Interview with Nastasia Meyrat
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Roxane Bovet :: This summer, you've shown *Cooking is Dwelling Without a House* in collaboration with Deborah Z3 Stéphanie Rosianu et EmmaTheGreat (La Placette, Lausanne, 30.6-25.8.2017). It was presented as an exhibition, but we could also have called it a series of events. You created some visual artworks but you also initiated a lot of less definable situations. Many people participated. Your public was very eclectic compared to a regular contemporary art show. Deborah and you were not always the authors of the events, tell me more.

Nastasia Meyrat :: I had been asking myself for quite a while now if it was possible to interlink different fields, different "worlds". Some friends of mine don't believe that arts can exist as tools outside of a combination of globalized capitalistic facts. But at the same time, we are quite a large number of people and artists believing in the possibility of creating exhibitions as a way to gather and share ideas. So yes, I was invited to do something at La Placette and I saw the opportunity to create something with friends that would bring along other tools than the ones I have. I realised that my hometown would be the perfect location to collaborate with people that I'm used to talk to about art, politics, etc. I had already chosen the title of the show, which referred to Rirkrit Tiravanija and to moments that my friends and I know well: the "bouffe pop". Since two or three years, I have noticed the importance of repeating actions during a long period of time, with other people, with a common purpose. The purpose in this project was the notion of collectivity and the space sheltering new common experiences that could constitute a common language to those who came and who experimented what we had to offer.

So I asked three friends to activate this project with me, and talked to two other friends about making the flyer for the show (homemade screen printings). Deborah Z3 and I created works for the show and I came up with a display, that was mixed text and basic pieces of furniture such as tables, chairs, a bar, etc. EmmaTheGreat cooked food and made cocktails every Friday for two months. Stéphanie Rosianu activated her *Kiosque*, every time too. Then every Friday we would invite people to perform, read, play music, etc. The food and the drinks were "for donation". It was crucial to work as a group, because this show was long and intense. In two months, we built a place where art could be seen and where events were happening. You could also just have a beer and talk with friends, like you would do in a normal bar. I noticed at the end of the show, that this proposition was very performative and flexible, which I was really happy about.

RB:: You have talked about connecting different fields, and mentioned the performative character of someone cooking every Friday (even if s/he is not an artist), as well as the fact that some of your friends don't believe in contemporary art as they imagine it. You seem to envision art as a container [contenant], a space that will shelter and foster experiences and ideas. How do you deal with this border of art/non-art, or art/other fields of creation? Some say that "art is life". Do you, like them, work towards expanding the borders of art, or do you prefer to just not be locked in art definitions?

NM:: I think art does not rely anymore on a clear definition of what it should be. I'm opposed to this kind of determinism regarding art and its media. My purpose isn't to challenge that precise matter – I mean, XXIst century art forms challenge it already, so I do too, but I don't concentrate my energy on that. What I'm interested in are forms and situations. For that project, I wanted to create common codes and signs (based on the situation of the show and not the collaboration of the members participating in the show). To me, art is able to fit right in this challenge of creating situations and forms that go in the direction of collective intelligence (whether or not the public and/or members of the show are part of the "art world").

RB:: The notion of common codes and signs, forms and languages, brings in the idea of an actual, real community. Did you *feel* this sense of community during the time of the project?

NM:: Well, the show and the experiment might have been a production of common codes in itself. The format the exhibition took became, throughout time, a language. We all tried, with the pieces that we proposed, to inject codes that referred to collectivity. There could have been more signs. The more projects and the more opportunities are created to organize things, the more signs will be multiplied and shared.

RB:: I see. And I agree. I was actually wondering if the project had - in a sense - created a new community which was not really existent before and which has maybe disappeared since? When I use the word "community" it's not at all in an exclusive and closed way, meaning that the people who came just once are not part of it, but it's more in the sense of that, the more you were there, the more you thought together about the same topics. I imagine that the fact that some people came regularly was an important element in the process of building a common language?

NM:: Indeed, I think the collective energy that took place and created this language was really specific to the duration of the show and to the people who came to it. I wonder, now that it is over, if the codes are too. I don't think so, I think they're still "here", they exist between the people that have experienced the project. If there were to be a next similar show, it would be interesting to see whether or not the adventure continues with the same language created during *Cooking is Dwelling Without a House*.

RB:: That's a very good question. I would be curious to see that as well. In the show, there where sentences sewed on cushions and painted on the wall:

"how to multiply collective intelligence
how to multiply collective knowledge
how to multiply love ?"
"Multiply intelligence, multiply knowledge and share it no less than a thousand times with people that would also multiply themselves and then it copulates with itself, multiplied people multiply themselves and their knowledge. They multiply themselves with other multiplied persons with multiplied consciousness."

