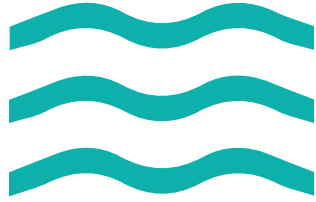


# KLAXON

13



## Taking Action with the Living

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# TAKING ACTION WITH THE LIVING

Pascal Le Brun-Cordier & Benoit Vreux

Confronted with our current ecological disasters, what can artistic creation achieve? First and foremost: to transform our representations, to reconfigure our imaginaries of the Living. This is the terrain we explored in *Klaxon*'s previous issue.<sup>1</sup> Persuaded that *"the imaginary is neither a smokescreen nor a pipe dream"* but *"what bridges the action, the architecture of a state of mind; what gives it its vanishing point and its perspective"* (Alain Damasio),<sup>2</sup> we have been witnessing how artists working in public spaces are succeeding in having us jettison a worn-out concept of "nature" in order to rethink other relationships with the Living, to modify our capacity for attention and sensitivity, to see, hear and think differently about the world.

In the wake of the imaginary and the symbolic, comes the tangible. Can artistic creativity in public space succeed in transforming it? If so, how and with what impact? These remain the open questions to which this issue of *Klaxon* is devoted. Here, our focus is on art/action, activism, transformational creations, cooperation between artists and winegrowers, urban design for humans and insects alike, effective architecture built on concrete deeds... The artists we have chosen want to effectively transform facts on the ground. Their diverse approaches all strive for a certain effectiveness, tangible even if often modest. A far cry from the classic notions of autonomous art, which is an end in itself, detached from any involvement in the world's grimness, their approaches engage directly with the harshness of reality. They have asserted themselves as a means at the service of non-artistic causes: to mobilise the citizenry *"with love and rage"* (Extinction Rebellion),<sup>3</sup> creating joyful and committed communities of action to rectify the world, or to arrest its further destruction; support the re-growth of endangered flora and threatened species; activate spaces of hospitality, the list goes on.

***"Grace is an act that involves thinking while thanking the world."***  
*Laboratoire d'Imagination Insurrectionnelle*

If André Breton's celebrated maxim *"'Transform the world,' said Marx, 'change life,' said Rimbaud — for us, both these orders are but one and the same,"*<sup>4</sup> appears to animate all avant-gardists, the artistic strategies presented here in *Klaxon 13* are more akin to Joseph Beuys' notion of social sculpture, defined as a broad concept of art that embraces the entire spectrum of human activity that interlinks languages, thoughts, actions and objects. Beuys was to argue that society as a whole should be seen as a great work of art to which everyone can contribute creatively. Thirty-five years on from his death, his ecological message echoes more clearly with each passing day.

*Klaxon 13* opens with an emblematic work by this pioneering German artist: *7000 Eichen* (7000 Oak Trees), considered by some as one of the twentieth century's foremost collective ecological works. Other landmark creations take us in the footsteps of Reclaim the Streets, with its astounding action "Transforming a highway into a forest," on the heels of the Yes Men with their "RefuGreenErgy" hoax, encompassing everything from Thierry Boutonnier's urge to "Biodynamize parking lots" to the archaeologist Sarah Parcak's art of toppling statues.

In September 2019, Cifas organised an Urban Academy whose overarching theme was "Imaginaries of Ecology: Art in Times of Climatic Change." At a conference that attracted a full house, John Jordan and Isabelle Fremeaux led us along pathways,<sup>5</sup> retracing their trajectories and commitments. The following day, they conducted a Labofii — Laboratory

<sup>1</sup> [bit.ly/2Z9O2cx](https://bit.ly/2Z9O2cx)

<sup>2</sup> Alain Damasio, epilogue to *La recomposition des mondes*, d'Alessandro Pignocchi, Éditions du Seuil, p. 101.

<sup>3</sup> [bit.ly/3k13Ved](https://bit.ly/3k13Ved)

<sup>4</sup> André Breton, *Position politique du surréalisme, Discours au Congrès des écrivains* (1935), Jean-Jacques Pauvert Édition, 1962.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Isabelle Fremeaux, John Jordan, *Les sentiers de l'utopie*, La Découverte, 2011.

of Insurrectionary Imagination – for about thirty participants, which they presented as a joint preparation for urban strategies destined to create novel forms of disobedience and creative resistance. We thus felt justifiably compelled to commission them to pen the introductory text for this issue of *Klaxon*.

In their brilliant essay, Labofii seeks to clarify the distinction between “art as we know it,” with its vampiric tendencies to suck out rebellion’s innate values, to exploit the migrant and ecological struggles in order to regurgitate them in the detached form of objects, performances or artistic experiences, and, on the other hand, an art which gives back its due to life rather than plunder it. To illustrate what the authors refer to as the grace of art – which etymologically means “that which delights” – Labofii draws upon examples not only from its own practice, but also from other collectives such as the Zoological Ensemble for the Liberation of Nature (Brussels) or the Korean community of K-Pop fans, who in recent times notably mobilised to underpin the Black Lives Matter movement. The grace that links these diverse examples is akin to joy, which, according to Labofii – who cite Oscar Wilde – is nothing but a variation of a primordial artistic virtue, namely disobedience: “Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man’s original virtue. It is through disobedience and rebellion that progress has been made.”<sup>6</sup>

It is these very aspects of disobedience and rebellion that form the basis of engagement for the performer Christophe Meierhans when he joined Extinction Rebellion Belgium. In his contribution “To act as if we were already free,” he depicts his commitment to disobedience not just as a personal challenge, but also “a tangible and direct response to the loss of confidence in the stability of a world that suddenly seems to be falling asunder.” In such responses Meierhans has come to discover that artistic practices directed toward the user rather than the spectator, such as those executed by the international civil disobedience movement Extinction Rebellion, differ from artistic works of representation through the scope of their operations: they operate on a 1:1 scale. While not radically transforming the world around us, they nevertheless attest to the fact that protest is already participating in the construction of an alternative world.

**“Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man’s original virtue. It is through disobedience and rebellion that progress has been made.”**

Oscar Wilde

Other artists, which Lauranne Germond, co-founder of the association COAL Art and Ecology, presents in this edition, grapple

with life in all its dimensions: soundtracks to stimulate the vines’ immune defences or to entice swifts to nest in particular locations; inter-connected beehives installed on a military terrain in order to invent new defence strategies, but in this instance at the service of biodiversity; new artistic practices focused on food and agriculture. Nothing or nowhere seems to elude these new territories for creativity when it strives to directly engage with the Living.

And lastly, it is this very aspect of direct engagement that Sébastien Thiéry and Camille de Toledo position at the heart of their conversation, focussed on various projects by PEROU – Pole of Exploration of Urban Resources, pooled under the generic term of an “Architecture of Hospitality.” They evoke the Très Grand Hôtel, an evolving citizen project that aims to offer spaces and deeds, hosts and accommodation in a neighbourhood in order to boost cohabitation and foster a society based upon hospitality. Throughout their dialogue, both authors recall the Embassy created as a landmark in the heart of the Ris-Orangis slum, a visible space, and an observatory – a place that looks –, which clearly reveals, if need be, that “it is not the walls that are built that shore up a habitat, but rather the relationships between living beings.” Their contribution culminates with a reference to a recent action, related to the engaged and symbolic project, addressed to UNESCO by PEROU and other citizen groups, which aims to have hospitality recognised as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

Each and every one of the artistic actions featured here in *Klaxon 13* happens in public space, whether in urban conglomerations or rural hinterlands, maritime areas or military zones... These spaces, far from being simple localities where these actions unfold, are most often transformed materials, re-designed through these actions that have pursued ecological, ethical, aesthetic, political principles. Hence, it is less a case of artistic actions in public space, but rather *with* public space, the art of public space. These re-designs are never purely formal: each time they activate an unprecedented “distribution of the sensible” to borrow Jacques Rancière’s celebrated formulation, which refers to “... a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determine the place and the political stakes as a form of experience.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, 1891.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique*, La Fabrique Éditions, 2000. Translated by John Barrett for *Klaxon*.



# LANDMARK CREATIONS

Benoit Vreux, John Jordan, Sara Selma Dolorès,  
Alexandre Dewez, Isabelle Fremeaux

***We asked some fellow artistic personalities to speak about an artistic action which, in their view, has brought about a transformation in the world, with a powerful social or symbolic efficiency. Spanning a timeline from 1982 with Joseph Beuys' tree-planting action at documenta 7 Kassel, 7 000 Eichen, to the toppling of the Edward Colston statue during the BLM demonstrations in Bristol (UK) in June 2020, we're getting ever closer to this utopian conception of social sculpture where human activity is equated with a work of art. Occasionally, focus has been more on the joyful, festive or humorous dimension, as exemplified by the occupations by the Reclaim the Streets movement, the spoofs by The Yes Men, or Thierry Boutonnier's core-sampling of a parking lot, in order to transform our perception of the world and to thus make "another world possible!" By drawing upon our individual experiences and memories, each of us will be able to add our own milestones as landmarks in a history of art that has been digging furrows into the world around us so as to unearth other ways of being alive.***

# 7 000 EICHEN (7 000 OAKS)

## JOSEPH BEUYS, 1982-1987

Launched at documenta 7 International Art Fair in Kassel, Germany, in 1982, the *7000 Eichen* urban greening project saw citizens of Kassel plant seven thousand oak trees throughout their city. A three-foot-high basalt column was placed adjacent to each tree planted. Beuys himself planted the first tree on 16 March 1982, several months before the exhibition opened, in front of the Fridericianum Museum in Kassel. The 7000 basalt columns were deposited pell-mell in the vast meadow facing the museum.

Planting continued over the ensuing five years in public spaces across Kassel, each individual site being chosen following proposals from local residents, schools or other local organisations. As planting progressed, the pile of basalt stone decreased in proportion to the

number of trees already planted. This resulted in a constantly changing relationship between the massive deposit of stone at the outset, and the oak tree, which was slender when planted but which, with each passing year, became more imposing. Beuys declared: "My point with these seven thousand trees was that each would be a monument, consisting of a living part, the live tree, changing all the time, and a crystalline mass, maintaining its shape, size, and weight... By placing these two objects side by side, the proportionality of the monument's two parts will never be the same."<sup>8</sup>

Joseph Beuys' son was to plant the very last tree during the inauguration of documenta 8 in June 1987, for Beuys had died the previous year at the age of 64.

*"I believe that planting these oak trees is paramount not only in bio-spherical terms, that is to say in an ecological context of a purely material order, but that it will raise ecological consciousness – raise it increasingly over the years to come, for we will never stop this planting. Planting 7000 oak trees is but a symbolic start. And for this symbolic start, I also need a signpost, namely basalt columns. Hence, such an action aims at raising awareness of the transformation of all life, of all of society, of the entire ecological context..."* Joseph Beuys

**BENOIT VREUX**  
Editorial Director

<sup>8</sup> Cited in the review *Free International University*, « 7000 Oaks », *Revue Inter* #47, 1990, pp. 6–7



7000 Eichen, Joseph Beuys © RR



# TURNING A MOTORWAY INTO A FOREST

## RECLAIM THE STREETS, 1996

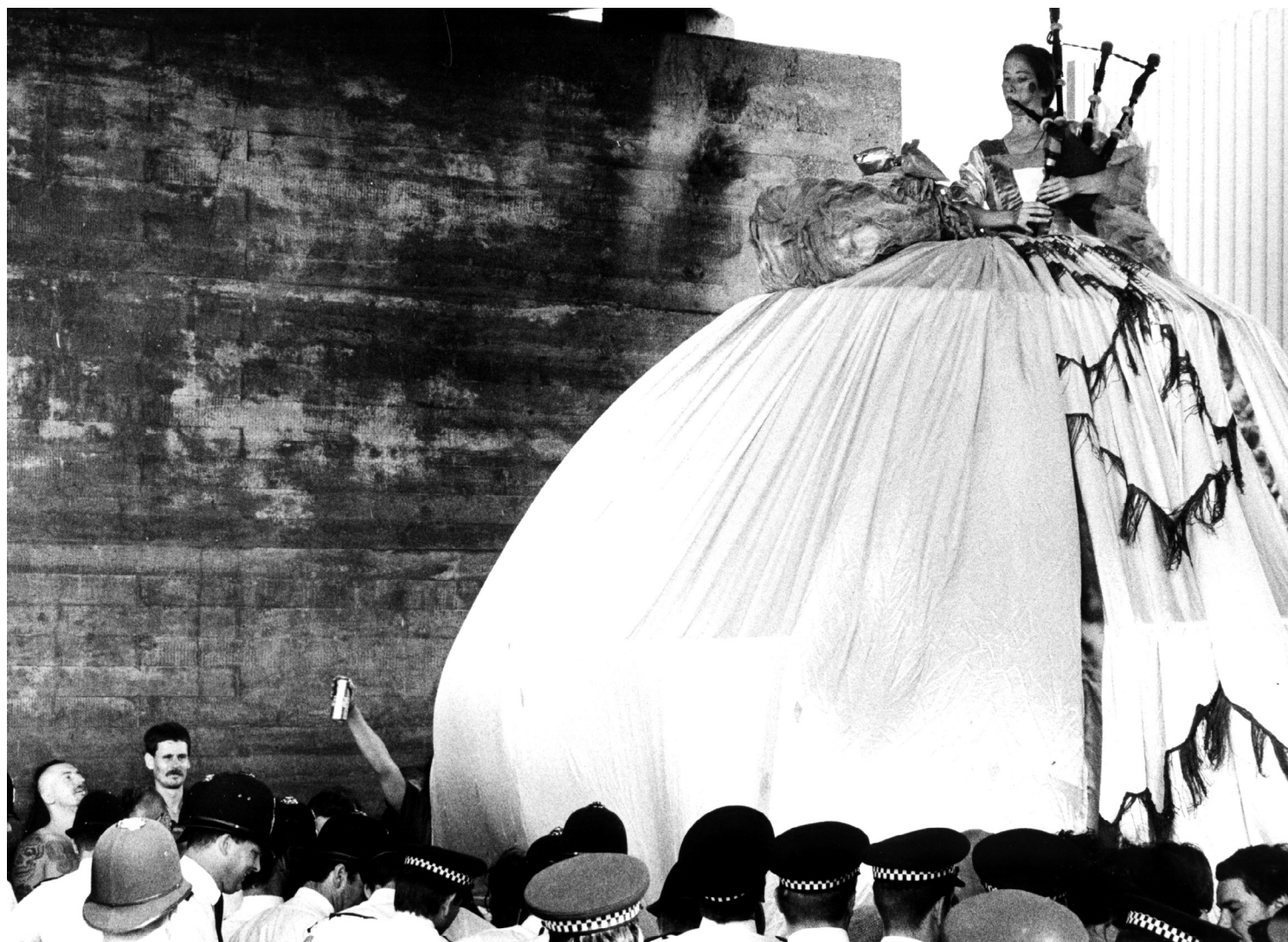
In the 1990s Margaret Thatcher launched a huge road-building program, claiming that nothing must obstruct “*the great car economy*”. As new road schemes spread across the UK, creative resistance emerged via an unlikely collaboration: outraged local villagers supported activists who lived in treehouses and on camps to protect the forests – and sabotaged the earth-wrecking machinery at night.

Not all the schemes were rural: one, the M11 link road, in east London, would destroy 350 homes and two ancient woodlands. Activists squatted the empty homes and an incredible laboratory of imaginative tactics flourished to stop the road builders. Sculptures of old cars turned into gardens became barricades, tunnels linked the resistant houses together, towers rose 30 meters into the sky. In 1994, due to the success of these movements (700 roads were eventually

cancelled) and the other growing counterculture of the free party scene, the government passed new laws, making the blocking of work a criminal offence and banning the playing of techno to more than ten people in public.

Out of this attempt at repression and the evictions at the M11, another unlikely composition emerged bringing the anti-road building movement and the carnivalesque nature of the DIY rave scene together, Reclaim the Streets (RTS) came into the spotlight. With its unique blend of party and protest the group designed a tactic, the street party, that soon spread across the western world. RTS tactic was as irresistible as it was easily replicable: get a sound system, invite people to occupy the street and show what the streets are like when they are reclaimed from cars by disobedient dancing bodies and become urban commons again.

Following a string of ever-growing street parties, in the summer of 1996, London RTS decided to up the ante, and have a street party on a motorway. Over 8000 people swarmed through police lines to invade the baking tarmac. Giant banners that combined political messages, party decoration and swings for children stretched across the 6 lanes. Sand turned the fast lane into a beach and a black and pink flyer saying “*under the tarmac the forest*” was distributed. Meanwhile, huge carnival figures, 25-foot-high women with hooped skirts, were pushed up and down the road. Underneath the skirts, hidden from view of the police, activists were drilling into the tarmac with jackhammers and planting saplings (saved from the route of the M11) into the motorway, symbolically turning it into a forest.



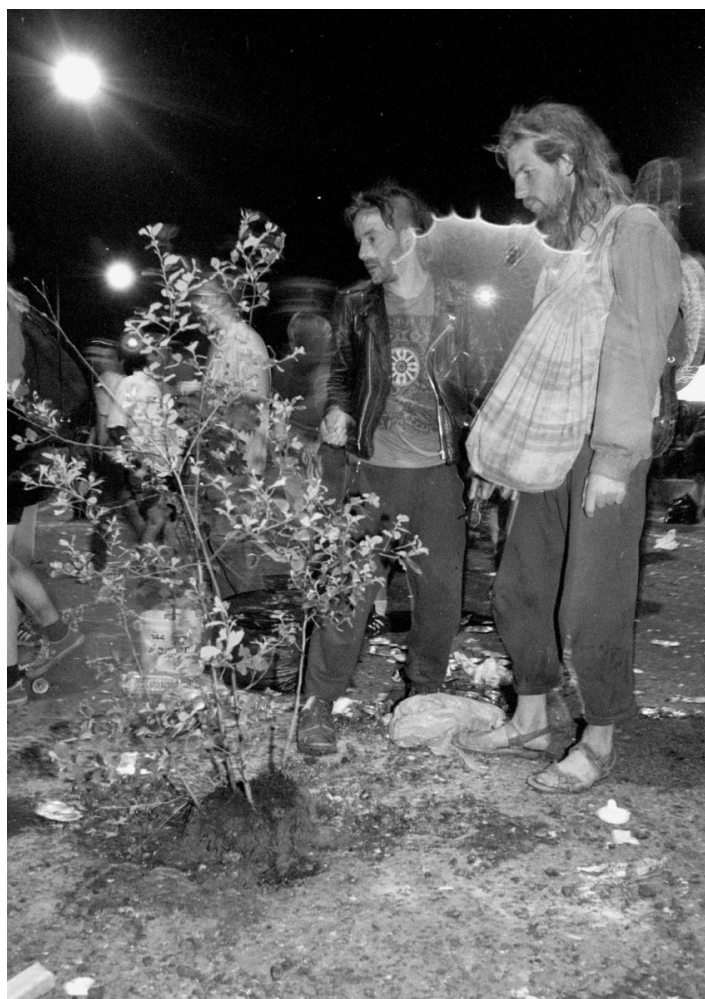
Huge Lady, Reclaim the Streets © Julia Guest

The story of this act of audacity reached the ears of the Liverpool Dockers, whose dismissal for refusing to cross a picket line led to a global solidarity movement and a two-and-a-half-year strike. Inspired, they suggested working together and another strange cocktail emerged, mixing working-class struggle, anarchism, radical ecology

and rave culture. The trees in the motorway had sprouted seeds that would become the huge diverse anti-capitalist movements that exploded into the public eye with the WTO protests in Seattle in 1999.<sup>9</sup>

**JOHN JORDAN**  
*Labofii*

**9** 1999 Seattle WTO protests, sometimes referred to as the Battle of Seattle, were a series of protests surrounding the World Trade Organisation Ministerial Conference of 1999. The negotiations were quickly overshadowed by massive and controversial street protests. The large scale of the demonstrations, estimated at no fewer than 40000 protesters, dwarfed any previous demonstration in the United States against a world meeting of any of the organisations generally associated with economic globalisation.



