



ELIZABETH WOODS

a collection of
EARTHLY MATTERS

Introduction

Considerando la vita come una continua ricerca di risposte, affiorano naturalmente alla mente vari quesiti che riguardano il valore dell'arte.

L'arte e il suo mercato, il suo prezzo, la sua curva di domanda. L'arte: un ottimo investimento. Ancor più quando è in corso una crisi finanziaria.

Quale è allora la posizione che l'arte si ritaglia nell'attuale sistema sociale? C'è ancora spazio per un'emozionalità estetica svincolata da paradigmi economici?

Oggi che il predominio dell'immagine è esperito, più o meno consciamente da ogni individuo, sembra che l'arte divenga sempre più concettuale.

Credendo nella potenzialità dell'arte di migliorare la vita degli individui, bisogna confrontarsi con l'effettività di questa trasformazione positiva, ovvero con le condizioni del quando, del dove e del come.

Un arricchimento avviene ogni qualvolta l'arte in tutte le sue manifestazioni, tramite l'attività del pensiero che essa è capace di stimolare, ci conduce a stadi più avanzati di consapevolezza di se, degli altri e del mondo in cui viviamo.

Lavorando con l'artista Elizabeth Woods un'altra dimensione positiva si è aggiunta a questa convinzione: l'arte può avere il valore di creare situazioni di incontro e di scambio. L'arte può essere un catalizzatore di relazioni umane concrete, per una società sempre più assuefatta all'interconnettività virtuale.

A collection of earthly matters (Una collezione di sostanze terrestri) ha portato la creatività artistica nell'intimità delle case del villaggio di Marnay-sur-Seine facendola incontrare ai suoi abitanti. Tutto si è svolto con la semplicità che è propria del ricevere una persona cara e del mostrarle un oggetto prezioso, raccontandole la sua storia. Lavorare con la comunità non è significato colonizzarla, appropriandosi delle sue ricchezze culturali e naturali per reinterpretarle in un personalissimo lavoro artistico, che nulla ha da spartire con la stessa. Si tratta di un progetto con uno sviluppo diverso dagli usuali meccanismi di produzione dell'arte pubblica in cui un'opera già esistente è successivamente messa in relazione con la comunità.

Si è concretizzato un mutuo scambio tra l'artista e i residenti, parte attiva dello sviluppo dell'idea.

Gli abitanti di Marnay sono stati invitati ad accogliere l'artista e a condividere con lei un momento di creatività, ispirato dalle loro storie personali, raccontate tramite un oggetto ritenuto prezioso. Sono stati chiamati ad incontrarsi nella chiesa del villaggio che, impreziosita dagli acquerelli dispersi nel suo spazio, è apparsa per un giorno diversa ai loro occhi. Infine il disegno, capace di cattura ricordi e intime suggestioni, è stato loro dato in dono dall'artista.

Dopo quel momento di convivialità, l'acquerello si trasforma a sua volta in un oggetto prezioso, un earthly matter che conserva la memoria di quell'incontro speciale, con l'arte e con colei che ha saputo farla incrociare con le loro vite e farla incontrare alla loro comunità.

Notre Dame de l'Assomption,
Maynay-sur-Seine, Aube, Champagne-Ardenne



WHAT MATTERS?

What matters?

The old cliché of the tormented artist, lonely and struggling in the garret, who may occasionally hit the jackpot and be rewarded with hero status and material rewards has been replaced by the image of the artist as a slick business entrepreneur. The successful contemporary artist is either situated firmly at the scarcity end of the market, producing a limited and highly valued product generally displayed within the art gallery system, or producing unlimited editions of works that are available anywhere and at anytime via the World Wide Web.

Furthermore, in an effort to 'normalize' the role of the artist, government, via funding programs and arts agencies have taken this a step further by placing the artist within the broad economic category of the 'creative industries'. This tends to make artists into 9-to-5 business people going about their work and making a 'real' income by producing individual objects for sale or grand statements for new infrastructure.