This experimental exhibition really tried to *incarnate* the idea of collective intelligence. What does it mean for you?

NM:: Collective intelligence to me is a "satisfactory" (as opposed to optimization) way of understanding, sharing and multiplying knowledge, without any kind of hierarchy. There are many ways, I guess, to do it. One of them, I think, is the idea of spreading, contaminating or multiplying. I have this "immature" need and a rather ideological way of seeing collective intelligence and the act of being multiplied. I mean "being multiplied" both mentally and physically. It would be great if we could experiment life in many different situations at the same time, we would learn much faster and we would be able to achieve so much more. I guess one is able to do it mentally (to multiply ideas and mental spaces through conceptual, mental, organizational operations rather than multiplying them physically) but there's something really schizophrenic about it. To me, collective intelligence is the creation of an opposition to a normalized system based on capitalism, it is a way to constitute an alternative and a plurality.

RB:: Some see in the possibilities of new media a way to achieve this multiplied way of thinking. We often speak about collective intelligence related to online tribes or online open source projects. At the same time, there is GAFA and the web went through a huge process of normalization. Do you see a chance in the network technologies to apply this schizophrenia "in real life" and step out of the metaphor?

NM:: Yes, namely because of the obvious fact that there's so much content on the internet and the accessibility and ability to share it is overwhelming. But what I think is missing is the physicality of the gathering. Reading others and writing to people is great, but to be confronted to people and being somewhere with them, thinking together (physically) is something different. I also think that different groups that communicate knowledge or thoughts in the same directions should have more bridges linking them to each other. There's maybe a lack of encouragement and acknowledgment towards one another. Everything is still very isolated, which slows down any process of resistance to normalization.

RB:: It's the second time you mention the fact of being too slow or that we can be faster to achieve something. It seems that you feel an emergency about those process?

NM:: Yes, I feel like it is an emergency. The state of things -regarding misogyny, racism and globalized capitalism- are alarming. But things are happening, people are

organizing, even if it's small and local. People are getting involved in processes that are more and more inclusive. The deconstruction that is needed to make a consequent change of direction takes a long time, it's super long. It takes a long time because to understand things (as in the systemic imbrication of oppressions that also infiltrates by definition artistic environments) and to agree with them is different than integrating them in our mind, body (and art practices).

> Storks, bears and sharks with personal names and rivers with the status of legal entities are tentative first steps, whose significance, particularly if they remain scattered and isolated instances, is easily dwarfed by the major problems looming. Nonetheless, they are examples of how the surge of complexity, which was brought about in part by digital infrastructures and is currently causing us so much unease, can be bent to our will and transformed into new and very promising realities.
> Felix Stalder, *Escaping Digital Unease*

RB:: Indeed, principles and moral values are not only abstract. They cannot be restricted to a discursive space, they are prolonged and they spread in the materiality of the world and in the practical application and coordination between people. Even if it's only tacitly, each community has to define how it functions as a "living" organism, how people interact, if there is any hierarchy, how decisions are taken, etc. Sometimes it's very well-defined - decided from the beginning by a group of people or in a democratic process, and some other times it's just the result of trials and adjustments. How did this apply during this experience?

NM:: There wasn't an actual framework, because the people with whom I did the show were friends. We already have common political ideas defined, as we're evolving in similar social environments. The four of us kind of share the same views, of course we might have some oppositions and we're not from the same background either, but we can, if we want, use a similar language, so it makes it easier to unite without having to define things too much. We defined our purpose, the direction we wanted to take, but we let some parts define themselves. That decision was very specific to the project, which I think didn't need a strong structure, as we wanted to explore these framework possibilities. But still, we needed, at some point, to adjust things (to tranform or ajust certain aspects of our proposition), of course. This notion of adjusting to the context

was also very important. The fact that the project was long, allowed us to try different scenarios, to "improve" ourselves. It is quite rare to have the chance to take time in order to be precise, especially when you organize an exhibition. We often feel pressured into delivering and seeing something perfect, immaculate.

RB:: Have you heard of Mathieu O'Neil? He wrote a book about "authority and autonomy in online tribes". The pdf is already in the diagram here. He describes virtual communities as follows: *communication is their core and definitive activity; membership is voluntary and easily revocable; and the basis of relationships is shared personal interest rather than obligation*. One can easily think of examples of participatory culture online but I think it's pretty uncommon IRL. That's why I wanted to make this link between O'Neil's description and your project, it seemed relevant to me. Years ago, Levy described collective intelligence as an "achievable utopia" - *not something that grows inevitably from the new configuration of technologies but rather something we must work toward and fight to achieve*. Is it complicated or different when it's not with your friends? I'm referring to your residency in the Dominican Republic.