A sapling planted in the asphalt by Reclaim the Streets during a motorway street party, 1996 © Nick Cobbing



The first Reclaim the Streets poster, 1995 © RTS



# REFUGREENERGY

## THE YES MEN IN BRUSSELS, 2017

Today is D-Day.<sup>10</sup> This is to be our last briefing under our shelter installed behind the building housing La Bourse in Brussels. We, some twenty artists, have been brought together by La Fabrique de Théâtre<sup>11</sup> so as to grapple with the theme of the Anthropocene. We're about to launch a performance in public space, guided by the sensational duo: Mike Bonanno and Andy Bichlbaum, the celebrated Yes Men!

[bit.ly/2P98yVp](http://bit.ly/2P98yVp)

For the last ten days, we have been preparing this action together with these master pranksters that will be at once artistic and political. The period is thorny. The migration crisis is acute and collapse seems imminent across this Europe, which is increasingly leaning to the Right with each and every day. How are we to rally as many people as possible to call out our general approach toward an ever greater unequal world, where the price of energy is deliberately kept low in order to avoid the worst, where everything must be Green, where the borderlines between "those who have" and "those who would like" are expanding just as much as the number of drownings in the Mediterranean Sea?

RefuGreenErgy, "for every crisis is an opportunity!": this is our project. Cynical,

violent, challenging. We laugh so as not to cry. Our sales pitch: a start-up that will enable refugees in transit extend their presence on Belgian soil for twenty-four hours—in exchange for their workforce. They will have to generate green energy by pedalling through the city streets. And in order to remain competitive, they will be paid €1.60 per hour, all social charges included of course.

With that idea as our starting point, we've been setting up our fake venture over the last ten days, as though preparing a heist. *"It all comes down to communication,"* Mike and Andy caution us. *"Website, social networks, logo, T-shirt... Everything needs to be done with care so that the D-Day illusion is faultless, and that the media fall into the trap. Some media outlets will be brought up to speed regarding the action in order to incite the others, but we've got to keep a low-profile and above all, have fun! That's most important!"*

So, we're going to have some fun! We are going to use the first name of the Minister of State for Migration from the Flemish Nationalist Party, a certain Theo Francken, in order to christen the CEO of our start-up. We will juxtapose his first name with that of the surname of none other than Eddy Merckx, the six-time Belgian title-holder of the Tour de

France. So, we have: Theo Merckx. Couldn't be better! We devised a smart-phone app that will enable delivery of a battery "full of green energy generated by a migrant" in order that it operates the purchaser's raclette machine. Our big D-Day is upon us before we know it. Saturday 30 September 2017 at 9 a.m. Armed with our communication equipment, our bicycle prototypes, and several "walk-on migrants," we find ourselves in a pedestrian street in downtown Brussels, ready to sell our "green energy" to passers-by, not having a clue where this will all end up.

*"Ah yes? Why not! They'll never lack for something to do! If it's for green energy, it can't be so bad."* We're flabbergasted. Many passers-by don't even contest the idea. Even though some twitch their faces and others prefer not to have children involved, many find the idea worthy of interest and would be ready, in their own words, *"to switch energy supplier."* On social networks the idea triggers controversy, while in the press the word spreads. The media questions us: *"But have you been authorised by the government?"* Sheltering behind our fake start-up, we have to wait for our CEO's official speech before finally, from amidst the crowd, a man is outraged. Obviously, he is Black. Obviously, he falls into the arms of our CEO when we inform him that the whole thing is a hoax. Obviously, we film the whole affair; this will serve to out us for what we are: fakes.

Nevertheless, what will linger will be the fear. To witness first-hand that we're merely a couple of pedal-strokes away from barbarism. And, that such barbarism can strike us as being normal. That the world we're living in is already the future world. And that such fake acts function as an indicator of our level of acceptance of this world that has already blown it. What a hell of an experience!

### ALEXANDRE DEWEZ

Actor and author, member of the creative platform de Zoé(asbl) (Brussels)

<sup>10</sup> This text was written in June 2020, and describes an action that took place in October 2017.

<sup>11</sup> [bit.ly/3jXYdKc](http://bit.ly/3jXYdKc)





# BIODYNAMISER LE PARKING

## THIERRY BOUTONNIER, 2019-2021



*Biodynamiser le parking*, Thierry Boutonnier © Sara Selma Dolorès

Before filling our readers in about this performance, I should perhaps first enlighten you regarding the history of the site for our experiment. We find ourselves in the land of clocks and banking secrecy, more precisely in Far<sup>12</sup> in Nyon (Switzerland), on the Place Perdtemps<sup>13</sup> (1586), a public square where one squanders one's time. Nowadays, the square has been transformed into a parking lot (for a fee, of course, for time is money). Since 2018, the municipality of Nyon has been launching calls for projects to make this square "green" and to drive cars underground.

With *Biodynamiser le parking*, Thierry Boutonnier<sup>14</sup> proposes a program for collective, playful and joyful actions whose objective is to raise awareness among local residents about the artificialisation of soils and underground terrains due to human intervention.

Boutonnier's credo: it's time to re-think the quality of the subsoil as we do the quality of the air.

### DAY #1: YOGA IN THE COMPANY OF A DIVINER

A dozen participants, including this narrator, find themselves practicing yoga right in the midst of cars. Our objective: to relax, to become aware of the water of which we're comprised, to open up our chakras between two catalytic converters.

As this session draws to a close, we're all ready to become diviners. We select either a divining rod, a pendulum, or brass rods prior to squeezing ourselves through

the vehicles, looking like a bunch of wacky Professor Calculuses.<sup>15</sup> And lo and behold: water! Thereafter, we narrow the perimeter for the core drilling so as not to burst any underground pipes.

Dapper in his giant earthworm costume, Boutonnier raises our awareness about the question of soil and humus, as well as of the need for earthworms and the "greenwashing" concealed behind the term "re-vegetate."

<sup>12</sup> [bit.ly/2QFCkSp](https://bit.ly/2QFCkSp)

<sup>13</sup> Literally, perdtemps means to waste time.

<sup>14</sup> Please refer to Thierry Boutonnier's contribution to *Klaxon* 12: "Thierry Boutonnier, Artist Rooted in the Living World"

[bit.ly/2QBPC2n](https://bit.ly/2QBPC2n)

<sup>15</sup> The reference here is to fictional character Professor Cuthbert Calculus (Professor Tournesol) from *The Adventures of Tintin*.

## DAY #2: CORE DRILLING THE PARKING LOT

With the help of a garden auger and an adventurous member of the public, Boutonnier (still in his earthworm costume) removes the first layer of bitumen in order to sample the sub-soil strata.

Taking shelter in the shade of the trees, we observe them sweat all while listening to Boutonnier talk about the “anthroposoil.” As questions and answers burst forth, an environmental activist comes by and asks us to sign a petition and has her picture taken with our earthworm. Onlookers pause, exchanging ironic remarks regarding future developments at Place Perdretemps. We inhale the petroleum fumes emanating from the hole. The performative effectiveness and excitement of this direct action astounds me. Two guys

are just digging a hole before my eyes, yet they transform the parking lot into a Greek agora. Three hours later, the hole is one meter deep with a circumference of twenty centimetres. No earthworms in sight, though.

## DAY #3: CONSTRUCTING A MONOLITH AND SAMPLING SUB-SOIL

Back at the parking lot, we analyse the findings from our core drilling. Buckets contain the first layer of bitumen, the all-purpose backfill, clinker and finally rubble that we gather together in order to construct a monolith. This monolith will complete the collection at the Cantonal Museum of Geology, thus reflecting the vast diversity of Swiss soils, spanning glacial melts to anthroposoil...

Finally, we are invited to sample the soil, where it will be a matter of tasting wines and sucking partly calcareous pebbles in order to enhance our understanding of the characteristics of sub-soils in the Swiss canton of Vaud.

During these three episodes about the making of a biodynamic parking lot, everybody present falls under Boutonnier's spell. Originally the son of a farmer and later to graduate in Fine Arts, his warm and disconcerting presence, at once engaged and wacky, renders his action a tender, instructive and engaging moment.

### SARA SELMA DOLORÈS

*Polymorphic artist and part of the theatre company Thank You For Coming (Brussels)*

Find out more:

[bit.ly/3jZ3gtO](https://bit.ly/3jZ3gtO)



# THE FINE ART OF ICONOCLASM

## BRISTOL, 2020



The empty pedestal of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol © Caitlin Hobbs

The story doesn't say if those who initiated the operation had read the detailed instructions posted on twitter by renowned archaeologist Sarah Parcak on how to pull down confederate obelisks (a remarkable way to put one's skills at the service of social justice, whatever these may be).

On June 6<sup>th</sup> 2020, when the Black Lives Matter march in Bristol (UK) arrived at the statue of Edward Colston, a 17<sup>th</sup> century trader whose role in enslaving more than 84 000 people is undisputed, the result was what she had hinted at: ropes popped out of bags, the crowd got organised, and a few tugs later a symbol of deep institutional racism was lying on the floor, amidst ravenous cheering. In an unequivocal gesture, a few protesters knelt on the neck of

the bronze figure before it was unceremoniously rolled through the streets and dumped in the docks from where the slave ships once set sail.

This popular dismantling of a symbol of oppression obviously is nothing new. It is part of a long genealogy of collective resistance against a hegemonic discourse. As such, it cannot but echo another such gesture, a couple of centuries earlier: the demolition of the Vendôme column by the Confederation of Artists during the Paris Commune in 1871. In its vision of the establishment of “communal luxury”, or the abolition of art as the monopoly of an isolated elite, the Confederation was also working against the centralising organisation of monumental space. As such, this “monument to barbarism, a

*symbol of brute force and glory (...), a permanent insult to the vanquished by the victors*" – as the decree that officially allowed the levelling of the column stated – could no longer be tolerated.

Likewise, demonstrators in Bristol interviewed on the day talked about the “daily affront” that they, as Black citizens, had to endure when walking past the Colston statue. These acts of reclaiming powerful symbols go far beyond the mere symbolic dimension: they are about reasserting collective worth and power, about reclaiming history and one’s place in it, and therefore one’s place in today’s society. In many ways, they are also a way to confront the role of art (the BBC even invited the Chairman of the Fourth Plinth<sup>16</sup>, the London based renowned public art commission, to consider whether the tearing down of Colston statue should be nominated for the Turner Prize).

When Mary Richardson, a suffragette artist, slashed Velasquez's Venus back in 1914, as a protest against the torture of Emmeline Pankhurst in prison, she claimed the act as an artwork in response to the slow "killing of Mrs Pankhurst". *"I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history..."*<sup>17</sup> she said following her arrest. *"You can get another picture, but you cannot get a life".*

Iconoclasm is a re-stating of one's hierarchy of values and Black Lives Matter, like Richardson or the Communards before them, clearly chose life and dignity over deference.

**ISABELLE FREMEAUX**  
*Labofii*

**16** The *Fourth Plinth* is the northwest plinth in Trafalgar Square in central London. It was originally intended to hold an equestrian statue, but remained bare due to insufficient funds. Since 1999, various sculptures and works of art have been temporarily installed there, commissioned by *The Fourth Plinth Commission*.

**17** [bit.ly/3gysQn7](https://bit.ly/3gysQn7)



# CULTURES OF REBELLION

## NOTES AGAINST EXTRACTIVIST ART AND FOR THE ART OF LIFE

John Jordan & Isabelle Fremeaux

***Ever since its inception in 2004, the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (Labofii) has sought to overcome the distinction between art and activism, by instigating acts of disobedience that transform situations. It is thus understandable that the focus of this issue of Klaxon has led us to its two instigators, John Jordan and Isabelle Fremeaux. We asked them to tell us about Labofii's motivations and working methods. John and Isabelle shared with us a powerful reflection, directed toward an urgent and imperative rooting out of the extractivist art and replacing it with art of reciprocity and a culture of rebellion.***

Her hand rises up out of the swirling sea. Dark eyes fix deep blue sky. She's drowning, not waving. Water is pushing life out of her lungs, but she just wants to be alive, she coughs and squirms. She's travelled so far to get here. The home is on fire, the climate has broken down, droughts have brought hunger, the fields are becoming deserts, the wars never stop and she is in search of life, that's all. But fortress Europe has made sure she never reaches your beaches with their bronzing bodies and sweet smell of sun cream. Her darker body will wash up on the golden sand days later, when the tourists have gone back to their hotels and after the tides are tired of playing with it. You are moved by the TV pictures of the crowded boats and the drowned children. You are moved to make a work that speaks of how Europe's migration policies are killing the exiled. You cover the columns of a theatre with thousands of orange life jackets, you are the artist Ai Weiwei. When asked why you

helped design Beijing's *Bird Nest* Olympic stadium for the very government that has repeatedly repressed and censored your work, you replied that it was because you "loved design." Do you love it more than life?

The Arctic is at times 20 degrees Celsius warmer than it should be at this time of year. The ice is melting so fast that scientists say it is literally off the charts, and recent storms are now appearing on seismographic records. What used to measure earthquakes is now measuring storms. The tools to measure the crisis are not even adequate. The waters are rising and the climate tipping points are looming, you are moved. You have hundreds of tonnes of Arctic ice that has broken off the ice shelf transported to Paris during the United Nations Climate Summit in 2015. You leave them to melt in the street. You are the artist Olafur Eliasson. Apparently your studio does not "make things" but "ideas", but that does not stop you

selling your wire and light-bulb football lampshades for 120,000 pounds to rich collectors.

You are artists and you are working in what some dare to call the era of the *Anthropocene*, suggesting shamefully that we are *all* equally responsible for the radical wrecking of our life support systems. As a recent internet meme reminded us, "*we are all in the same storm but not the same boat.*" We, the *Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination*, would rather call these times the *Capitalocene*, pointing the finger to the system that puts the economy in front of life, and naming the elites who keep its suicide machines and armies of soldiers and police well oiled making sure their profits are safe whilst everyone else's lives tumble towards extinction.

No artist, no activist, in-fact no human being, nor any of the more-than-human species who live inside and outside of us, has ever been faced with

this before. A recent official European Commission policy paper ended with the analysis that if we go beyond 1.5 degrees of warming, “we will face even more droughts, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people; the likely demise of the most vulnerable populations – and at worst, the extinction of humankind altogether.”<sup>18</sup> We are all living within a world where it is now easier to imagine the collapse of all life than imagine reinventing the right ways to live.

Yet for the majority world, the collapse has already happened, the colonisers destroyed their cultures long ago with virus stained blankets, swords, guns, slave and gold ships. The contemporary corporate colonising armies continue extracting everything they can from the lives and worlds of vulnerable beings – wood, metals, minerals, molecules, medicine, knowledge – with their enclosing, digging, mining, sucking and studying machines. It’s what we can call the logic of extractivism, a logic at the heart of the most destructive of all religions, the belief in the growth economy. Extractivists

take “nature”, stuff, material from somewhere and transform it into something that makes profit somewhere else. That profit elsewhere is always more important than the destruction it causes, than the continuation of life of the communities from which wealth is extracted. Extractivism is the opposite of response-ability, the opposite of reciprocity.

And as known worlds collapse, so do our ways of thinking and understanding. In the laboratories of social and natural sciences, “human exceptionalism and bounded individualism” writes Donna Haraway<sup>19</sup> “those old saws of Western Philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable.” Scientists are showing us that the idea of “nature” as unfeeling machines outside of us is an illusion, and that we all – from the whale to the cell – feel and sense the world, we all share a hunger for life that drives us to create, we all share an inwardness, a felt subjectivity.

And as scientists become neo-animists, politicians reclaim the tools of

magic. In the government offices and the media they control, truth and causal logic have become unthinkable: from Trump to Erdogan, Boris to Bolsonaro, a post-factual politics weaves irrational images and myths back into our politics, where, writes Kasper Opstrup, “It is no longer about whether a proposition is true or not, but about how effective it is to make something happen.”<sup>20</sup>

But in the museums and studios, concert halls and theatres, galleries and street festivals of the Metropolis<sup>21</sup>, it seems that even though this era has made art unthinkable too, so

**18** [bit.ly/31rZYYD](https://bit.ly/31rZYYD)

**19** Donna Haraway, *Staying with the trouble*, Duke University Press, 2016, p. 30.

**20** Kasper Opstrup, *The Untamed craft – Magical Activism as a Reaction to the Reappearance of the Reactionary*, Unpublished essay, in correspondence with the authors.

**21** cf. John Jordan, “Try to imagine (Letter to a corpse)”, *Klaxon 2: Political City*, p. 7  
[bit.ly/2EgzMrp](https://bit.ly/2EgzMrp)



Map of the Climate Camp at Kingsnorth © Hemant Jain  
Klaxon 13 - TAKING ACTION WITH THE LIVING

many continue business as normal. The catastrophe may well have been integrated as a *topic* and there is constant inventiveness in art's material forms, but its essence has not been reinvented, partly because *art as we know it* is still very much conceived of as a universal defining feature of civilisation. Yet according to art historian Larry Shiner, *art as we know it* "is a European invention barely two hundred years old".<sup>22</sup> For most of human history and for most of human cultures there was no word to describe *art as we know it* today. Then something unprecedented happened, what some have called a copernican revolution in art. It started around 1750, in the white colonial metropolises of Europe, at the very onset of another revolution – the industrial capitalist one. For the first time, the process of making things became independent of human or animal power, of seasons, of weather, wind, water and sun rays. Making became independent of place as the fossil fuel burning machines of the capitalocene, first coal then oil, amplified the logic of extractivism and our life support system began to be plundered everywhere.