There are, however, other artists who resist the notion of art as commodity and who explore new ways that art can have some relevance in other ways. In the more recent past these artists have been called 'political artists' and 'community artists'. Nevertheless, many of them also have been subsumed into the system of capital by producing saleable product or solving institutional problems such as graffiti.

Ironically within the high art system itself new movements arose that denounced the objectification and special-ness of art and attempted to destroy the division between art and everyday life. These attempts, noble in their endeavour to celebrate everyday life, still resided in the rarified theory of the art elites and made no impact whatsoever on the general community.

More recently the theory of relational aesthetics developed by Bourriaud and other related ideas such as social sculpture, new genre public art, functional site etc have actively sought to forefront the relationships created during a project. As Bourriaud suggests:

...a series of meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals and places of conviviality, in a word all manner of encounter and relational invention thus represent, today, aesthetic objects likely to be looked at as such, with picture and sculptures regarded here merely as specific cases of production of forms with something other than a simple aesthetic consumption in mind.

(Bourriaud, Nicholas, Relational Aesthetics. Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002, p28.)

It is against this background history of the changing role of the artist that I wish to present the current work of Elizabeth Woods. Over recent years she has been developing a site-specific art practice. Initially her work responded to the broader context of site without necessarily privileging any one contextual element of that site. Sometimes this was due to the parameters of a particular commission. At other times this approach was simply part of her experimentation into increasing community ownership and participation in a work. Gradually Woods became less interested in making a distinct artwork that she then had to sell to a community and instead opted to focus her attention on the relationship building that went into developing the art object. The object becomes more peripheral and serves as a link or impetus for the development of a greater sense of community and shared purpose.

The issue for the critical observer is not to judge the success or failure of the art object but rather the effectiveness of the project's community development. The issue here is this - can an artist make more permanent change for the better in a community? Or are we falling into the same trap as when we speak of the art object having the power to change one's life.

Elizabeth Woods sets herself a contentious task in her current project 'A Collection of Earthly Matters' when she sets out to explore whether we can find some form of spirituality in our overly materialist modern lives. Spirituality is one of the most written about and debated concepts in human history and it is certainly not a term to be used as a truism especially if we take the viewpoint that every ethical, scientific or religious frame of reference is itself a historical product of humankind. Humanity always remains an invention of the culture it has created. However, the purpose of this essay is not to discuss in detail what spirituality is or even if it is a worthwhile thing to aspire to. Likewise, I believe that Woods is not trying to posit a major new theory of spirituality but is really only hoping to find and tease out something more enduring and richer collectively than consumerism. Whether that is spirituality or not is beside the point.

And as an artist, she certainly does not see herself as a shaman who reveals the truth to a community. Rather, she sees her role a link between people, a kind of 'service provider' who provides an opportunity for a community member to enjoy a chance to talk about their own life to an outsider. Woods has seen an opportunity in 'A Collection of Earthly Matters' to remind a community that the things that they hold most precious, often the humblest of personal objects, have value to all people in the community.

This project follows on from 'Chance Encounters', which Woods undertook in 2002. Here she door-knocked in the small community of Perigueux in south-west France, asking to enter their homes and draw their domestic everyday objects. The artist gave a selection of the resulting drawings to the host. An unexpectedly significant part of this project was the shared stories around cups of tea. Woods realized that, by taking the time to focus on the intimate and domestic parts of people's lives, trust can be built between an artist and a community. With this trust established, she was able to develop further dialogic projects with the town's residents.

In Marnay-sur-Seine Woods repeated the Perigueux process but focused on objects that people felt were important to them. She asked the questions:

Why is this object so important to you?... Is it beautiful, unique, expensive, functional, skilfully made, irreplaceable or evocative? Perhaps it has all these qualities or perhaps, none of them at all. Does it hold the memory of love, tragedy, friendship, rare generosity or just of a moment when your life was full? If you have kept it for a long time, why have you done this?'