NM:: Totally. I mean, what you said about O'Neil is something that I see, that I live quite often and that we activated during the project as a reflex. It's funny – talking about "achievable utopia": I first saw this sentence in a text by Rirkrit Tiravanija. This definition of an achievable utopia is something that has become central in my work and in my life. But still, to reach this achievable utopia in a larger community, in a larger scale than just a close friends circle, means that somehow people have to agree that chaos can be positive, and then have a common idea of what their utopia is. This, I don't have to do with a lot of my friends, because we're on the same page, let's say. So yes, I think it's a big process to engage with people that you don't know or who don't share the same codes/contexts/privileges. Nevertheless I think it's necessary to combine and confront codes more and more, so that "achievable utopia" can become a combination of codes that could touch many people on many levels. The Dominican Republic was a great opportunity for me to learn from others, and to exchange points of view on art, politics and privileges. It was an important moment of deconstruction for me. This process that now begun one year ago is still ongoing. The projects that I'm setting up are really very much linked to that experience.

RB:: I really like the idea of combining and confronting codes on many levels in order to maybe build a common language. Talking about privileges and context: to have the opportunity to develop those kinds of experimentation really is a luxury. But for me, it's essential to be able to apply and test utopian and ethical/political ideas concretely. Some say that it's a tendency for ideas and trials to spillover from whatever network they are circulating in –and hence to escape the narrowness of their channel and to open up to a larger milieu. We see more and more projects based on the ideas of the common, knowledge sharing and community building. Do you think this can, by capillarity, change something to the "real" political and economical world?

NM:: Of course, going to other countries to experiment relationships is a luxury and a privilege as well. But I think it's possible to do it without going abroad. I mean, as human beings and artists, depending on what our privileges in society are, there's a lot that we can deconstruct and work on, here and now. Indeed, there are more and more projects and conversations about "sharing knowledge", about privileges, etc. I think it's great and necessary that all of those propositions take place. But I also think it's still not radical enough to really change something politically or economically. The majority of the projects that we all do, and the opportunities that we're looking for in terms of acknowledgement or in terms of money, are directly linked to the State. And the State, as we all know, uses the precariousness of any worker and artist to pursue its own economical and political goals. Artists, off-spaces and so on, are tolerated and even sometimes taken under the wing of political institutions, just to be sure that they remain under control. We are the tools of capitalism's big machine and it's very hard to find ways to get out of it. However, we all do what we can to try and find solutions and adjustments, so there's nothing judgmental about the comments I made, it's just the

way I see things. Also, in institutions such as schools and museums, discussions about misogyny and white privileges are still very complicated, which again, is alarming and needs to be questioned by people of power in those structures.

RB:: Back in Ancient Greece, the common idea was that art had such a great power over the soul that it could alone have destroyed the very foundations of the city. Today I agree with you, artists (neither more nor less than punks and dropouts) are an important element of social peace and society's structural equilibrium. Pain said that "society is produced by our wants and governments by our weaknesses: the former promotes our happiness positively by uniting our affections, the latter negatively by restraining our vices." I think a lot of those projects –like yours or *Frode café*– are not far from trials of society building on a smaller scale.

NM:: The thing is that, to become a counterweight to the established power – whether we talk about politics or institutions in art – it seems to me that a sort of consensus has to be found between people opposing a normalized system. It doesn't mean that it should be a group, but it would be great if some artists and collectives could agree and act collectively *and* publicly on certain points. I'm thinking about manifestos that could be written collectively by artists and collectives (it's actually a project that I'm going to carry out soon). I think that as long as we don't try to self-organize exhibitions, events and some sort of economic resource for ourselves, we'll always be dependent of a system that works on our precariousness and on prejudice. In order for that cynicism to end, it seems to me that we have to open self-organized spaces that are no longer linked to the State or any other hierarchic power. We need to invent other patterns of what could be a self-organized art world, that doesn't rely on a binary system.

RB:: Can you tell me more about your idea of manifesto or is it too early?

NM:: There are various forms of manifestos but today I think less people talk about global politics and systemic matters, which I think clearly misses in the discussion. Recently, the "not surprised" manifesto is one that got my attention. I thought it was great, but I can't see how it can be developed when none of the capitalistic systems are questioned regarding women's oppressions or other types of prejudice. So I'd like to gather people and invite them to constitute different forms of manifestos, analyzing or

simply discussing political and artistic statements, including globalized capitalism, misogyny and racism.

RB:: I would like to see more and more independent propositions emerge here and there. The more there will be, the more diversity we will have. I don't expect common rules, internal organizations or ways of functioning because firstly, I don't believe in a homogeneous and unique society and secondly, I don't have an actual societal program –with solutions and answers to every problem we are facing– to replace capitalism. To establish a consensus among people opposing a system, each "group" firstly agrees on the position they share, like gender and ethnic equality for example, but it's always after sharing those common ideas, that things get complicated and that it becomes difficult to speak using a common voice. Do you have to deal with this in your projects?