As the capitalocene began to ravage our worlds, the traditional ways of thinking and making art were split apart, and *art as we know it* became the new normal. What was once the process of inventive collaboration became the creation of individual genius, works that once had specific purpose and place were separated from their functional contexts and enclosed for silent and reverential contemplation by the rising middle classes. This new notion of a contemplative universal art – no longer situated nor useful, with its silent polite audience – was pushed worldwide by missionaries, armies, entrepreneurs, dealers and intellectuals as one of the engines of progress. It colonised imaginations everywhere and continues to do so. Without the violent rift that it created between artists and artisans, genius and skill, the beautiful and the useful, art and life, the system of *art as we know it*, that most of us reading this text work in and depend on, would collapse.

And yet it seems so obvious that in this crisis, it is exactly these rifts that must be healed and an extractivist art – that takes value from specific places and regurgitates it elsewhere, from the past to the present, from this messy life to a slick show somewhere else, from this community to my career, – has to stop. Today any look around the *art as we know it* system will show its vampire-like tendencies, sucking value out of collapse, rebellion, migrant struggles, ecology, territorialisation, magic, new-materialism – whatever is a fashionable topic at the time – and regurgitating it into un-situated detached objects, performances or experience elsewhere, anywhere in fact, as long as it is a context where the codes of the *art as we know*

**"Extractivist art sucks value out of collapse, rebellion, ecology – whatever is a fashionable topic at the time – and regurgitates it into un-situated detached objects, performances or experience elsewhere."**

it system function, be it the metropolitan street or the museum, the neighbourhood park or the walls of the abandoned factories.

The concerts and performances, the interventions and installations of extractivist art all "speak about", "comment on", or "explore" their subjects; they "invite us to spur a debate" or a "conversation". They involve the attentive transformation of space and bodies, light and time, they attempt to make things beautiful and/or strange, they "make visible" an invisible problem or invite a polemic. Often the artist is deeply "concerned" by the issue, and the communities

**"How can art thank life rather than take from it? To give back to life is to enable it to flourish more, to open spaces for the potentialities of the fecundity of the living world to continue to be ongoing."**

affected by it routinely become their material. But in the end, the most important thing is not how the work can be part of strategy against the problem, but that the material is extracted and transformed into good art. Their relationship with life is that of a resource rather than acts of reciprocity. The work does not really "give back" despite all its claims, what benefits most is the artist's career and the further legitimisation of the

institutions promoting *art as we know it*. Whether the work nourishes and sustains the social movements or communities invested in these issues is hardly ever on the agenda. Asking whether the work is useful or contributes in any way as some material solution to the issues it "deals with" is virtually a heresy, leading to accusations of instrumentalisation. If the art is used by political movements, it loses its fantasy of autonomy!

In this extraordinary moment, this crack in the system that is the covid-world, where the line between what seemed unfeasible and what ended up being possible has been smudged, where so few of us want to return to the toxic normal, perhaps we can take the risk of reinventing this worn out invention of art. Perhaps we can begin shifting it away from the logic of extractivism, towards the art of reciprocity.

Those three letters a-r-t come from a merger of the Latin *Ars* and the Greek *Techne* and that for many thousands of years meant *any* human activity, from shoe-making to verse writing, horse breaking to governing, vase painting to cooking, medicine to navigation, was considered an art. Not because it was done by an artist or because it was separated from life by framing it within the contemplative context of the *art as we know it* system, but because it was performed with grace and skill. Grace is an act of thinking with and thanking the world. The word comes from old French *Grace*, meaning "thanks" – as in "*grâce à*" – as in "gratitude". To thank life for giving us life, that is perhaps the greatest skill our art must learn. But how can art thank life rather than take from it? To give back to life is

to enable it to flourish more, to open spaces for the potentialities of the fecundity of the living world to continue to be ongoing. To do this our art must defend life from the death machines of the economy and desert the worlds that feed its logics.

<sup>22</sup> Larry Shiner, *The Invention of art. A cultural history*, University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 3.





A treasure island map to find the buried boat and take part in Great Rebel Raft Regatta © John Jordan

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The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination certainly does not have all the answers to these questions, but they have inhabited us since our founding in 2004 and driven us to aim for work that smudges the line between art activism, political movements and art institutions and often forces us to cross line of legality into acts of disobedience. “Disobedience in the eyes of anyone who has read history is our original virtue” wrote Oscar Wilde, poet, playwright and queer activist: “it is through disobedience and rebellion that progress has been made.”<sup>23</sup> We believe disobedient bodies sculpt history much more than radical art ever did. But what art can bring to this disobedience is joy. “Pleasure evokes change” writes US author, doula, women's rights activist, witch and black queer feminist Adrienne Maree Brown.<sup>24</sup> We have spent years embedded in movements, working as organisers and designers of acts of disobedience that motivate through joy and desire rather than guilt and cynicism, acts that are designed to be useful, in stopping the war that the economy is waging on life.

**“We believe disobedient bodies sculpt history much more than radical art ever did. But what art can bring to this disobedience is joy.”**

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Sunset. A gentle hillside. Tents fluttering in the wind, whirling windmills, circus marquees filled with animated bodies. 2000 people: talking, eating, working, dancing in a squatted field. Tomorrow is the big day, you can smell the excitement... and the nerves.

Your team is ready, an affinity group of 6 people, new friends made over the last week, living and deciding things together in this field. You are briefed in a tiny tent by a pirate, you like his blackened eyes and tilted hat. He gives you a treasure map and tells you that your task is to launch into the river at 7am, “sharp!” The aim is to shut down

the coal fired power station downstream. “This is where the boat is buried” he says, pointing to a X on the map, a mischievous glint in his eye.

The camp is surrounded by thousands of police officers. They search everything that comes in and out. Later that evening you meet a mysterious man in a nearby railway station, whom you recognise thanks to a secret sign. He gives you life jackets.

The night is warm. You are creeping through the woods. A white column of light sweeps the canopy, the ripping roar of a police helicopter overhead. You know that there are another 12 other groups, hiding, searching for their boats. You listen out for them, the crack of a twig. You read the map by headlamp, and find the spot. You dig. Here it is: your boat! There is even a bottle of rum! You drink and sleep amongst the trees with your friends.

<sup>23</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, 1891.

<sup>24</sup> Adrienne Maree Brown (ed), *Pleasure activism. The politics of feeling good*, 2019.

At 7am, you launch into the river, you see so many others emerging from the forest like you, you paddle as fast as you can towards the power station in the distance. Behind you a huge black police motorboat appears, it is coming after you. You feel so alive and in the world, things make sense again.

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We need moments that inspire hope and adventure in these dark times. Moments where the spectators become the spectacle again. Acts that transform us and the world at the same time. Amongst the ruins of the Second World War poet and dramatist Bertolt Brecht wrote: “Our theatre (...) must illustrate the pleasure to be had in changing reality”.<sup>25</sup> In 2008, we helped organise a Climate Camp on the edges of the Thames valley in the UK, illegally set up on a site, with an extractivist climate crime as a backdrop: Kingsnorth’s coal fired power station. Climate Camps are temporary self-managed infrastructures, forms of prefigurative politics that show the desired world in the here and now rather than simply being protests “against” something. On

camp, everyone is crew and decisions are taken horizontally. All the energy for the camps is renewable, the food local and for over a week there are workshops in everything from anti-capitalist degrowth economics to how to build a hand-made wind turbine. It culminates with a mass direct action on the last day.

The Labofii designed an action to shut down the old working power station that stood where a new one was supposed to replace it. The action was entitled *The G.R.R.R. (The Great Rebel Raft Regatta)*. A week before the camp set up, in the dead of night, we buried inflatable boats in the forest along the river. Then, when the camp began, we distributed treasure maps showing the location of the buried boats. On the day of action, despite the huge police presence, and a new by-law banning anyone from taking a boat out on the river, 130 rebel rafters took to the water. One boat managed to partially block one of the outfalls of the power station, closing part of it down. Three of the crew on that boat had never before taken part in disobedience, and over a decade later they are all still active in the climate justice movements. All say that the sense of playful adventure, camaraderie and

excitement of that day was what lit the spark for them to continue to rebel for a future worth living. “Man (sic) is at his most human when he plays”,<sup>26</sup> claimed playwright and philosopher Friedrich Schiller. The Labofii would add that when our playing builds joyful communities of rebellion, our humanity is perfected.

“Direct Action Gets the Goods!” was the infamous slogan of the International Workers of the World (IWW), the anarchist union that swept across the USA in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They experienced time and again that direct action works, that it costs the industrialists money and thus hurts them where they are most fragile, forcing them to fold to social movement pressure. A year and a half after the Climate Camp packed up from the banks of the river, the plans for a new power station was shelved and the old one was knocked down.

<sup>25</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “Politics in the Theatre”, in Kuhn, Tom/Giles, Steve/Silberman, Marc (eds.), *Brecht on Performance. Messingkauf and Modelbooks*, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2015, p. 255.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Lesley Chamberlain, *The arc of utopia. The beautiful story of the Russian revolution*, Reaktion Books, 2017, p. 41



The victorious team's joy of the GRRR © Kristian Buus



Coal is no longer burnt on those drained marshlands, the molecules of CO<sub>2</sub> that remain active for 1000 years will no longer rise from that place and wreck our climate. To us at the Labofii, this is the work of art, grace embodied: the returning of the complexities of life to a space that was once dedicated simply to the production of money and human technology, building spaces that privilege difference, diversity and the weaving of complex relationships between human and more-than-human forms of life over the monocultures of capital.

In 2015, when Paris hosted the UN Conference of Parties (COP) on Climate Change, climate art was cool once again, and the *art as we know it* institutions brought out their global stars. Eliasson's *Ice Watch*, as mentioned at the start of this article, took pride of place. Whilst *art as we know it* asked its spectators to contemplate the disaster, we did not want to enable people to look at ice liquefying but to encourage them to engage in what would help stop the causes of the ice melting in the first place. By 2015 the climate discourse and the Paris summit itself had been totally taken over by corporate interests, many of the summit sponsors, such as toxic car makers Renault and French coal, gas and uranium burning electricity provider EDF also sponsored art events, such as philosopher Bruno Latour and architects scenographers raumlabor's *Theatre of Negotiations* at the Nanterre-Amandiers theatre. Some art seemed to be directly enabling a vast greenwashing operation, cleaning the dirty logos of climate wrecking corporations, doing the job of public relations companies for cheap, having their value extracted to promote the myth of green Capitalism. To us, there was nothing graceful about that.

Instead, we decided to turn the Climate Summit into the stage for the world's biggest civil disobedience game, entitled *Climate Games* – which would take place online and in the streets, with teams taking creative actions against climate criminals. With its tag line “*We are nature defending ourselves*”, *Climate Games* was developed collectively, a collaboration of hackers, gamers, artists and activists during a series of week long hackathons, taking place in numerous art institutions – from the Berliner Festspiele to Artsadmin in London, the

Vooruit in Ghent to the Lieu Unique in Nantes – which became places to rehearse, plan and design actions that aimed to bend reality.

When the games were launched in December 2015, as the world's leaders arrived in Paris, 120 teams had signed up using the anonymous website, despite the state of emergency declared in France following the terrorist attacks a month earlier which banned all demonstrations for weeks. As the conference unfolded, 225 actions against corporations linked to fossil fuels took place across the world. Each team had put “play zones” onto the map, then uploaded reports of their action. Like in all good games, there were prizes, and these were voted by all the players. This included the most efficient action, the funniest or the most courageous one, or the one that showed most solidarity with other teams.

A winner was the Belgian team Zoological Ensemble for the Liberation of Nature (their French acronym EZLN is a hat tip to the Zapatista insurgency), who dressed as animals, trees and vegetables and invaded Volkswagen show rooms covering the brand new cars with “nature” in the form of autumn leaves, whilst dancing to the sound track of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Formed especially for the

*Climate Games*, the EZLN continues to be one of the most creative and effective collectives smudging the line between art and activism in Europe. Another one of the teams printed the scientific basis of the conference, the IPCC report, onto brand new toilet paper and put the rolls into the toilets of the heavily guarded conference hall. Meanwhile an international team, armed with allen keys that open the advertising spaces of bus stops, commissioned numerous artists to design posters that were then illegally inserted into 600 bus stops overnight. One team blocked the huge coal mining machines in the open cast mines of Germany and on the last days of the games, a team of one pretended to be a tourist going up the Eiffel Tower and used his crutches (he really did have a broken leg!) to hide a pirate radio transmitter that beamed out rebel messages from the top of Paris' landmark.

Most of the teams did not “aim to inspire action for climate”<sup>27</sup> as *Ice Watch* claimed, they *did* take action, transforming worlds with their disobedient bodies, without mediation but with audacity and courage.

**27** [bit.ly/2YyWkKE](http://bit.ly/2YyWkKE)

See also Klaxon 12: *Reconfiguring Ecological Imaginaries*, p. 14.

[bit.ly/2YAXrtv](http://bit.ly/2YAXrtv)



The IPCC report printed on toilet roll, placed in the toilets of the conference hall during the COP21 in Paris for the *Climate Games* © Teresa Borasino  
Klaxon 13 - TAKING ACTION WITH THE LIVING



Of course not everyone is able to be active on the “front lines”, to be openly disobedient. Many of us are not psychologically suited for it, many have life circumstances that restrict the capacity to take such risk as being arrested. But everyone can be part of building a culture of rebellion, a set of values that embrace, encourage and promote political transformation. It is about learning to no longer “play safe” but instead identifying what one can do from wherever s/he is in order to support all those who are actively fighting.

A year after the *Climate Games* we moved to the ZAD (zone to defend) of Notre-Dame-des-Landes, in Western France, where a struggle against an international airport for the city of Nantes was coming to a peak and illustrating the power of a culture of rebellion in an extraordinary way. This “laboratory of commoning” situated on a territory of 4000 acres was once a place that French politicians called an “outlaw zone”, “lost to the republic”. In 2009, the struggle involving local farmers and villagers had already been going for 40 years, but people who had visited the Kingsnorth Climate Camp in 2008 had taken that inspiration across the channel, and France’s first Climate Camp set up on the wetlands. After the week long camp packed up, some people stayed and squatted the land and empty farmhouses and learnt to grow food, build incredible architecture and live life in common with the human and more-than-human inhabitants of the land, as a creative living barricade against the climate wrecking infrastructure. Meanwhile the entire movement kept the fight in every way possible.

When in January 2018, the French government finally cancelled the airport, it was obvious that the victory did not happen by itself, it took a rich composition of opponents, and a culture of rebellion to support them. On one of the squatted farms was a banner that read “*Pas de barricadières sans cuisiniers*” (no women on the barricades without men in the kitchen), to remind everyone that a strong social movement will always need all roles to be fulfilled, from the most spectacular to the most seemingly mundane. Every revolution has been held by the art of care and a culture of rebellion be it cooks, medics, legal support, media relations, child care, safe places to rest or hide, etc. When



A specially commissioned poster inserted illegally on a bus stop during the COP 21 in Paris for the *Climate Games* © Brandalism



EZLN (Ensemble Zoologique de Libération de la Nature) © RR





EZLN (Ensemble Zoologique de Libération de la Nature) © RR

squatted dwellings were at risk of being evicted, local farmers organised so that cattle could be looked after whilst others took turns to come with their tractors and defend them. Residents from surrounding villages offered beds, showers and food to those who had been on the barricades when military operations struck and were resisted. Supporters from afar sent clothes, money or medical supplies; doctors tended wounds, lawyers offered legal advice, mechanics fixed vehicles, carpenters built cabins and houses; naturalists and scientists helped make an inventory of all the species threatened on the land and set in place legal challenges for endangered species, welders from the St Nazaire ship yards helped build an illegal working lighthouse on the very place where the control tower of the airport was planned... All worked for free to ensure that every aspect of the fight was covered.

Cultures of rebellion can take so many shapes, and sometimes, can take an unexpected twist. We write this piece in 2020 during the hottest summer on record, from our home on exactly where the duty free shop of the airport should have been, had people not stepped out of their roles and refused

to follow the laws of a government that wanted to suck these wetlands dry and cover them in concrete. As we write, a new form of rebellion has taken the world by surprise, co-designed by K pop (Korean popular music) fans, using public virtual tools to have real effects on the territory of the enemy. They have organised their communities of tens of thousands to torpedo white supremacist events. These teenagers who spend most of their lives on screen posting billions of tweets with dance routines and futile memes have actually become experts at social media. They know how to play the algorithms so as to boost their own messages where they want. When George Floyd was killed by a cop kneeling on his neck for almost 9 minutes, the worldwide fury that erupted flooded the streets and the cyber space. #BlackLivesMatter and #BlackOutTuesday trended social media for days, which was not without triggering some angry response from white supremacist users who countered with their own #WhiteLivesMatter or #WhiteOutWednesday. And so, the supposedly apolitical and frivolous K pop crowd rallied and took over the racist hashtags by drowning them with memes and music videos, so that when looking up for those tags you went

through an inexhaustible stream of performances and pictures of their favourite artists.

Empowered by their success, they struck again a few weeks later, by forging a powerful alliance with "alt tiktok", a queer counter subculture to the mainstream side of the video platform, in order to sink Trump's rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma. When the presidential campaign announced that tickets could be booked by phone, a few users saw an unmissable opportunity: reserve a seat, never show up and most importantly encourage everyone one else to do so. Except that when you are social media savvy, "everyone else" can actually become almost "everyone else". One of the first post suggesting the strategy was liked over 707 000 times and viewed over 2 million times. It was so successful that despite Trump boasting about millions of tickets being booked and the entire rally being organised on that basis (with overflow events planned outside the arena), only a few thousands supporters turned up, the stadium was two third empty and the President was very visibly humiliated.

The use of social media can also be more straightforward, as archaeologist



Sarah Parcak demonstrated.<sup>28</sup> The Egyptologist decided to put her expertise in ancient obelisks and how they were raised to good use. On June 1<sup>st</sup>, amid the same anti-racist demonstrations, she gave step-by-step directions on how to bring down racist monuments over a series of a dozen tweets,<sup>29</sup> illustrated with explicative diagram, safety instructions and advice to keep good rhythm. It is difficult to know whether people actually followed the instructions, but it certainly helped a great

deal legitimising the numerous topplings of supremacist statues all over the world.

***“Why make an installation about refugees being stuck at the border when you could design tools to cut through the fences?”***

Cultures of rebellion can be clandestine too, but not necessarily underground. A friend was chatting to municipal street workers in Nantes in 2014, following a riot against the

airport project. They were re-fitting cobblestones that had been dug up from the pavement. Noticing that they were putting very little mortar between the stones, our friend enquired gently. “You never know when they could be useful again”, responded the street worker, with a wink and a smile.