(artist call for participation in project)

Initially participants found it hard to think of an object that had this significance. Through a process of convivial conversation with Woods, they soon delved into personal memories and the story of their lives and were able to identify objects that told a simple but impassioned story about their lives.

Woods had identified a key feature of the town that would add resonance to the project. Marnay-sur-Seine's church, the Notre Dame de l'Assomption, with its beautiful Romanesque frescoes, is no longer used except for special events. A significant tourist attraction, it no longer has any formal spiritual function for the villagers. The church provided not just a venue to exhibit the drawings but a chance for the community to extend the value, whether spiritual or not, of their personal favourite objects. Certainly the church provided some kind of spiritual context. The novel use encouraged them to see the church in a new light. As Woods says; the role of the artist in a community is to assist them to look at their environment and their relations afresh. She was able to move from the site of the home, from the everyday, to a public place and thus added greater depth to her project. This brought to the work a sense of wonder, an engagement and encouraged relationships to develop.

So how then did the artist transform this dynamic of the domestic and public realm into a powerful project that captured the hearts and minds of the community? She produced a series of very poetic watercolour paintings of ordinary objects such as a guitar, bed, rabbit, architect's French curve etc on special paper which were then cut to the shape of the object and glued archivally to the walls of the church, mimicking the existing frescoes found there. This element of moulding the images to the architecture gave the works a greater sense of being part of the church and in turn gave more impetus to the idea that there was some kind of spiritual link between the personal objects portrayed and the frescoes.

Some 35 residents were involved in the project with Woods visiting over 25 homes in one month to make the works. Once the works were complete Woods then arranged them in the church and this act allowed her to provide some kind of subtle references to the spirituality of the objects and the personalities of the participants. For instance she arranged the French Curve, an object which suggested a notion of perfect form, owned by an architect, around the statue of Jesus. Once all the works were in place an opening event was arranged in which over 150 people in a small village of 100 attended. This was a huge success as the church had never been so full and looked at with such interest. During the exhibition the residents were able to come to the church and view the collection and then take the drawings from the wall home, thereby slowly depleting the collection in the church. The church thereby became not just a gallery but also a meeting place, in other words, it became activated as a communal space.

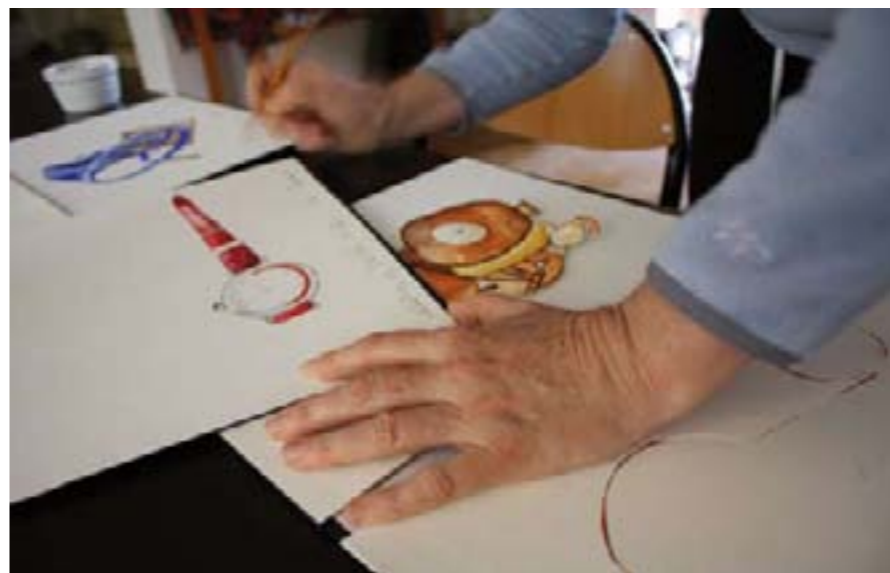
So what lasting impact did this project have? At once the event and the activity added another communal memory to the residents of Marnay-sur-Seine about themselves and the church, but it also alerted the community to the importance of the church over time and how it could be used again as an important site in the town.