NM:: I'm not sure. "Common ideas" define a common base of ethical and political beliefs, that can be discussed, debated, supported. However, it does not stop people from dealing primarily with the questions and beliefs that they qualify as the most urgent and which are usually the oppressions/questions that concern them the most. One way of supporting the actions of other groups is by being active in the matter one chooses to get involved in. Showing support intimately or publicly already is a consensus, as one is willing to be an ally or take part in a large scale of actions in which one believes, even if the used tools are not necessarily the ones initially chosen. I actually think that once people acknowledge other people's tools, things (comunication, actions and collaboration) become easier. As boundaries are defined, everybody collaborates and somehow lives together, instead of "tolerating" each other. So no, I haven't experienced that with people I've worked with, at least for now. I guess the only thing I have experienced, is a specific moment in the collaborative process, where speed of communication slows down –which is needed sometimes– to digest, learn from others and deconstruct.

RB:: What about the "Art Game" [subjectively derived from the "rap game"]? By "Art Game", I mean: the money given by the Fondation Nestlé pour l'Art, artworks functioning as *safe* currency stocked forever in Freeport storages, the cosmopolitan and urban white elitism of contemporary art, the harmful, one percent-ish, tax evasion art market, free labor and impossible-to-miss opportunities. How do you position yourself

among this list? I just read an excerpt of Hito Steyerl's writings, in which he brings forward an hypothesis on the reappropriation of art circulation. I found it interesting.

<u>Hito Steyerl, Duty Free Art, abstract</u>

NM:: I find my position where I can still allow myself to have an opinion. Even if we're all participating in an economic system (starting with having a boss), it doesn't mean we should remain silent. Of course I have, as anybody, inconsistencies (in my practice as much as in my personal life), but i still feel legitimate to talk and to act regarding what's bothering me. The economic system we live in is one that is more and more totalitarian, as less and less alternatives exist. So again, just because we're forced to participate doesn't mean we shouldn't try to create "alter" patterns, in order to bring to existence alternatives which will be viable in a few years (who knows?). In general, I do not agree with a nihilist position in art either. This extract is indeed interesting, but I would maybe distance myself a bit from the attempt to change while we are inside a certain pattern that is already super powerful and which we all participate in (as long as nothing else exists). So I'd take part with other people in the construction of alternative solutions, and navigate between possibilities, until what is built becomes strong enough.

RB:: Nothing is inaccessible enough to preserve its supposed authenticity. It makes me think of the "immature figure", the one who uses irony and humor as a weapon, or at least a tool. I know it's one of your interests, does it play a role here?

NM:: For sure, it does. But it has to do with my formal practice. It's my way of escaping confrontation and authoritarianism. I want to address certain matters that are serious and sometimes political, so it's a way of being self-critical regarding whatever I'm saying.

RB:: You wrote your master thesis on the question of art in a "liquid society", borrowing the words of Zygmunt Bauman. It was a project without form, which crystallized only during opening hours. It was all about mutation and adaptation to new conditions, whether it be people or the weather. Of course, it's not the same –your project adopted

this moving architecture because of its experimental condition– but do you find this liquidity in your art, your life or your thoughts?

NM:: I'd rather speak of a gaseous state as "liquidity", in my mind, is really linked to globalization. Some in art theory have criticized this gaseous state, but I guess you would criticize it if you had a hierarchic way of perceiving art and culture, which I haven't. But yes, I think this project, as much as my practice, moves in a certain way, but not as much as something that is liquid. It's grounded, but evolves in a context. The way I think and organize my life and art practice is more like kaleidoscopes, those toys that we have as kids. The combinations are multiple, but the content is a data (a data that evolves too, as my ideas change and my deconstruction evolves through time). I'm questioning the terms "liquid", etc., because they have been seized by white men who have been writing about them... It's probably our turn now to make ours other relevant terms and to define them in our own way.

RB:: I have invited you to be part of the diagram –which is about a certain idea of post-internet creation– because I wanted to develop the idea of collective intelligence with you. We mostly spoke about how ideas spill out of the web to find physical implementations AFK. Can I ask what your relation to internet is?

NM:: I don't really know actually. I mostly use it as a tool to work, to search information whether it be for my practice or for political events or conferences, etc. Internet is part of my daily routine now. But I guess I know nothing of the extent Internet has or could have. I think it can be efficient in terms of sharing information, and I think if it wasn't controlled and owned by big corporations, it could be a very powerful tool for an alternative.