**28** cf. Our article Jalons – “The fine art of iconoclasm”, by Isabelle Fremeaux, p.10.

**29** [bit.ly/3i401j3](https://bit.ly/3i401j3)



The ZAD lighthouse, erected on the very place where the airport control tower was to be built © John Jordan



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About 10 years ago, scientists identified 15 potential tipping points in the Earth system that could spell disaster.<sup>30</sup>

The classic example of a tipping point that causes a feedback mechanism is when ice melts in the Arctic. White ice reflects heat, dark rock underneath absorbs it, the more the ice melts the hotter the area becomes and so the more ice melts. Today, there is evidence that 9 of these feedback mechanisms are already active. *"If damaging tipping cascades can occur and a global tipping point cannot be ruled out, then this is an existential threat to civilisation"* the

*"Why not dissolve art back to its ancient roots in ritual—the age old theatre of magic, where communities of bodies perform a desire that is so intense and focused, that it bends reality?"*

It feels that a much more hopeful tipping point in the world of *art as we know it* could occur, if artists increasingly joined movements and applied their creativity to them rather than *art as we know it*, and if more art institutions opened their doors to nurture real cultures of rebellion and closed their doors to toxic corporate machines of the capitalocene.

Why make a dance piece about the coming food riots when your skills as a choreographer could help crowds of rebels move through the streets to avoid the police? Why design a mural about the violence of debt when you could be organising ways for communities to be less dependent on the dictatorship of the markets? Why make an installation about refugees being stuck at the border when you could design tools to cut through the fences? Why make a sound work in a forest about the

30 [bit.ly/3ggfmwe](https://bit.ly/3ggfmwe)

31 [bit.ly/30kescH](https://bit.ly/30kescH)

**Sarah Parcak** @indyfromspace · Jun 1  
PSA For ANYONE who might be interested in how to pull down an obelisk\* safely from an Egyptologist who never ever in a million years thought this advice might come in handy

\*might be masquerading as a racist monument I dunno

5.6K 32K 85.5K

**Sarah Parcak** @indyfromspace · Jun 1  
My Bona Fides: I'm an Egyptologist. I have worked in Egypt for 20 years and know a lot about ancient Egyptian architecture. Especially how they raised obelisks.

344 542 10.8K

**Sarah Parcak** @indyfromspace · Jun 1  
The key to pulling one down is letting gravity work 4 you. Chances are good the obelisk extends into the ground a bit, so you want to get CHAINS NOT ROPE (it's 2020 AD not BC let metal work for you) extended tightly around the top (below pointy bit) and 1/3 down forming circles

162 998 12.3K

**Sarah Parcak** @indyfromspace · Jun 1  
For every 10 ft of monument, you'll need 40+ people. So, say, a 20 ft tall monument, probably 60 people. You want strong rope attached to the chain---rope easier to hold onto versus chain. EVERYONE NEEDS TO BE WEARING GLOVES FOR SAFETY (there is a lot of safety first)

199 895 11.8K

**Sarah Parcak** @indyfromspace  
@indyfromspace

You probably want 150+ ft of rope x 2...you'll want to be standing 30 feet away from obelisk so it won't topple on you (your safety! first!). This gives enough slack for everyone to hold on to rope, alternating left right left right. Here's the hard part...pulling in unison

3:48 AM · Jun 1, 2020 · Twitter Web App

501 Retweets and comments 8K Likes

**Sarah Parcak** @indyfromspace · Jun 1  
Replying to @indyfromspace  
You have two groups, one on one side, one opposite, for the rope beneath the pointy bit and the rope 1/3 down. You will need to PULL TOGETHER BACK AND FORTH. You want to create a rocking motion back and forth to ease the obelisk from its back.

**Sarah Parcak** @indyfromspace · Jun 1  
I recommend a rhythmic song. YOU WILL NEED SOMEONE WITH A LOUDSPEAKER DIRECTING. There can be only one person yelling. Everyone will be alternating on rope left right left right not everyone on the same side. No one else near the obelisk! Safety first!

67 519 9.2K

**Sarah Parcak** @indyfromspace · Jun 1  
Start by a few practice pulls to get into it. Think of it like a paused tug of war, pull, wait 2, 3, 4, 5 PULL wait 2, 3 4,5. PULL AS ONE, PAUSE 5 SECONDS, you'll notice some loosening, keep up the pattern...you may need more people, get everyone to pull!

45 390 7.3K

**Sarah Parcak** @indyfromspace · Jun 1  
Just keep pulling till there's good rocking, there will be more and more and more tilting, you have to wait more for the obelisk to rock back and time it to pull when it's coming to you. Don't worry you're close!

47 367 7.1K

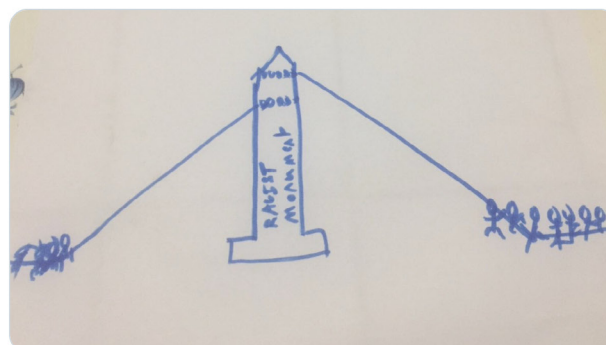
**Sarah Parcak** @indyfromspace · Jun 1  
WATCH THAT SUMBITCH TOPPLE GET THE %&\* OUT OF THE WAY IT WILL SMASH RUN AWAY FROM DIRECTION.

Then celebrate. Because #BlackLivesMatter and good riddance to any obelisks pretending to be ancient Egyptian obelisks when they are in fact celebrating racism and white nationalism

234 1.5K 21.7K

**Sarah Parcak** @indyfromspace · Jun 1  
OK because this is twitter I need to clarify: PLEASE DO NOT PULL DOWN ACTUAL ANCIENT EGYPTIAN OBELISKS that was not the point of this thread.

**Sarah Parcak** @indyfromspace · Jun 1  
Here's a rough schematic. I note this is experimental archaeology in action! Just my professional Hot Take and you may need more people, longer rope, etc. everything depends on monument size.



Sarah Parcak's Twitter feed, instructions for knocking down an obelisk  
Klaxon 13 - TAKING ACTION WITH THE LIVING

silence left where there were once songbirds, when you could be creating an ingenious way of sabotaging the pesticide factories that are annihilating them? Why not dissolve art

back to its ancient roots in ritual — the age old theatre of magic, where communities of bodies perform a desire that is so intense and focused, that it bends reality? Why continue to

extract life when we could be giving back to it?

## The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination

### John Jordan & Isabelle Fremeaux



Art activist John Jordan has been described as a “*magician of rebellion*” by the press and a “*Domestic Extremist*” by the UK police. Co-founder of Reclaim the Streets (1995-2000) and the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, he is also co-author of *We Are Everywhere: The irresistible rise of global anti-capitalism* (2003, Verso). Isabelle Fremeaux is a popular educator, action researcher and deserter of the academy.

Co-authors of the film-book *Les Sentiers de l'utopie* (Zones/ La Découverte, 2011), they coordinate The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (Labofii), through which they work in diverse contexts from museums to squatted social centres, from international theatre festivals to climate action camps. The Labofii brings artists and activists together to design tools and acts of disobedience, infamous for launching a rebel raft regatta to shut down a coal fired power station, turning bikes into machines of disobedience, using ants to sabotage banks and refusing the attempts at censorship by the BP sponsored Tate gallery.

[bit.ly/3gDzhp3](http://bit.ly/3gDzhp3)

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# TO ACT AS IF WE WERE ALREADY FREE

Christophe Meierhans

**Performer artist, Christophe Meierhans joined Extinction Rebellion Belgium after reading the *Petit manuel de collapsologie*<sup>32</sup> by Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens. He has discovered that artistic practices oriented more toward users than spectators, such as those practiced by the international civil disobedience movement, are differentiated by the scale of their operations: they operate at a scale of 1:1. As such, they demonstrate an efficiency, which, even if not radically transforming the surrounding world, nevertheless attests that political protest involves partaking, in the here and now, in constructing the world to which it aspires. To act as if we were already free is the founding gesture of freedom...**

## NEED FOR REALITY

I have always liked to consider the theatre as the forum where the potential to change reality could be activated, a place where we would go to open ourselves up to ways of seeing the world unknown to us. The place where we can let our guard down and willingly allow ourselves be spirited away, where we deliberately suspend our mistrust in order to enable other perspectives take shape, where we let ourselves blindly be guided by others.

Although without any training in this field, I chose the theatre as my artistic practice primarily because of the first twenty minutes of a performance. Twenty minutes in which, theoretically, anything is possible: spectators don't know what to expect. Generally full of goodwill, they free up a given amount of their time all while nourishing the hope that whatever happens there will somehow be

worthwhile. So, anything that happens during those opening twenty minutes enjoys exceptional credence. As spectators, we need to take this time to devise a framework that will then enable us to render judgment. Only then, we might just get up and leave the hall...

In a certain way, I've been exploiting the theatre for a decade or so. This instrumentalisation of spectators' desires to be spirited away; this wilful abuse of their credulity has somehow transformed into an opportunity to advance my own progressive agenda: to redefine our political and democratic habits, our relationship to money, the way in which we build a community... Over the years, my performances have thus increasingly adopted elements and methods borrowed directly from everyday life, seeking to make the theatre disappear, all while maintaining the suspension of judgment that it enables. In creating participatory performances, I seek to erase that boundary between fiction

and reality in the hope that a contagion takes place; that the open-mindedness that theatre generates might lead to concrete shifts in reality beyond the bounds of the theatre, however tenuous such changes may be. A highly idealistic aspiration, one might say, but without which, I would struggle to find a reason to pursue this work.

As the ecological disaster fully unfolds and underpins the urgency and depth of the systemic changes it requires (or rather, as I slowly awaken to this realisation), the need to verify and evaluate the potential changes that my artistic work might ultimately enable has become all the more compelling. Caught up in this need for reality, certain questions need answers: who are my audience? How much does the artistic bubble isolate us from what is substantially

<sup>32</sup> Pablo Servigne, Raphaël Stevens, *Comment tout peut s'effondrer: Petit manuel de collapsologie à l'usage des générations présentes*, Seuil, 2015.



happening in this world? Is my work really useful? Will it bring about effective change, or is it merely a fiction I regale myself with in order to justify my efforts? Is executing an artistic performance really the most effective way to contribute to transforming the world on which our survival depends?

## POINT OF NO RETURN

Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens's *Comment tout peut s'effondrer: Petit manuel de collapsologie à l'usage des générations présentes* (How Everything Can Collapse. A Manual for Our Times), has one salient quality: it succeeds in confronting readers with the disastrous reality of our current ecological predicament, without affording them the opportunity to look the other way. No angle has been rounded off, no false hope suggested: the likelihood of the imminent collapse of our modern thermo-industrial societies is now close to a certainty regardless of what we

humans do from now on. Failure to take this reality into account when imagining the future is not alone naive, but utterly irresponsible. Not only does this popular science text render complex information more accessible, it also serves as a manual to assist those who receive this bad news throughout the various phases of psychological upheaval that such an awareness triggers. Readers are not left to their own devices in how to come to terms with this challenging information. This book helps us resist the protective

***“What XR is attempting to do with the ecological crisis is more or less a similar operation as that used by theater, though upended: its objective is to make people realise that the impending collapse, which many still hope is a fiction, has long been very real indeed.”***

reflex that makes us look for a way to dispose of this disturbing information at any cost – irrespective of whether we consider it a boon or a curse. As far as I'm concerned, this manual truly hits the nail on the head. Reading it was a pivotal moment: it snatched the carpet from under my feet and forced me to shift positions and search for a renewed equilibrium. Soon thereafter, I attended the founding meeting of the Belgian branch

of Extinction Rebellion (XR), the international civil disobedience movement.

Practicing civil disobedience involves accepting consequences: arrest, police violence, financial sanction, police surveillance, and public exposure to name but a few. For me, taking action was a huge personal challenge; it nonetheless afforded me a tangible and direct response to the loss of confidence in the stability of a world that suddenly seems to be falling asunder. At an individual level, direct action is a way to shake off denial and cynicism, while also helping to avoid plunging into despair. More generally, the fact that XR was initiated elsewhere, its spectacular beginnings, as well as the way in which its initiators have made its ownership available to anyone, just like an open source code, have all played a vital role. It's possible to jump on the bandwagon and take action without first having to confront the difficult task of defining for ourselves an identity and a purpose that can unite enough people.



XR London's action on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 2020, during the coronavirus crisis: thousands of children's shoes are left in Trafalgar Square to call on the government to act on the climate crisis © XR



Against this backdrop, I felt for the first time that my particular background and artistic skills might be of real benefit to something outside the art world. Although this transition happened rather quickly and brought about a somewhat radical change of environment and priorities, it has not been abrupt for all that. Indeed, participating in the realisation of XR's actions proved to be an activity not unlike staging artistic performances. Both require an extensive sensitivity; both seek to address more than one level of our being. Both approaches work indifferently with images, signs, symbols, sounds, attitudes, temporality, relationships, situations, and so forth with the aim of breaking through layers of our social norms and constructs in order to awaken dormant, or novel, aspects of our existence.

## THE THEATRE OF POLITICS

Whenever spectators purchase a ticket to the theatre, they do so in the hope that the fiction presented to them will be persuasive enough to be credible (here, fiction can broadly be understood as anything offered to the

public, be it a story, an interactive device, a collective process, a choreography). In other words, the objective is to enable the audience to yield to it and abandon the rules of the outside world for the duration of the performance. What XR is attempting to do with the ecological crisis is more or less a similar operation, though up-ended: its objective is to make people realise that the impending collapse, which many still hope will be a fiction, has long been very real indeed.

For XR, as for theatre, rational arguments and data don't suffice. The contemporary political world seems to increasingly call upon theatrical methods in its communication with citizens. Any means available seem good to blur notions such as truth and reality and to generate an alternative and imaginary version of the world that better adapts to dominant economic interests, to the political parties programs, or even to individual ambitions. In this respect, Donald Trump is not alone in invoking "alternative facts." Public statements by Flemish Minister-President Jan Jambon about asylum seekers using their survivors' allowances to become property owners is but one of multiple examples in which rumours or fabrications have played a leading

role in political debate. Here, just as in theatre, one doesn't need to balk at lies, fiction, or special effects in order to achieve the desired result. The amplification factor of media relaying this "information" suffices to render it effective. In such circumstances, to face the urgency of an impending ecological collapse requires generating a counter-narrative in order to be able to respond to this multi-dimensionality. Everything seems to happen as though the entire spectrum of human expression (emotions, poetry, images, music, empathy, and so on) had to be mobilised in order to deconstruct the theatrical engineering of incumbent governments and political parties.

## TRACTION ON REALITY

As artists, we devote our lives to producing fictions of every kind. So, logically, shouldn't we be the best equipped to rebel against the pervasive suicidal narrative to which we all still cling, willy-nilly, and with so much angst? In many respects, the physical and mental activities carried out within XR from day to day and in my artistic practice are identical. Yet, the work I



Water cannons spray the demonstrators on the Place Royale in Brussels during XR Belgium's action "Royal Rebellion", in October 2019 © François Dvorak



do plays a wholly different role, both for me personally and for others who have come into contact with it.

In his book *Towards an Index of Usership*, Stephen Wright hints at the emergence of artistic practices that he calls de-ontologised. These practices are “characterised more than anything else by the scale of operations: they operate on the 1:1 scale. They are not scaled-down models (...) of potentially useful things or services (the kinds of tasks and devices that might well be useful if ever they were wrested from the neutering frames of artistic autonomy and allowed traction in the real). (...) 1:1 practices are both what they are and propositions of what they are.”<sup>33</sup>

For some time now, Wright’s phrase has resonated with me: “the kinds of tasks and devices that might well be useful if ever they were wrested from the neutering frames of artistic autonomy and allowed traction in the real.”... Devising and carrying out civil disobedience actions with XR is by no means Art. Indeed, should an XR action be perceived as an artistic operation, this would considerably weaken

its activist objective to directly impact reality in order to transform it. Even if such an action were declared or perceived as Art, its artistic autonomy would swiftly (and brutally) be disregarded by the police, once the action actually began to interfere with reality! Direct actions and artistic operations, however, do share multiple qualities, operating modes, effects and affects.

**“As artists, we devote our lives to producing fictions of every kind. So, logically, shouldn’t we be the best equipped to rebel against the pervasive suicidal narrative?”**

In October 2019, XR carried out “Royal Rebellion,” an act of civil disobedience in Brussels. On this occasion, a thousand or so participants took up positions in the middle of a road, blocking traffic in order to convene Popular Assemblies: many groups of about twenty people seated in a circle discussed different aspects of our collective response to the ecological crisis, each group being moderated by a qualified facilitator. Nothing in these groups’ activities or behaviour suggested non-compliance of the law.

Only the fact that they placed themselves in the middle of the road embodied a real blockade. These assemblies were authentic popular assemblies striving to involve large numbers of citizens in novel forms of democratic participation and to collectively tackle real-life problems. And yet, given that they obviously did not have to be convened right in the middle of the street, the assemblies were held there as a performance.

Blocking a street by means of a popular assembly instead of using classic methods (chains, barricades, sit-ins, etc.) afforded the action a poetic, visual and emotional dimension of a completely different order.

During the action, the police freed up the roadway through a totally disproportionate violent response; they arrested all participants and indiscriminately used tear gas, bludgeoning, and water cannons. As can be seen in this photo that circulated widely in the

**33** Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*

[bit.ly/3eX9TJf](https://bit.ly/3eX9TJf)



Town meetings on Place Royale in Brussels during XR Belgium's action “Royal Rebellion”, in October 2019 © Birdy Photography



media, the Brussels police chief Pierre Vandersmissen is standing right in front of one of the popular assemblies, ordering the sprinkler truck positioned right behind him to aim directly at a group of peaceful citizens seated nearby in a circle.

Infinitely more effective than any press release, this image speaks directly to our senses. The authorities' water-jet is directed at those who are trying to sound the fire alarm, rather than at the blaze itself. Nobody at XR anticipated let alone desired such a scene. Still, this image is deliberately and painstakingly staged. The type of sensitivity, care and experimental willpower invested in creating such an action is fully comparable to a process of artistic creation. And yet, by virtue of its ability to integrate the police's brutal intervention as part of its own narrative, the action succeeded in exerting a good deal of traction on reality.