It remains to be seen over time how the community may have been changed by this experience. It is too much to ask of art and artists to be political or cultural activists that rewrite history and Woods has been well aware of this issue with a conscious decision not to take an overt political stance in her work. She believes that politics is a delicate field and political intervention can compromise a project and make the artist into a colonizer of sorts. A key word for Woods in these kinds of projects is generosity. The artist is there to give and to listen and to serve a community. Another is celebration – we all love to celebrate both the personal and the communal and there is no reason why artists can't make good party organizers. Woods takes delicate steps but steps that allow a community to see the artist as a lens on their own life.

Kevin Wilson, December 2010



PROCESS
& PARTICIPANTS



Elizabeth Woods at work



1. Marianne-France Staub (teddy bear)



2. Dominique Darmon (tractor) & Aurele Dudzinski (guitare)



3. Iztok Sostarec (one- wire bicycle)



4. Geoffroy Clémenceau (watch)



5. Eveline Hecquet (Crystal Cube) & Fabrice Desrosier



6. Léonard Rousseau (tools)



7. Mathilde Rousseau-Domec (video tape)



8. Barbara Baudin, Arsène Et Léopold de la Tullaye (bracelet)



9. Frédéric Devilliers (banker : tower)



10. Elizabeth Woods Et Maria Lampel (Bed)



11. Guy Simonnot (Major, book)



12. Omar Martinez, Valérie Livory, Jeanne, Pola Et Cornelia (the blue grinder).



THE COLLECTION



Photo: Jan Parker





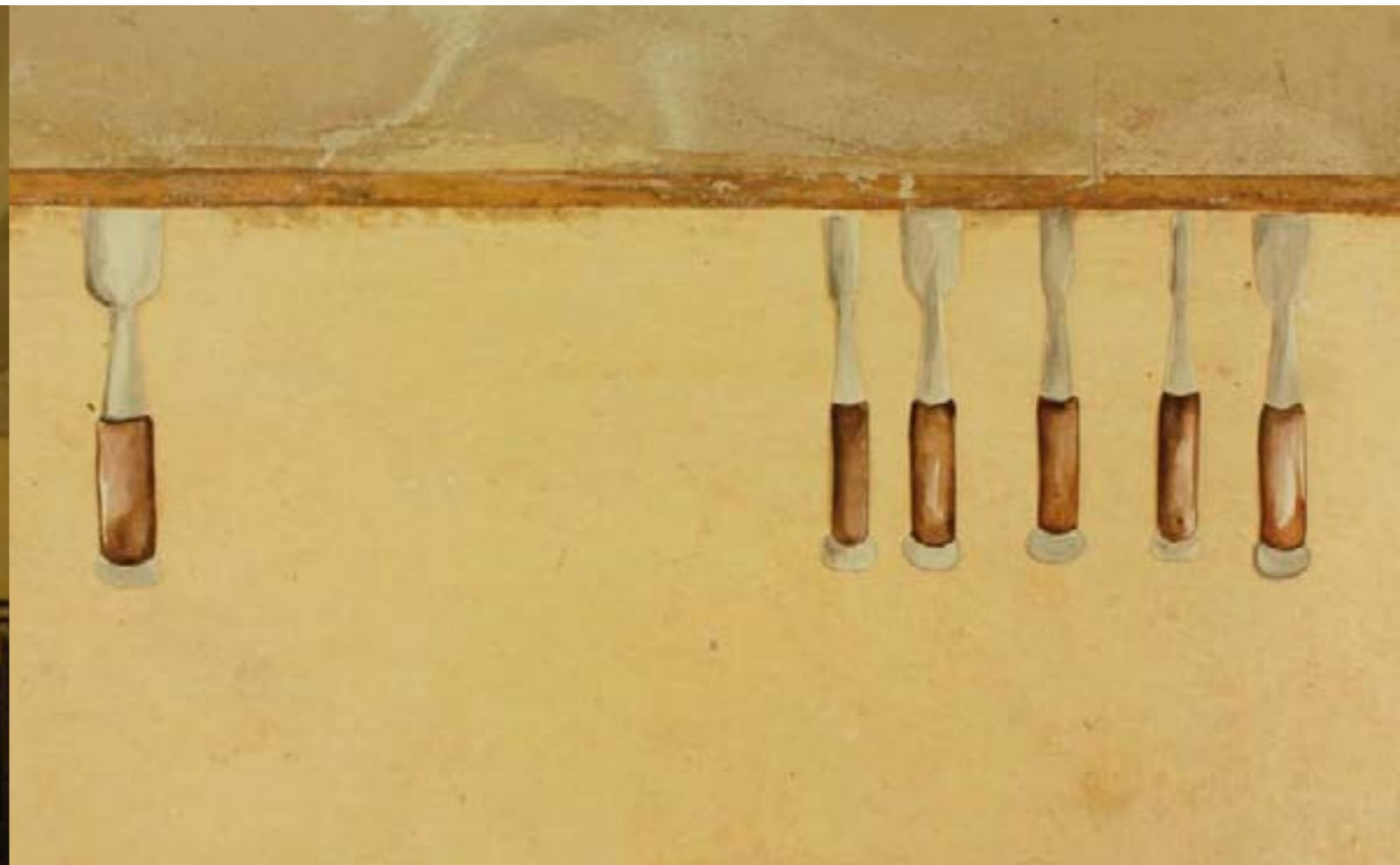
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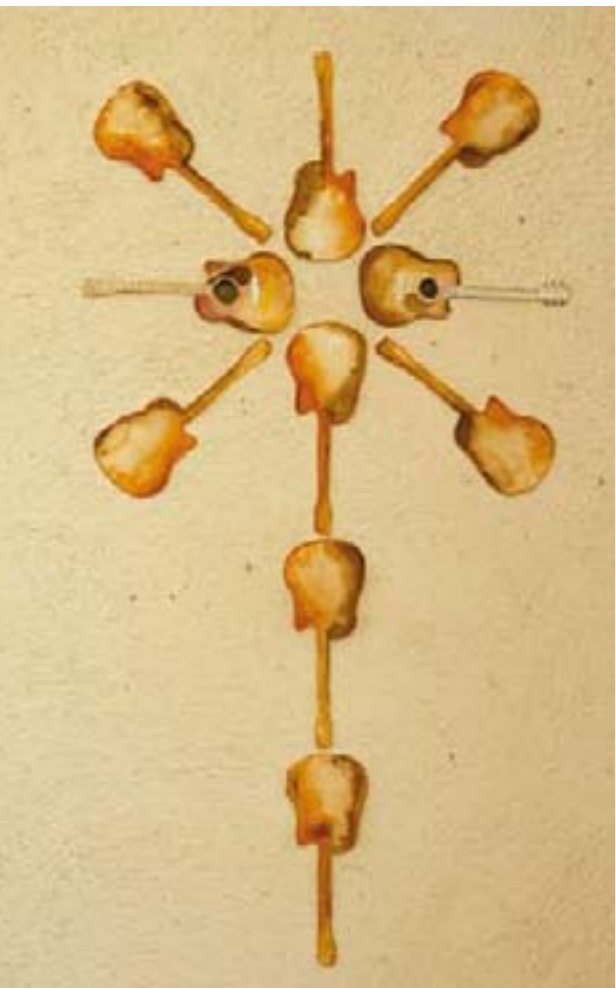




