me straight in the eyes and nodded as if she understood.

20:19

I am exhausted, totally physically and mentally exhausted, but not done. I still wanted to film the nest tonight with the last daylight so I can get rid of it. But I don't have the energy anymore.

We did a lot though. And we took 20 boxes of books to De Boem Kringloopwinkel. Beforehand, I cut out all the author dedications from the frontmatter.

For my mother and father
Voor de fotograaf
For Sue
Voor mijn dochter Sophie
FOR GERRY, FOR ALWAYS
Voor Eva, met genegenheid en dank
For all those on the border
Voor mijn zus Stephanie, die me achter mijn vodde heeft gezeten
To Antonia
FOR DI-DI, WITH MY LOVE
voor Max die eigenlijk Rupert heet
Voor hen die hun eigen pad volgen en vuurtjes stoken
Ter nagedachtenis aan mijn ouders
In loving memory of Pam
Voor Billy
For Orshi
Aan ons
For H.S.L.
for my grandchildren
For Sonny and Gita, who put up with it all.
For those who find forgiveness by way of the truth and for those who find the truth by way of forgiveness
For my favorite aunt, Frances who is also my friend
In memory of Isobel
For woman with cancer who have found their fire, and for those who are still searching
Voor vriendinnen
Voor Noor
Voor X, ter herinnering aan heroïsche tijden
Voor Loubna
To Cleo and Gloria long may they wave
Aan alle moeders

I only cried once. It was while packing your jackets in garbage bags. I am ok. On the way back from goodwill we saw an oystercatcher feeding its young, here right in front of the house.

Katja Mater

is een kunstenaar, een redacteur, organisator en educator / is an artist, editor, organizer, and educator.