## THE THEATRE OF OPERATIONS

Civil disobedience is an asymmetrical game whereby the assumption is that the power under challenge is immeasurably more powerful. By contrast, the traditional (authorised) demonstration is more of a kind of personified petition, whose leverage is no greater than its number of participants. Generally speaking, those demonstrations that succeed in provoking a radical undermining of the powers that be are those which, by-passing authorization, combine sufficient numbers with disobedience, and compel the authorities to expose themselves through reaction.

Erica Chenoweth states in her research on social disobedience that if 3.5% of the population defy a ban, that would suffice to make the contested power capitulate.<sup>34</sup> This figure

should be taken with a measure of caution, for it has been used somewhat excessively and out of context by several civil disobedience movements, including Extinction Rebellion. Nevertheless, this figure of 3.5% clearly indicates the asymmetry of power in which civil disobedience takes place. To challenge an established authority by breaking laws that binds us to its decisions is a direct and frontal challenge that forces any government to react, irrespective of how truly serious the violation might be. Tolerating disobedience would equally constitute a posture by the authorities, for such a response would ensure accountability and tacitly endorse the demands being made.

For XR, as for any other groups engaging in civil disobedience, acting in public space amounts to forcing the

<sup>34</sup> Erica Chenoweth, Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, Columbia University Press, 2011.



The "Red Brigade", created by a Bristol street theater company, offers scenes and sequences mimed in slow motion during Extinction Rebellion's actions. "Red symbolizes the blood we share with all other species," they say. Here during an action by XR London in October 2019 © Sibylla Bam Bam



actors of power to come on stage. The media, public opinion, government, political parties, the police are all characters playing an improvised piece. By organising an act of civil disobedience, a scenario is submitted to the various actors, the challenge being to compel them to play their respective roles, all while deliberately leaving them the task of coming up with their own lines. The absence of any pre-written dramaturgy affords civil disobedience its effectiveness: no one can predict its outcome. Consequently, it's worth the effort, for to effect change is invariably doable.

Once public space is itself defined by a legal framework that distinguishes that which is communal from that which is private, civil disobedience can challenge this order of things and redefine the very nature of public space. In occupying a particular bank branch in order to denounce its harmful investment policy, for instance, we are demanding that the private space where commercial decisions are taken be subjugated to debate and public decision. Here, physical space serves as leverage for activating a symbolic space. How the actors involved negotiate the hazards engendered by occupying the bank determines the

outcome: who will take whose side and by what means? Here, as in classical theatre, everyone immediately knows how the episode will end: those occupying will be forced to leave the premises thus allowing the bank's normal course of activities to resume. Everything plays out in the particular way through which the event will be conducted; everything depends on the particular light that will be given to this expected sequence.

Civil disobedience is not naive, nobody seriously entertains the idea that an isolated act will succeed in overthrowing the established order. Rather, its aim is to gradually introduce movement exactly where the status quo is blocking necessary changes. The more an action manages to pose a dilemma for those in power, the stronger the movement we can hope to create. The police's excessive repression of activists, for instance, frequently culminates in turning against the political power that endorsed the repression; this then leaves activists greater room for manoeuvre for any future actions.

Civil disobedience is also built upon the prospect of a "big night," however. The possibility that through reverberations from one small movement to

the next, we can eventually reach a tipping point at which the powers in place topple. For even if we know the likely outcome of a game that an action sets in motion, it nonetheless remains an improvisation in which each actor remains free in their choices, where the complexity of relationships underlying the scene is such that it generates something unforeseen.

## PUBLIC ACTION

One characteristic of XR's large-scale actions is that, although illegal, XR generally announces them in advance. They are not based upon a surprise effect, for they are organised with almost total transparency. Police authorities are notified in advance, as are media outlets. The rationale, the objective, the itinerary as well as various other practical aspects such as place and time are made public in the weeks preceding the action. The action's illegal nature is specifically described with precision in order to underline its deliberate nature and to highlight the awareness that participants have concerning their future deed. Given that participants are willing to suffer the consequences,

the action may openly contravene the law. Such a declaration of intent constitutes a direct defiance of the established order; its authority and the legitimacy of its decisions are publicly questioned. This, in turn, calls for the powers that be to react. And yet, the predictability of the action puts the authorities on notice to develop a duly considered response that will expose them to a much greater degree than were they simply reacting to an emergency.

Announcing the action beforehand energises the public sphere in anticipation of the action itself, via the media, political interventions, potential controversies and the ensuing discussions. The action's timeline as well as its public exposure are thus considerably extended. Hence, even if ultimately no action took place, it would still become the subject of open public debate.

## ACT AS IF WE WERE ALREADY FREE

Although civil disobedience fully belongs to the reality of public space, it still operates at a symbolic level (unless, of course, we are dealing with one of those truly rare moments of rupture such the collapse of a regime, the reneging of a particular law, or the closure of a factory...). To occupy a coal-mine and shut it down for a day, as the activists at Ende Gelände in Germany do, is a truly tangible intervention with real economic repercussions for the mine's operators. In itself, such an action is unlikely to effectively force an end to the mine's activities, however. Such a temporary stoppage remains a symbolic gesture that merely hints at the possibility of a total closure. Still, in making a part, however small, of what one is ultimately fighting for a reality, such tactics make it possible to outstrip the power that is being challenged. We are no longer in a position to wait, for instead of hoping the authorities will comply with our demands, we put our demands directly into practice. In other words, by means of forewarning, the act of protest in civil disobedience participates in constructing the world to which it aspires.

The last of XR's three core demands requires governments to set up citizens' assemblies selected at random in order to determine how society should tackle ecological collapse. This is exactly what participants of the "Royal Rebellion" action put into practice. Undoubtedly, those assemblies that convened on the street during the action had no democratic legitimacy and their decisions lacked any form of legislative power. Those assemblies practiced the art of "as if," just as children do, just as we all still do in the theatre, letting ourselves be carried away in the imagination, without being disturbed by the awakened consciousness that we are actually dealing with a fiction. Linking civil disobedience and forewarning, we can directly confront the imagination with the conditions of the realisation of what has been imagined and breach the boundary between the two. To act "as if" belongs to a similar level of reality as that of police repression, political rhetoric, and press commentary. As David Graeber points out, it's all about "*insist on acting as if we were already free*"<sup>35</sup> against the apparent immutability of the world.

***"By making a part, however small, of what we are ultimately fighting for a reality – instead of waiting and hoping the authorities will comply with our demands – we participate, by means of forewarning, in constructing the world to which we aspire."***

At the time of writing this article, final preparations are underway for XR's first major act of civil disobedience in Belgium since the outbreak of covid-19. In less than a week, with the action "Our Future – Our Choices!" an inauguration ceremony will be organised to rename an iconic Brussels skyscraper. Officially called the "Finance Tower," this building not only houses the Belgian Federal Ministry of Finance, but also the ministries of Immigration and Asylum, Health and the North Sea: a state of affairs that neatly encapsulates the rationale that currently guides government priorities. The action was publicly announced two weeks ago: everyone has been alerted to our intention and the police have certainly been preparing to block access to the tower.

Two days before the announced action, however, the large silver letters forming the word FINANCE on the skyscraper's façade will be secretly

unhooked, leaving only the word TOWER visible. The next day, a letter to the government will duly inform them that the disappearance of the letters is merely a temporary measure, for substitute letters will be brought along during the ceremony to replace the word FINANCE with the word RESILIENCE. Moreover, the original letters will subsequently be handed back to the government in order that they be exhibited in a museum.

This action, albeit symbolic, thus points to a world where the acceptance of the reality of ecological collapse will be taken as fact and where the subjugation of all areas of collective life to the economic imperative will be a relic of the past. We're unsure whether such a world will ever come to pass, but we can act as if it already has, with all the insistence of a radio alarm on a difficult morning.

## OPENING UP

XR's demand to establish randomly selected citizens' assemblies in order to determine how to grapple with ecological collapse calls for participation. It has not advocated any specific solution, however. Its members can be pro-solar energy, vegan, pro-nuclear, degrowthist or even defenders of green capitalism; what unites them is a burgeoning awareness of the reality of the ongoing ecological disaster, of the urgent need for drastic changes in our lifestyles and, more significantly in terms of our current objective, a hope that we rediscover the value of communality. If, as all the social, racial and economic inequalities that plague our world blatantly reveal, we are clearly not all in the same boat, we are all nonetheless traversing the same storm. The tenuous possibility of salvation lies in our ability to confront it together. Hence, regardless of the solutions considered, they can only be a solution if they are the result of inventing a new way of being together as a society that is inclusive of everybody's individual aspects. The ecological

<sup>35</sup> David Graeber, *The Democracy Project* (Intended title: "As if We Were Free"), Spiegel & Grau, New York, 2013.



XR Belgium's action at the Tour des Finances in Brussels in June 2020 © François Dvorak

cause is one of social justice and democracy.

XR operates on the premise that while we often hold unequal positions in a toxic system, each and every one of us are an integral part of that system that we are striving to change. Hence, exposing those responsible for this toxicity will in itself never suffice. They, too, will need to be a part of the solution. As such, XR's identity could be described as open source. No central committee is called upon to rule upon the admissibility of such and such a group, or of such or such action as being able to legitimately claim to be part of the movement. Any action can be carried out under the banner of XR, any individual can claim to be a "rebel," the sole condition being that he or she adhere to the movement's ten fundamental values.

Participation is thus not only at the core of XR's demands, but it is also the driving principle behind how it operates and in how it organises itself. Here, as in the theatre, however, participation only works when transparent and fair. The clown randomly choosing an audience member in order to have them suffer a hard time amid the laughter of other spectators is the worst example in this respect. Here, control lies entirely in the hands

of the clown: he instrumentalises the licence he grants the volunteer as a generator of the material (the clumsiness) that he needs to execute his dramaturgy. In this instance, participation (if one could call it such) empties participants of their capacity to respond, for the stakes, the risks, and the objectives are not shared. For participation to be generative of a dimension that goes beyond individual interests and capacities involved, all cards must be laid on the table.

In addition to being a tactical tool in communications and an effective source of political pressure, the transparent planning of actions opens the way for a much more inclusive mobilisation. Furthermore, announcing an action invariably works as an invitation. Rather than being spectacular performances executed by reckless activists, XR strives to think of its actions as participatory devices. Despite the often tense and potentially risky nature of civil disobedience, the idea is to conceive of direct action as a welcoming space, as a place where the greatest number of different people can feel that they have been invited. This remains XR's greatest challenge, for to date it has been a relative failure. While the movement involves a wide spectrum of the population and has succeeded in

mustering a group of people who probably would never have met otherwise to work intensely together (young adults and retirees, bourgeois families and leftist activists, civil servants and artists...), it remains predominantly white and middle class. Evidently, civil disobedience is much more affordable for those who enjoy the privilege of all their rights as citizens, whose skin colour guarantees that their rights are respected, as well as for those economically and socially able to devote time and energy to civil disobedience (childcare, nights spent in jail, payment of fines, legal consequences, training, organisational meetings, and so forth.)

Hence, behind the membrane of that artistic bubble, which I feel I've barely pierced in order to come into contact with the reality of political and social transformation, stand the transparent walls of a multitude of other bubbles that limit the transmission of the movements that are generated there. For XR, as for any artistic practice, the potential in opening up, of creating robust alliances and of articulating its methods with other strategies is the decisive factor. Either it will then be effectively possible to gain traction in order to push back the boundaries of fiction and to gain ground on reality by transforming it, or we will



once again find ourselves confined within a privileged space which, instead of impacting reality, risks turning civil disobedience à la XR into a form of progressive middle-class pastime. Instead of scuppering privileges

and creating a more just and inclusive society that it is calling for, XR would then merely result in affording those participating a clear conscience, thereby resolving their psychological dilemma between denial and

depression, but at the same time de facto reinforcing inequality and privilege.

CM

## Christophe Meierhans



Christophe Meierhans (Geneva, 1977) has been developing a resolutely engaged form of theatre that is often participatory in character. *Some Use for Your Broken Clay Pots* invites the public to rethink the constitutional foundations of democracy, the anarchist cooking show *Verein zur Aufhebung des Notwendigen – à cent guerres de la paix dans le monde* as well as *Fondo Speculativo di Provvidenza* (with Luigi Coppola) have been transforming spectators into a political community that brings into play their individual responsibilities. With Ant Hampton he created *LA CHOSE*, an automated workshop-performance that initiates participants in the preparation of disruptive actions...

As of 2019, Christophe Meierhans has been putting his artistic practice to the service of ecological causes with the civil disobedience movement *Extinction Rebellion*. He was one of the associate artists at the *Nouveau Théâtre de Montreuil* in Paris during 2017-18, and is currently an artist-in-residence at the *Kaaitheatre* in Brussels (2017-2022).

# FUNGAL ATTACKS, SWIFTS, CORAL, AND BATS...

## WHEN ARTISTS TRANSFORM ALL THAT LIVES. AN INTERVIEW WITH LAURANNE GERMOND

Pascal Le Brun-Cordier

***Lauranne Germond, co-founder of the COAL Art and Ecology Association, talks to Pascal Le Brun-Cordier in order to introduce us to a dozen artists who, each in their unique fashion, are inventing new artistic terrains in which aesthetic practices, life sciences, ecological activism, individual and collective experiments, design and ancestral know-how intertwine... Firmly anchored in concrete realities, these creative endeavours strive to transform reality and view their efficiency exercised at multiple levels: they span everything from diagnosis to symbolic fixing-up, as well as education or improvement of living processes. However, it is primarily in the processes involved, often collective in nature, that the confrontation of techniques and knowledge achieves its optimal realisation and incentivises the establishment of new organisations. In turn, this transformation of reality operates on art's innate ecosystem, and ultimately toward transforming the prevailing social and economic models.***

**Pascal Le Brun-Cordier:** We devoted the previous issue of *Klaxon* to those artists who are working toward transforming our ecological imaginaries, artists such as Thierry Boutonnier, who won the 2010 COAL Art and Environment Prize and with whom you have been working. This current issue will focus more on artists who seek to transform not only our representations but more concretely our everyday circumstances, be they ecological, social, or political. What is your take on such approaches that fall within the scope of action art or activism?

**Lauranne Germond:** The matter of efficiency lies front and centre of the problems being tackled by ecological art; at one point or another, all those committed artists ask themselves this question. How to act so as to concretely change things? Tough question. Can we — should we — as an artist stretch beyond the sphere of the imaginary, the narrative, the symbolic? How can we bring into line our convictions, our research fields, our political commitments and our artistic output? How to overcome not only the limits of individual action, but also financial and legislative

obstacles? Environmental challenges are systemic in nature and play out on a scale over which a single individual has scarcely any control. Obviously, the smallest deed counts — as Lucy and Jorge Orta point out: “1 + 1 = 10 million.”<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the limits of the scale on which artistic practice operates can be frustrating. It remains a dilemma

<sup>36</sup> The artists Lucy + Jorge Orta have been working as a duo since 1992, exploring social and ecological themes through a wide variety of media: sculpture, painting, photography, video, drawing, short-lived interventions and performance...





for many artists who want to work, for instance, on the resilience of a particular ecosystem, or the transformation of critical situations from an ecological point of view: in terms of the scale of the problem a project's impact is often modest, and may even strike one as insignificant. Still, all these approaches, however tenuous, are real workshops for potential alternatives, micro-models whose power lies in this constantly evolving aesthetic, poetic and symbolic relationship to the world.

**PLBC:** Tell us about those artists who are following such an approach...

**LG:** Anthony Duchêne, the artist nominated for the 2020 COAL Prize, would be an example. He works together with winegrowers-*paysans* who are resisting the dictates of modern agriculture; they are striving to maintain, preserve and develop nature's balance by refusing chemical inputs. What is at stake with Duchêne's project is how on-site installations can foster innovative permaculture techniques that will boost the winegrowers' output, by providing eco-systemic services that have been identified by scientists.



For his project *J'enherbe le monde* (I seed the world),<sup>37</sup> Duchêne in tandem with the winegrowers has created not only artworks with rather unexpected shapes, but also installations embedded amidst their vines in order to make their role in preservation and in the development of biodiversity both visible and palpable. This project's starting point was scientific studies, *paysans*' know-how and an embrace of experimentation.