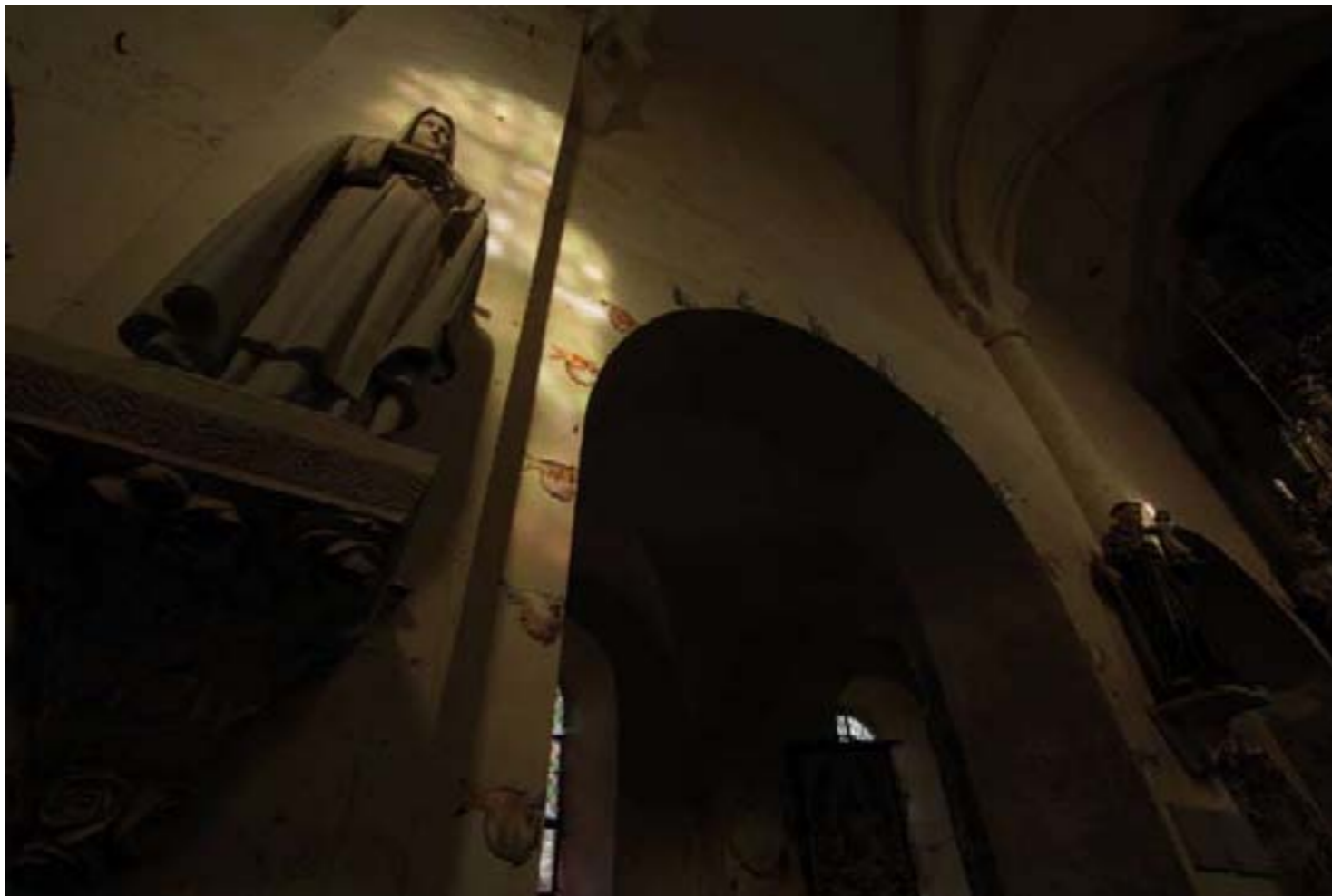


















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Catalogue Design: Valérie Livory

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ELIZABETH WOODS

& THE RESIDENTS OF MORNAY-SUR-SEINE