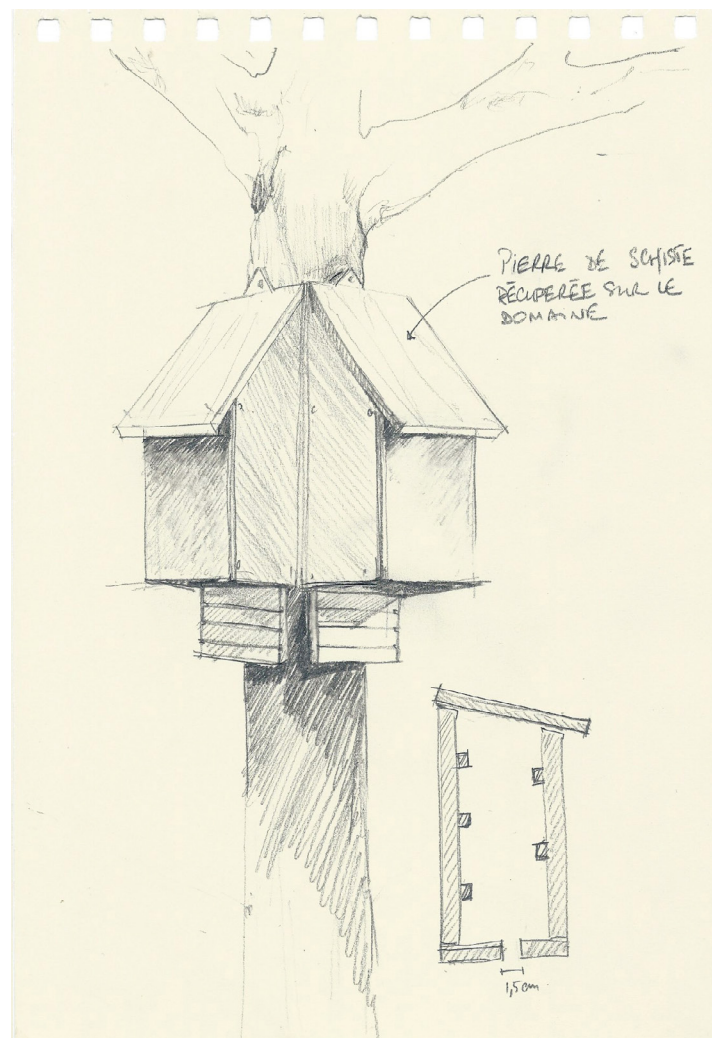
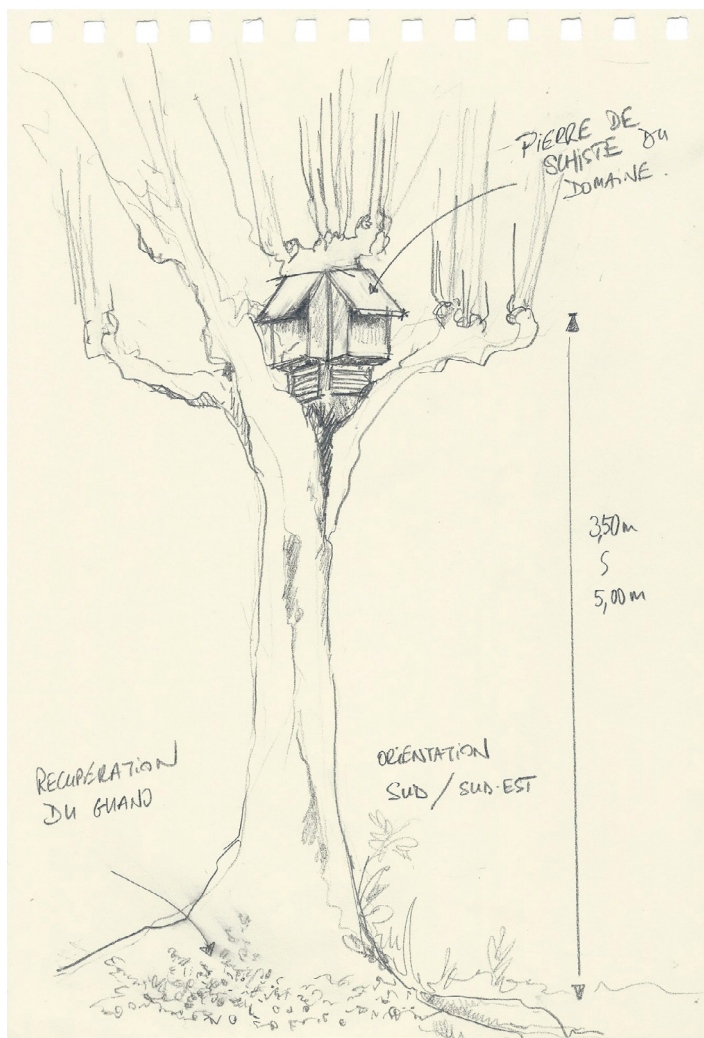
At Domaine Ledogar in the Corbières region, he employs sound diffusion in order to stimulate the vines' immune defence systems and to heal them through natural means against any fungal attacks without having to resort to any chemical solutions. He has been writing musical scores that follow the rhythm of the development of certain enzymes, using frequencies emitted during the synthesis of proteins by means of amino acids.

At Domaine Léon Barral (Faugères), he has created an artwork that can at once accommodate and retain the loyalty of bats, who, in turn, will be able to naturally fertilise the surrounding soils and organically fight the grape worm.

*J'enherbe le monde*, Jars buried in the vines, Anthony Duchêne, 2020 © Anthony Duchêne

<sup>37</sup> [bit.ly/3glXkc3](https://bit.ly/3glXkc3)





Artwork aimed at attracting bats in order to fight the grape worm in a natural way, reference sketch, Anthony Duchêne © Anthony Duchêne

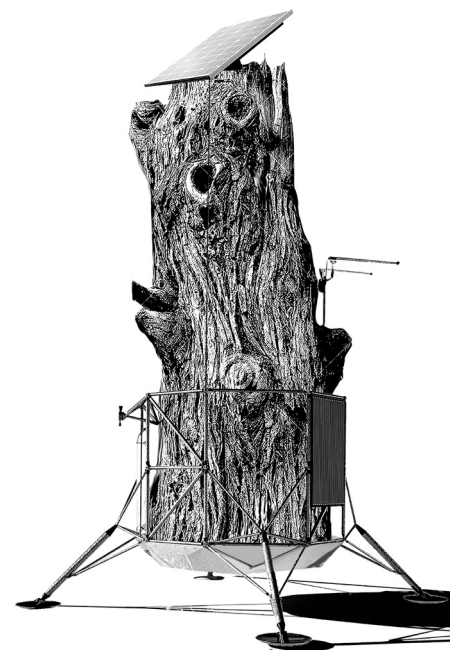
On another vineyard in Catalonia, Duchêne is planning to produce wine-making jars with clay extracted from the terroir itself in order to produce a typically endemic wine, as well as to bring an end to the exploitation of oak trees in the making of wine casks. The jars have been designed both with their aesthetic and functional dimension in mind. Duchêne explains that there has always been *"a playful and imaginary form in my work. Yet, also a medieval inspiration, for this period and its representation permeate rural life; an aspect I would like to espouse in my aesthetic approach, attentive to the values of ancestral practices that tend to resurface."*

While Duchêne has a relatively classic artistic output; on the hand, he draws, he makes works of art, and yet, he has these practices in situ, in dialogue with these winegrowers, making artistic objects that haven't been disseminated. His approach is based on the farmers' reality and needs; he wants to provide solutions to concrete problems.

**PLBC:** Victor Remère,<sup>38</sup> another artist nominated for the 2020 COAL Prize, is working with the French military forces...

**LG:** This work in progress fascinates me particularly in term of its purpose. Remère is an artist who wants to break loose from art's institutional frameworks, to work in places where art is not found, using surprising modes of collaboration, as in this case with the French Navy around military lands that have been turned into sanctuaries. These lands have turned out to be tremendous natural reserves for biodiversity. Given that they are exempt from any real estate pressure, remain inaccessible to the public, and are protected for military reasons, they constitute a major area of interest in terms of preserving flora and fauna.

Remère envisions that these lands, free from any human intrusion for the past 150 years, could become models for eco-management and a favourable breeding ground for germinating innovative defence strategies, but in this instance in the service of biodiversity. He has set out to discover such sites, in particular those on the Saint-Mandrier peninsula, in Toulon Harbour where he has been creating, in tandem with the French Navy that administers these lands, "laboratory zones" that combine scientific research, artistic practices, and agricultural know-how



Elec-Tronc. Study of the forms on the beehives for the "laboratory zones" in Saint-Mandrier-sur-Mer, Victor Remère, 2020 © Victor Remère





A sheep wearing a prototype of the bionic collar, Fernando García-Dory © Bionic Sheep project & Shepherd School / Fernando García-Dory

that serve the preservation of the Living. In particular, he wants to install a network of inter-linked wild beehives, designed as artistic, scientific and artisanal objects. A system for observing the hive's activities in real time will enable him to follow how this ecosystem evolves. On this aspect of the project, he is working with another artist who likewise is deeply committed to direct action, namely, Olivier Darné, bee-keeper and instigator of the *Ferme urbaine zone sensible* (Urban Farm Sensitive Zone) in Seine-Saint-Denis.

The focus of this project is to affirm that any artistic intervention can safeguard its autonomy and retain its specificity, by avoiding those protected spaces implemented by institutions, by cropping up where such interventions are least expected, all while mustering during their realisation all those most removed from contemporary art practices, whom Remère refers to as “those unscathed by art.”

Asked to how he would characterise his environmental commitment as an artist and citizen, Remère replies: “I’m doing my part!,” just like that hummingbird in the famous Native American legend.

Let me also mention Fernando García-Dory,<sup>39</sup> a Spanish artist who notably created a school for shepherds in Asturias; he has deeply invested himself in the transmission and safeguarding of pastoralism. His ultimate objective is to enable this rural way of life to survive and garner recognition, as well as to provide practical solutions to the problems encountered by shepherds, in particular through the use of technologies. His practice as an artist manifests itself partly through his activism in championing this revaluation of rural areas as laboratories for new social, economic, artistic and sustainable models. With his *Campo Adentro* project, García-Dory falls within our European network *La table et le territoire* that focuses on new artistic practices in food production and agriculture. As I see him, García-Dory belongs to the same movement as Victor Remère: the challenge they face is to break down the barriers between universes, to introduce once again ingenuity and creativity in unexpected places. This is where the artistic dimension expresses itself: not in a rationale

of producing objects, — this will always be somewhat deceptive for those who expect plastic forms — but rather in the spirit of social sculpture as advocated by Joseph Beuys.

**PLBC:** Similarly, Suzanne Husky is involved in rural life.<sup>40</sup>

**LG:** Yes, Husky is an artist who is also living through this personal dilemma between producing works of art and achieving efficiency through her practice and her lifestyle. She has been navigating a great deal from this one universe to the other, in alternative settings such as San Francisco or the Gers. She is currently deeply involved in a project with Starhawk on plant intelligence. And since 2019, she has decided to be involved in more concrete forms of commitment by resettling in her native village in Bazas, a town of 4700 inhabitants in Gironde, and by instigating a local project called *Pharmacie*. Trained as a herbalist, Husky has been seeking both to revive not only knowledge about medicinal plants, but

<sup>39</sup> [bit.ly/30ISR3s](https://bit.ly/30ISR3s)

<sup>40</sup> [bit.ly/33piYly](https://bit.ly/33piYly)





*Douceurs de fleurs*, ceramic, Suzanne Husky, 2018 © Suzanne Husky



*Sans titre*, ceramic, Suzanne Husky, 2019 © Suzanne Husky

also about an episode in local history: that of women healers, formerly highly present across the region, who, despite possessing a perfect mastery of herbal medicine, have been completely erased from history by modern male-dominated medicine, abetted by the Church. Her garden of medicinal plants will have an artistic and training vocation, as well as a function of reflection on eco-feminism and plant intelligence... And she has also just been elected to the municipal council of Bazas! Hence, a transformative and polymorphic project.

**PLBC:** We have mentioned several agricultural projects. Are artists also engaging in these transformative works that involve the participation of animals?

fascinating true story that unfolded in the late 1950s in the China of Mao Zedong. At that juncture, tree sparrows were blamed for pecking away at the grain seed in the paddy-fields. Having observed how sparrows could fly for no more than two and a half hours without landing – they would eventually drop dead from the skies – the authorities decided to orchestrate a massive extermination campaign: for three days, young and old, men and women, descended into the streets and across the fields, armed with flags, gongs, and slingshots in order to destroy the sparrows' nests, crush their eggs, and prevent them from reposing. It was a massive diabolical carnival. Tens of millions of sparrows perished as a result of this campaign. Yet, the

following year, crops were almost completely destroyed by those insects that had been deprived of their predators.

Saintagnan's *Moineaux* project will see the re-enacting of this sort of hysterical bacchanal, but on this occasion her objective is to create a carnival ritual meant to expiate our past human faults and to pay homage to the interdependent links between humankind and sparrows. A film will combine images shot in colour with black and white archival footage, notably reconstituting Mao Zedong's infamous extermination campaign, a cruel fable that informs us about humans' exterminating folly. An episode from the past that still resonates to this very day, at a time in which we are witnessing the gradual disappearance of biodiversity. As is well-known, birds are

*“The challenge: to break down the barriers between universes, to introduce once again ingenuity and creativity in unexpected places. This is where the artistic dimension expresses itself: not in a rationale of producing objects – it will always be somewhat deceptive for those who expect fine art – but rather in the spirit of social sculpture as advocated by Joseph Beuys.”*

**LG:** Yes, with birds, notably with sparrows and swifts. Let me start with Éléonore Saintagnan,<sup>41</sup> who received a special mention from the COAL Prize jury this year. Her starting point was a

disappearing from our planet at an extraordinary rate. The sparrow population, for instance, has plummeted by some 95 % over the last thirty years.

Similarly, Saintagnan will take concrete steps to preserve the sparrow population through collectively creating ceramic works and nesting boxes meant for use in public spaces, by recreating nooks and crannies in walls where the sparrows can nest, and by dint of mobilising young people and artists linked with local organisations and scientists in order to champion the reintroduction of this bird species throughout urban settings.

Martine Feipel and Jean Bechameil work together *with* and *for* swifts.<sup>42</sup> They obtained a special COAL Prize for their project *Cité d'Urgences – Apus Apus* in conjunction the François Sommer Foundation. They are seeking to provide nesting possibilities destined for a bird species that has been threatened by the

<sup>41</sup> [bit.ly/2XmfUcv](https://bit.ly/2XmfUcv)

<sup>42</sup> [bit.ly/39PIsrm](https://bit.ly/39PIsrm)





*Moineau*, reed and paper mâché, Éléonore Saintagnan, 2020 © Éléonore Saintagnan



*Cocoon Bench*, bee wax, silkworm cocoons, burnt oak base and bee resin varnish, Marlène Huisoud, 2017 © Collection permanente du CNAP

scarcity and/or destruction of their natural habitats due to urban sprawl and the burgeoning densification of rural space around cities. This phenomenon particularly impacts swifts. Symbol of the freedom to relocate in rhythm with the seasons and recognisable through its piercing cry and impressive aerial manoeuvres, this migratory bird that we can follow in early summer has constantly evolved alongside human populations. Over centuries it has been accustomed to avail of crevices in stone and mortar walls in human habitations in order to build their nests. Contemporary architecture, however, notably during reconstruction work, has removed many of these holes and breaches, leaving in its wake only smooth surfaces unsuitable for nesting.

Feipel and Bechameil have proposed to demonstrate in the Ardennes – a rural region where the species has virtually disappeared – the feasibility to meet conditions for a return of this migratory bird, starting with existing buildings and working over a particular timespan. In collaboration with scientists and local residents, they want to make new crevices in existing walls, which can be considered as artworks in their own right. There is also a project to create soundtracks that could attract swifts to places where they would be likely to nest and also to build astounding nesting boxes, at times in the shape of feet, or other body parts...

**PLBC:** And what about artistic projects for insects, whose extinction rate is staggering, eight times that of other animal species?

**LG:** Yes, the work by Marlène Huisoud,<sup>43</sup> an artist designer who creates street furniture for both humans and insects, is an outstanding example. Here, we have urban design work focused on form, material, uses, compatible with the needs of humans and made in such a way as to be habitable by insects. The shelter, the nest box, even if a basic object and a commonplace idea we come across in all citizen ecology programs, is worth revaluing. It makes sense to lend it more depth through more complex projects that go beyond simply making objects. Despite everything, these small-scale, simplistic, easily disparaged gestures do have considerable impact.

<sup>43</sup> [bit.ly/3fpL8pg](https://bit.ly/3fpL8pg)



**PLBC:** Can you tell us about Jérémy Gobé,<sup>44</sup> an artist who wants to help save the coral reefs, more than half of which are known to have been threatened by human activities?

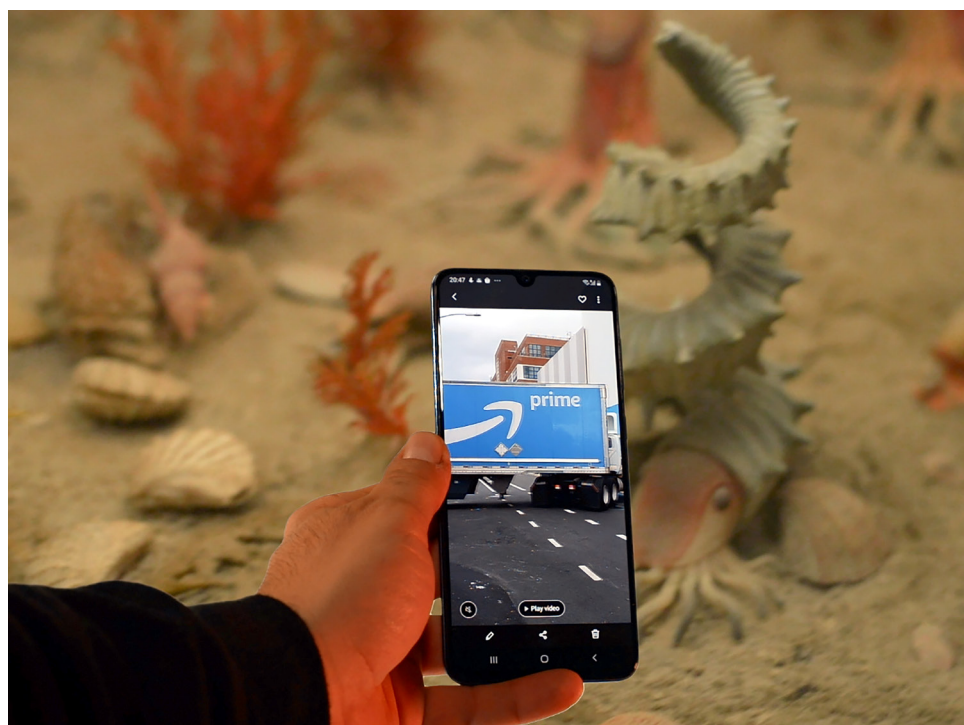
**LG:** Gobé is working on prototypes for a coral nursery. He discovered that it

was possible to grow coral by using lace as a substratum. It was after discovering the similarities between the *point d'esprit*, a traditional pattern used in bobbin lace, and the structure of the coral skeleton, that he decided to develop *Corail Artefact*,<sup>45</sup> a project at the crossroads of science, art and industry.

He set up a company and an endowment fund in order to overcome the constraints inherent in his status as an artist, and to develop this coral lace on a realistic scale. Tests will presently commence on one of the island in the Philippines, thanks to the support of a private sponsor.



Tests for the substrate for anemones, fastened on lace, Jérémy Gobé © Corail / Artefact



Center for Studies of Ocean Floor as Ceiling, immersive video, Ioannis Koliopoulos and Paola Palavidi, 2020 © Hypercomf

**PLBC:** And then there's the fascinating underwater project by this Greek collective, Hypercomf.<sup>46</sup>

**LG:** It's a speculative design collective that assumes the form of a fictitious business created by the artists Ioannis Koliopoulos and Paola Palavidi in 2017. They live in Greece, on the island of Tinos. Their focus is the seabed at great depths and the unexplored ocean floor, whose ecosystems are said to be home to two million as yet unknown species and who nonetheless could reveal the mysteries of the origin of life. To tackle the issue of marine plastics that are currently threatening this ecosystem and address the issue of who is responsible

<sup>44</sup> [bit.ly/2PgT4yB](https://bit.ly/2PgT4yB)

<sup>45</sup> [bit.ly/33piYly](https://bit.ly/33piYly)

<sup>46</sup> [bit.ly/3k5hCIT](https://bit.ly/3k5hCIT)

for polluting international waters, they conceived of this fictitious company, the Center for Studies of Ocean Floor as Ceiling which, in the guise of an imaginary tale, advocates inventive, creative and functional solutions, and in particular recycled objects made from plastics recovered during clean-up operations on the beaches. Their project thus combines a concrete clean-up of the shoreline and community building measures for coastal communities. They try to link up with other Greek islands while at the same time developing a fictional narrative, producing films, installations, serial objects, creating educational activities, events, workshops in order to promote a circular production system based on the reuse of synthetic materials and forging alliances between maritime communities committed to preserving marine ecosystems.

**PLBC:** Each and every one of these projects are recent; several are in the production phase. I wanted that we discuss a transformative artistic project that marked the history of ecological art, namely, Joseph Beuys' *7000 Eichen*, which we present at the beginning of this issue of *Klaxon*. With this action, at once concrete and symbolic, Beuys sought to *"raise the alarm against all those forces that destroy nature and life."*

**LG:** What I find interesting is that, forty years on from its inception, Beuys' project remains a benchmark. This iconic action has never lost its

relevance. Obviously, we're talking about a moderate level of efficiency: 7 000 oak trees, which is not a lot if compared to what hundreds of local organisations are doing nowadays; they are planting thousands of trees every day right across the world. Still, Beuys succeeded in creating a milestone, a symbolic landmark that was necessary in forging ahead with this collective struggle.

***"To work with living things, biodiversity, to pay homage to the untamed world, inter-species relationships, enables an immediate and fruitful relationship with the materials used, sensibility, emotion, spirituality..."***

**PLBC:** What have you observed throughout the evolution of ecological art practices?

**LG:** I could highlight projects steered by artists who have induced a transformation in their way of living and the advent of new organisations, such as we've observed with Suzanne Husky, who has been moving away from a classic practice of art in order to align her way of life and ideas with an economic system, a social network, and so forth. This alignment between artistic practice and concrete commitment is increasingly becoming an issue for the younger generation. This can be witnessed with the emergence of artists' collectives, communities, artist-run spaces, a model based on pooling of resources, and the challenging of that exclusive economic model, namely, the art market. Here, the

transformation operates on the art ecosystem itself, and the transformation of its social and economic models. In conclusion, faced with the complexity of the subject and the constraints imposed on the artist, not only in term of the limits of scale but also the economic and legislative limits, this commitment involves a return to a cooperative approach, to alliances, to the sharing of know-how between artists, scientists, and farmers in particular.

The other emerging field is that of the link to the Living, which historically is deeply rooted in the history of art. While as an artist it may be difficult to

confront industrial spheres such as energy or transport, to work with the Living, biodiversity, to pay homage to the untamed world, inter-species relationships, enables an immediate and fruitful relationship with the materials used, sensibility, emotion, spirituality... In parallel or closely linked, there's an active scene in the so-called digital arts, technologies, culture makers, that has been democratising access to information. Here, I'm thinking specifically of Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway's radio-activity counters for smartphones, or of those artists who place digital technologies at the service of ecosystems, such as Victor Remère with his inter-connected beehives.

**The interview was conducted by Pascal Le Brun-Cordier in June 2020.**



## COAL

The COAL Art and Ecology Association was created in France in 2008 by professionals in contemporary art, ecology and research with the objective to champion the emergence of a culture of ecology. In a multidisciplinary spirit, COAL mobilises artists and cultural actors on societal and environmental issues in collaboration with institutions, NGOs, scientists and businesses, and supports the essential role of creativity and culture in increasing awareness and implementing concrete solutions. COAL conceives of and curates contemporary art exhibitions and cultural events focused on the challenges of ecological transition; it supports artists through artistic coaching and production assistance and contributes to the transformation of territories with its sustainable Culture Laboratory. Each year, the COAL Art and Environment Prize recognises the activities of numerous artists.

[bit.ly/3j6aqLH](https://bit.ly/3j6aqLH)

### Lauranne Germond



Lauranne Germond, art historian and exhibition curator, is co-founder of the association COAL, which she has steered since its inception in 2008 alongside Loic Fel and Clément Willemin. A graduate of the École du Louvre in History of Art and Museology, she specialised in contemporary art in relation to nature and ecology. Since its inception, she has been artistic director of the COAL Art and Environment Prize and has been involved in launching nearly fifty contemporary art exhibitions and cultural events focused on ecological transition for prominent cultural institutions across France (Biennale d'Anglet, Société du Grand Paris, Condition Publique, UNESCO, La Villette, La Gaîté Lyrique, FIAC, Domaine de Chamarande, Natural History Museum, Museum of Hunting and Nature, Banks of the Seine, CEAAC, Halles aux Sucres, Nature in Solidum territory programs for the Haut-Jura regional nature park, *inter alia*). She has been active in researching and disseminating the topic through numerous speeches, as well as coordinating trans-European programs and numerous workshops and conferences led by COAL. She was previously a partner in and co-director of NUKE magazine, "*a self-portrait of a polluted generation.*"

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# ARCHITECTURES OF HOSPITALITY

## CAMILLE DE TOLEDO IN CONVERSATION WITH SÉBASTIEN THIÉRY

**Over the course of this enriching conversation between the writer Camille de Toledo, author of *Vies pøtentielles*,<sup>47</sup> and Sébastien Thiéry, researcher, author, and founder of PEROU, Pôle d'Exploration des Ressources Urbaines, a singular way to think about architecture takes shape, about the city and politics, as well as a certain savoir-faire of how to take action – in order to invent “a politics of hospitalities” and “to expand within the territory the scope of that which we could say ‘yes’ to today.”**

**Camille de Toledo:** I would like that we discuss an architecture of hospitality, of hospitalities in the plural. An architecture of space that welcomes, that embraces what exists, what happens, what yearns to come into existence. Also, a welcome of the power to act, of the ability to be, of the powers that exist around us in the

present. I also want to hear you discuss this architecture of hospitality, for ultimately any city, with all its architectures, is a form of writing. An interwoven writing, at once spontaneous and organised, unconscious and conscious. Hence, it is thus from this place of writing, from the standpoint of a broad interpretation of

writing, that I'm excited to enter into a dialogue with you. I will begin, if you don't mind, this conversation with an anecdote which will, I believe, greatly underscore that which we have to talk about.

<sup>47</sup> Camille de Toledo, *Vies pøtentielles*, Seuil, 2010.



The PEROU Embassy in the shanty-town of Ris-Orangis, constructed jointly with the architect Julien Beller and the designer Malte Martin © Malte Martin





Constructing the PEROU Embassy in the shanty-town of Ris-Orangis © Chloé Bodart

Back in the nineteen nineties, I was living in Calcutta in India (written as Kolkata for some years now). I used to live on a large avenue called “the Lower Circular Road.” Along the sidewalks, I would walk past makeshift huts every day. Those huts were made of canvas roofs, a few wooden trestles, and scrap pilfered from the city’s trash cans... And here was me at that juncture seeing the world in a modern spirit. I felt an outrage of sorts swelling up in me. I started asking myself what is this city

doing; what is the municipality doing for these inhabitants there on the streets, who come mostly from India’s very poor states, notably Bihar? Back then, I had this “developer-planner” kind of reaction, this reflex one has that stems from that long tradition of urban planning: how come nobody is taking care of rehousing these families? At that time, the government in Bengal was run by the Communists. My outrage therefore redoubled on account of this failure on the part of institutions

that claimed to be Marxist to come to grips with the matter. After some weeks, I happened to run into a journalist who was working in the neighbourhood. I let him know of my dismay: how can it be, why is there no urban planning in this city, which happened to be run by the Communist Party? Why are these people living there on the streets not taken care of and rehoused? Whereupon, to my utter amazement, this journalist replied that in Calcutta one had to *abandon* the viewpoint of developer, the modernist, the urban planner. He told me that in this city one had to learn *relinquish*. Calcutta can only be understood, he told me, by accepting the idea that what appears temporary is actually permanent; that what is there lives and grows like wild weeds, without the possibility of organising anything. He wrapped up by saying: “*That’s life, politics can do nothing about it.*” In our correspondence, you wrote: “*For me, the visible and the invisible, just as the temporary and the permanent, are spurious binaries. Such states can exist in continuity; succeed one another, extend from one to the next, come and go on the path of the same existence. Rather, the question should be: what to make present, to what extent and degree can the visible and the invisible underpin each other?*”





**Sébastien Thiéry:** Thank you, Camille. While listening to your anecdote, I recalled another episode which is also somehow a launching pad or a form of initiation. It was the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April, 2013, when bulldozers were demolishing the shacks that made up what is called a slum in Ris-Orangis, some 40 km south of Paris, in the Essonne department. Together with PEROU, *Pôle d'Exploration des Ressources Urbaines* (the Urban Resources Exploration Centre),<sup>48</sup> an organisation I had created beforehand along with Gilles Clément, we had been working there for several months, obviously in conflict with the public authorities; we succeeded, however, to construct an architecture writ large in the most unexpected places. Despite our efforts, the demolition was nonetheless scheduled following the issuing of a municipal decree (on which we worked a lot afterwards), and was duly implemented early in the morning of April 3. We were on site in order to document, to understand, to try to understand everything, including the ways and means of tearing down a slum.<sup>49</sup>

I stood at the boundary with Adela. Adela is a woman who was living there along with her husband Georges and their two children Ricardo and Dolari, in a hut located at the entrance of this slum that overlooked Route National 7, the so-called holiday-highway. Adela placed her hand on my shoulder, I had my arm around her waist as we silently watched the bulldozers, the posturing by the general reserve of the French National Police (CRS), and the overall racket. At one point, she turned to me, moved, and asks:

***"In the same way that literature is what is discerned but not found in a text, architecture's scope extends far beyond that which is actually built; it embraces the depth and richness of relationships, at once fragile and sensitive, which, as an architect, we need to know how to recognise, cultivate, and build."***

**Sébastien Thiéry**

*"But why are they destroying the trees?"* While I could only take in the demolished shacks, and especially Adela's family living quarters, she couldn't get her head around the fact that trees were being destroyed. A few weeks later, Adela, Georges, Ricardo, and Dolari relocated some 500 meters away, to a new slum.

They greeted me with a drink in hand and a big smile. The new slum was springing into life. Ultimately, in Adela's eyes, it was the tree that couldn't grow again, the very thing that had been vibrant and vivacious, vital in the slum. The life of those man-made constructions, however, had only been suspended for a short while and was to resume within a couple of days.

Hence, if I had to draw an inference there-from about an idea of architecture, as you've asked me, I will start with what Adela's words made manifest: we don't know how to see. Namely, that despite the infernal racket made by those bulldozers, the living core of what we inhabit remains. (Incidentally, we quantified the costs of

this commotion to the local community, down as far as the CRS: some 120,000€ to tear down such a slum!) And it's not the walls that we build that will shore up a habitat, but rather the relationships between living beings. What hadn't been damaged for a moment was the depth of the relationships grounded in Adela's gestures, arms and smile, in their ways and means of getting closer to one another, of forging bonds with each other. Only the destruction of a tree had threatened that which we had built. That's what struck me as paramount: to consider what such a displacement can make us see in what is built, and of what to build actually means. In my view, the space that exists between all that lives is the first and the ultimate definition of architecture. Unfortunately, this sense of richness is absent in the representation devised by professional architects, for in schools the only thing they learn about the verb "to build" is what it literally designates. In the same way that literature is what is discerned but not found in a text, architecture's scope extends far beyond that which is actually built; it embraces the depth and richness of relationships, at once fragile and sensitive, which, as an architect, we need to know how to recognise, cultivate, and build.



Together with Adela, George, Robert, Ricardo and Dolari © PEROU

<sup>48</sup> [bit.ly/30VXD73](https://bit.ly/30VXD73)

<sup>49</sup> Cf: *Considérant qu'il est plausible que de tels événements puissent à nouveau survenir. Sur l'art municipal de détruire un bidonville*, texts collated and presented by Sébastien Thiéry, Post Éditions, 2013.



This is a really serious issue, this ability to know what our buildings consist of and what we inhabit. This, I believe, is what explains a number of fiascos in our approach to making and thinking about the city, and naturally in our way of acting within the confines inhabited by people with a reputation for living in the uninhabitable, and who yet for all that build, build more than they should, more perhaps than what we others are used to building in a city. Here, there is an intensity of relationships, a depth of attachment to the soil where one lives, a proximity to each other, a richness of thresholds, a density of what makes a habitat: gestures, languages, bodies, stories we tell each other. This is what constitutes the living matter we inhabit, one which is undisputedly threatened with destruction, and which calls out for a certain *savoir-faire* to build in which architects are so lacking. The architect decodes and recodes the situation and interprets it as an “architectural problem,” thus overlooking everything that has already been built and that requires so much care. Some construct in the slums, claiming to act on behalf of those living there, yet who, blind to the vitality of what has been built there, are threatening or even crushing all that. These recollections reawaken yet another experience further back in time, one I had with the *Enfants de Don Quichotte*,<sup>50</sup> for whom I was one of the animators during that direct action in 2006. We used to contend, and with great impact, just how outrageous the living standards of the so-called homeless were. We demanded that they be “re-housed” by camping alongside them on the banks of the Canal Saint-Martin in Paris. We didn’t realise to what extent the Canal itself, occupied during the struggle and through the struggle, was an extremely elaborate, fine, and powerfully constructed habitat. Our unremitting anger led to a “crisis unit” being established there and that the homeless effectively were given accommodation, even housing. I recall a man by the name of Pascal, who was among the first to be accommodated elsewhere. He returned in tears the next day, staggered to understand that those statutory four walls of 2.20 meters under a ceiling were much less liveable than the Canal, which had become, in his words, a “home.” We then had to grasp what this

home was made of. This was something that we didn’t know how to see, thus disrupting our political positions...

So, there are setbacks at the origin of my current take on architecture, shocks which, from personal experience, have unsettled my approach. We need to broaden the subject-matter in order to grasp that which remains so poorly described, so poorly thought out, namely, to become aware of the depths of everyday life. First and foremost, we live out our days and nights at a distance from development plans. “*At a distance*” is how Michel De Certeau positions his gaze when writing *L’Invention du quotidien* (The Invention of the Daily).<sup>51</sup> It’s not a case that we no longer pay attention to the



Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, india ink, oil, paper and watercolour, 1920

physical buildings and walls, to the quality of thresholds, but rather it calls for another way of looking at the potential scope of construction. As a good architect, the point is to match materials and imaginaries, colours and relationships, stories that invariably make of our days and nights living and sentient matter, bearable or not. Yet, on occasion, and this is what the journalist from Calcutta was arguing, incomprehensible a priori, we’ve got to relinquish building in the sense that architects typically understand the term, so as not to threaten these fragile social and physical structures that stretch as far as the eye can see, that we consider so poorly.

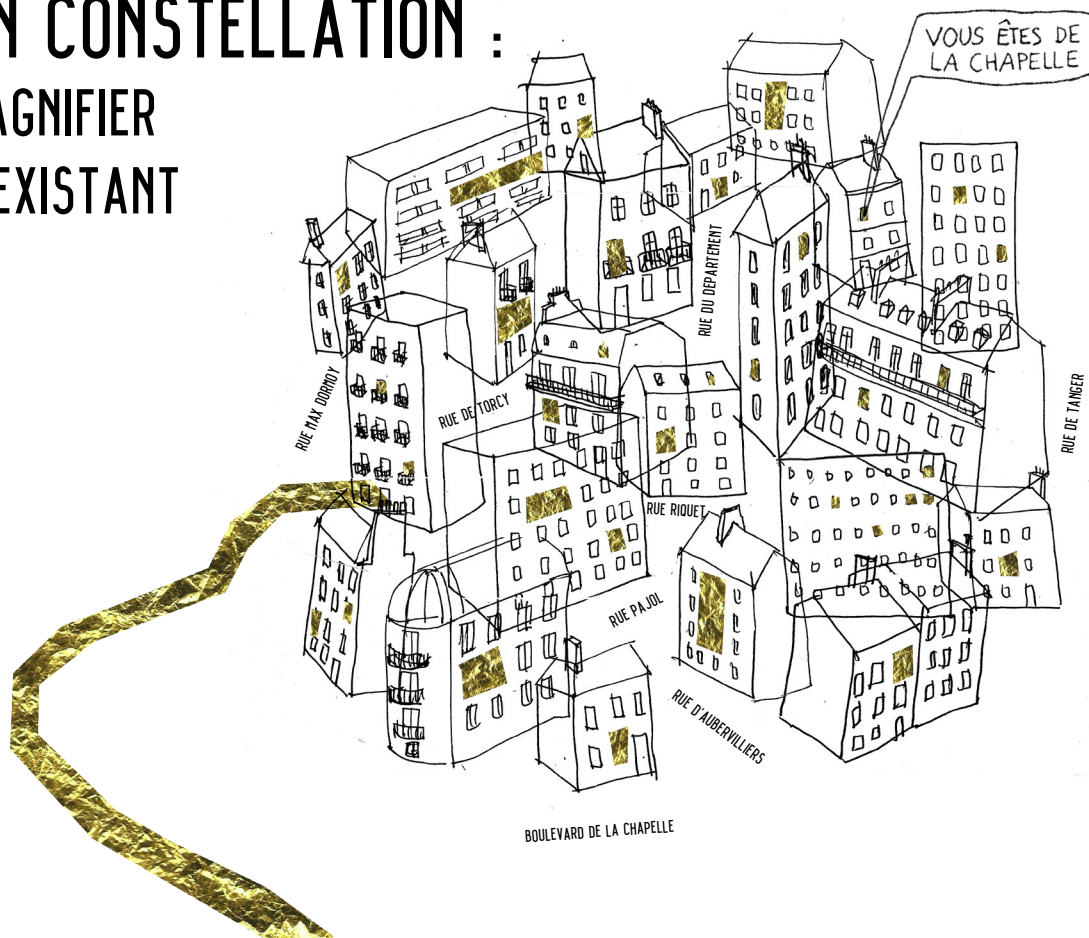
I’m by no means a proponent of non-construction, and I’m especially not satisfied with what a slum has to offer at first glance: it is not the last word, in an ecological and spontaneous sense, in town planning, as some might argue. We’ve built a lot in the slums; and for me there is something extremely important about constantly keeping alive the potential for transformation. I would never advocate backing off, but the very act of not erecting a building might well be a way of extending invisible structures. At times restraint itself is a builder. I’m thinking specifically of Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal who, even before becoming the prominent architects we know today, won a call for a project for Place Léon Aucoc in Bordeaux, back in 1996. They didn’t present themselves with the determination to implement a project, but rather with a sense of affection: they simply begin to take note of everything that populates that public square: the vegetable and mineral, a few benches, ambient sounds, the glances directed and the movements that take place there, the stories told and the names given, the customs, that which local people really care about in that square, the games they play there, what they discuss there. They thus put together a notebook encapsulating this daily life and later presented it to the elected officials with a fine, meticulous, systematic description of everything that inhabits this square and everything that made this square a habitat. By repopulating it in this way, through the act of enhanced awareness, they enabled city councillors to see anew to just what extent the square had already been a “cityscape,” planned as it were by life. This project is fundamental to me. I teach it to my students as soon as I can. It is in the light of such a stance and such experiences that I was keen

ready been a “cityscape,” planned as it were by life. This project is fundamental to me. I teach it to my students as soon as I can. It is in the light of such a stance and such experiences that I was keen

<sup>50</sup> Editor’s note: Les Enfants de Don Quichotte is a French association set up in 2006 that strove to “support and defend any operation aimed at preventing or combating acts that were likely to impact and compromise social and human well-being”. In December 2006, the association set up a village of 200 tents along the banks of Canal Saint-Martin in Paris, in order to render visible the precarious living conditions of Paris “homeless” people.

<sup>51</sup> Michel De Certeau, *L’Invention du quotidien*, Gallimard, 1980.

# UN TRÈS GRAND HÔTEL EN CONSTELLATION : MAGNIFIER L'EXISTANT



EQUIPER,  
OUTILLER,  
ARMER,  
SOUTENIR,  
MAINTENIR,  
ÉPAULER,  
L'HÉBERGEMENT  
SOLIDAIRE

Extract from *Très Grand Hotel*, studies by PEROU published as part of the request to UNESCO to register the act of hospitality as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity © Maëlle Berthoumieu – PEROU

to get PEROU off the ground, initially as a descriptive and narrative tool. I believe our primary challenge—and where we're badly lacking, what we don't know how to transmit, to teach in schools—is how to describe what has taken place, what makes a place, everything that inhabits a space, everything that populates the space between bodies, and that renders it more or less inhabitable. So, for the architect, is it a question of cultivating this population activity, of intensifying it, which sometimes involves actually building on condition, however, that these constructions somehow support this life that unfolds, this “life that constantly invents,” to borrow Gilles Clément's formulation?<sup>52</sup>

**“A city is probably two individuals crossing paths and who don't engage in war. There's something in this, I believe, just as in the atomic nucleus of all urbanity: it's not the walls that bear the load, but rather certain deeds.”**

**Sébastien Thiéry**

**CdT:** Listening to you, Georges Perec comes to mind: the intersections between various sciences, between writing a book and writing a city, for this descriptive instrument employed

by Vassal and Lacaton in Bordeaux is akin to a literary exercise of description, linked to a practice of inquiry. Perec the architect, there's a lot to be said on that subject: an architect-investigator, an architect of description, of capturing everyday life in text, what we have before our eyes, which is nothing other than life itself. *La Vie mode d'emploi* (Life a User's Manual), and his tale *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* (An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris) come

to mind. In his writings, there is an awareness of how architecture and human lives intertwine; lives caught in architectural structures. This attention to *what is there*, which manifests itself in literature, in architecture, in anthropology, in philosophy... differs nowadays from how it was

perceived in Perec's day. Contemporary attempts at description have lost the character of a “modernist game” they exhibited back in the sixties. Perec's starting point, as we can clearly see today, was disappearance, destruction, annihilation of a certain form of life. His mother was deported to Auschwitz via the Drancy internment camp. This, for me, is the tone of our contemporary investigations: In the wake of what has taken place, of that shadow of what has vanished, of what has been destroyed, these investigations underscore the disquiet for the rapidity at which our world regimes are wiping out hundreds of thousands of life forms. Here, I'm refer-

ring to what we've ever since been calling the man-made “sixth extinction,” but equally techniques for letting people drown in the Mediterranean. For us in the twenty-first

<sup>52</sup> Gilles Clément, *Toujours la vie invente*, Éditions de l'Aube, 2008.



century, the mark of this disquiet is effectively not only this attention to what is there, but also to what has been destroyed. This obliges us to resume the work of description.

Taking that as a starting point, let's launch ourselves into the second segment of our conversation: it will also broach upon the intersections between forms of knowledge, between forms of writing. I would like to start with a dimension that underlies, it strikes me, the architecture of hospitality: that of the unconscious, which I will specify by pursuing certain written works you introduced me to: "the unconscious city," or "the unconsciousness of a city." Here, I recall some objects that Freud had collected – notably some images of the ruins of Pompeii. They are still to be seen in Vienna,

in what remains of his erstwhile consultancy rooms. Psychoanalysis has been working on this image of "ruins" in order to characterise the unconscious as "destroyed cities," or "vestiges of cities" whereby consciousness corresponds to that which has been built, the construct,

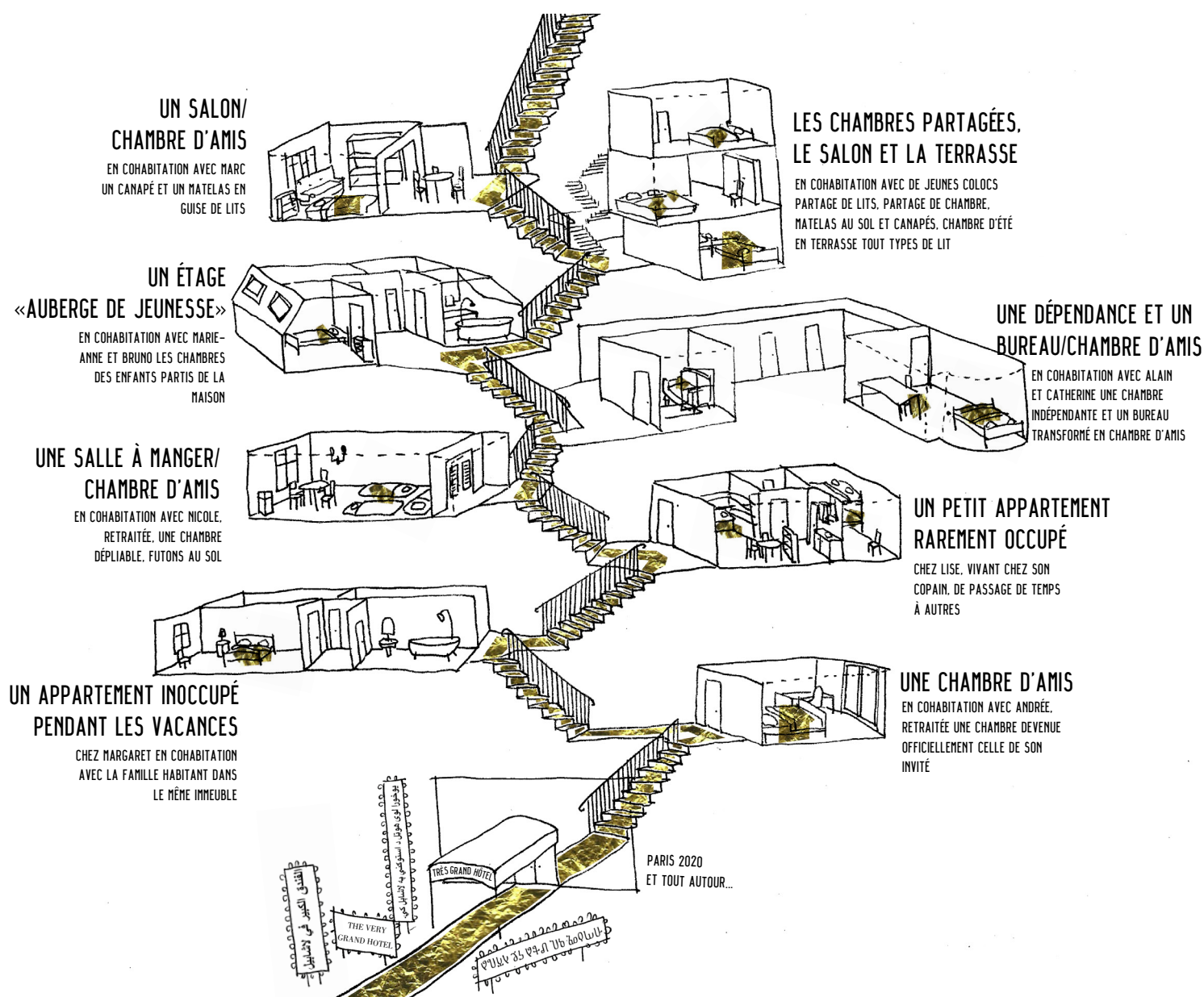
**"To turn ourselves toward that which longs to happen, toward all those places where there's an energy, a thirst for metamorphosis, to bring them together, to make them the present by dint of a discipline in thought: potentialities in reality that propose another way of inhabiting the present."**

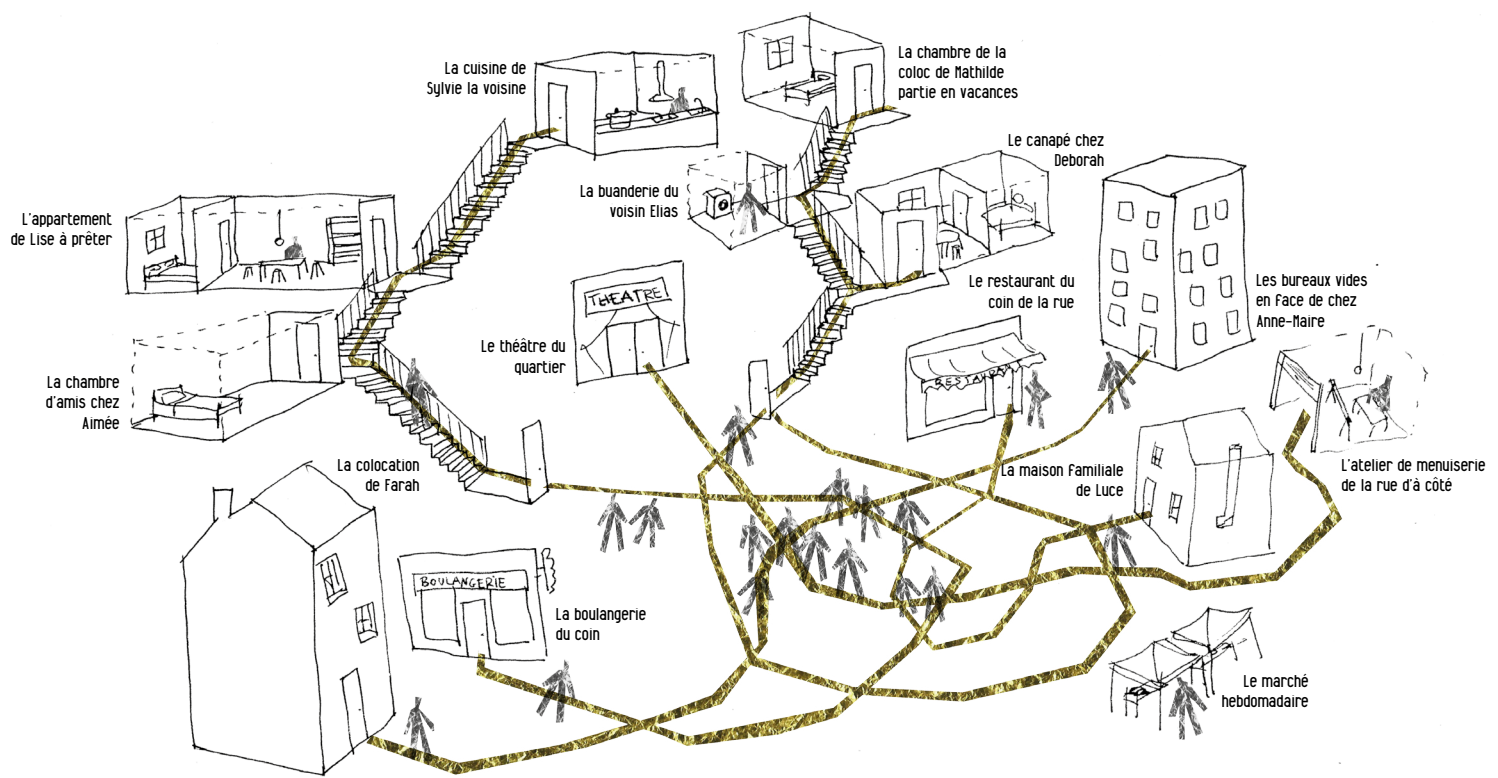
Camille de Toledo

the site of the "logos." And, the unconscious comes along to collect everything that does not fit into this well-ordered cone. In many respects, Freud viewed himself as an explorer of that limbo: of all those things that had been shoved aside by the triumphant, conquering

reason of his time. Similarly, in order to evoke that dimension, this "unconsciousness of the city," an image that Walter Benjamin describes in his essay *Theses on the Philosophy of History* comes to mind. This painting by Paul Klee (*Angelus Novus*, 1920) depicts a small angelic figure looking to the side. Benjamin transforms it into a symbol of whoever seeks to come to the rescue of whatever has been beaten or destroyed, all that progress has abandoned in its march forward. Benjamin makes it into this sort of unconsciousness at work throughout history; an Angel who comes to resurrect those lives abandoned in the dead zones by the march of progress. This can equally be deeply felt in that other text you kindly introduced me to. In reference to those abandoned territories, on the

reason of his time. Similarly, in order to evoke that dimension, this "unconsciousness of the city," an image that Walter Benjamin describes in his essay *Theses on the Philosophy of History* comes to mind. This painting by Paul Klee (*Angelus Novus*, 1920) depicts a small angelic figure looking to the side. Benjamin transforms it into a symbol of whoever seeks to come to the rescue of whatever has been beaten or destroyed, all that progress has abandoned in its march forward. Benjamin makes it into this sort of unconsciousness at work throughout history; an Angel who comes to resurrect those lives abandoned in the dead zones by the march of progress. This can equally be deeply felt in that other text you kindly introduced me to. In reference to those abandoned territories, on the





## COUR DU MAROC, PARIS XIX<sup>e</sup>, PETITS DÉJEUNERS SOLIDAIRES

Extract from *Très Grand Hotel*, studies by PEROU published as part of the request to UNESCO to register the act of hospitality as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity © Maëlle Berthoumieu — PEROU

fringes of the luminous, ordered construct, the text goes: “...they form the negative of the built city, the interstitial and marginal areas, the abandoned spaces or those in the throes of transformation, these are the sites of repressed memory and of becoming unconscious of urban systems, the dark side of the city, conflictual and contagious spaces hovering between organic and inorganic, between nature and artifice.”<sup>53</sup>

**ST:** This text dates from 1993; it is the manifesto by the Stalker Collective, penned by its founders, Francesco Carelli and Lorenzo Romito, in Rome. This city where I’m living today offers a nice viewpoint on limbo. A city is a successful shanty-town, and Rome is eloquent proof thereof: the accumulated sediments on every street corner tell us so.

Crossing the threshold of a slum is a rather disconcerting olfactory experience, for it emits a smell, a strange smell that sends us deeply inside of it. We’ll encounter this smell of the dead zone, crushed and rendered invisible from the city, the city that aspires to be a stellar, lunar, immaculate conception that has nothing to do with such an inappropriate foundation. In some respects, the history of urban planning is a history of violence against these very foundations, and hence against

the city itself. It is one of Stalker’s founding visions, whose members, while not building in the literal sense of the term, continue to officiate as practicing architects by walking the streets, forging relationships with all strata of Roman territory, in its depths as well as in its distant expanses, amidst its multiple limbos.

The slum is not the antithesis of the city; perhaps, it is a rough draft, a sketch of it. But perhaps, much has gone astray between the rough sketch and the finished painting. That is the feeling that emerged from our experience of that slum in Ris-Orangis whose central square, which we built with the architect Charlotte Cauwer, was much more vibrant and alive than the public square of Ris-Orangis built with all the might of an urban plan characteristic of those suburban cities, those so-called bedroom suburbs. In that slum, we danced, we drank, we made love, we shot the breeze, yet, we also struggled, we constantly questioned ourselves about the future of those camps, at times we made our contradictory visions confront each other, we constantly built the texture of this space that extended between us, we made the city. What remains of all this in our public squares? This vibrant richness, how is it that we are no longer able to conceive of it as the nexus of the urban

project? At best, what we get is a so-called citizen or convivial events program, that shrinks the urban fabric to a pleasant source of enjoyment without any political significance.

We’ve worked on this question a hundred times over in Calais, during the two years when, alongside schools, artists, architects, anthropologists, we sought to describe everything that could be built, developed, invented, asserted there, despite the prevailing difficulties. We thus brought together the traces of this *cité* that emerged from the mud that was the Calais Jungle and made of it an *Atlas of a Potential City*, and submitted it to the FRAC Centre, whose architectural collection is third largest in the world. What overwhelmed me in Calais, beyond the phenomenon of what had been constructed, the churches and restaurants, nightclubs and multiple shacks, was the mobilisations by the residents of Calais, by Europeans, by an incredible youth from all over the world who came there to help out. It is the intensity of the relationships forged there, including with those people of Calais who, at times, could engage in deeply hostile rhetoric — they even called for the ascent to power of a far-right populist



party such as the *Rassemblement National* – but who nonetheless, in this fine-grained richness of everyday life, dared to practice kind deeds that at times verged on the sublime. I thus came to this idea of the unconscious, to what resides in the depths of a city, in Rome as in the Jungle of Calais, ever before all the permanent structures were erected. At first, isn't there an act of welcome, of kindness? A city is probably two individuals crossing paths and who don't engage in war. There's something in this, I believe, just as in the atomic nucleus of all urbanity: it's not the walls that bear the load, but rather certain deeds. For me, this has become the primary challenge of the work that needs to be done now: to recognise in this multiform and extremely widespread act of hospitality what it encapsulates in terms of impact and power in the shaping of an urbanity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, of future forms of urban co-existence that we must succeed in recognising, in welcoming, in underpinning, in cultivating. Such hospitality suffers a poor reputation, even amidst activist circles: it's seen as harmless, anecdotal, and not up to the task. It's seen as taking place because of a lack of proper policies. Ultimately, given this prevailing poor reputation, these acts of hospitality

discharge public authorities of their responsibility to welcome; they are even considered as suspect in the eyes of many amongst us, for they are dissymmetrical, and we end up with nothing other than our colonial history being played out over and over again. Worsened by jeopardising police and judicial procedures, this bad reputation lies at the heart of the problem. In short, PEROU has constantly been instigating these re-evaluations: our task is to characterise what is disqualified or presumed indescribable. The Jungle

***“My work consists in having UNESCO recognise the act of hospitality as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, so that we can position ourselves differently faced with all that is unfolding by somehow supporting all those murmurs, all that is being built quietly on the margins. It's a matter of taking these everyday acts seriously; to consider them for what they are: a crucial common good for future generations.”***

**Sébastien Thiéry**

camp was a world-city that actually arose out of the mud, an urbanity built around a thousand small deeds and a thousand languages, an extremely fragile avant-garde program, to be recognised and made happen, to be consolidated from a thousand parts, rather than demolished on the grounds of an indignity that was denounced from all sides, from the standpoints of those “for” as well as those “against.”

**CdT:** During our exchanges in the run-up to this dialogue, you wrote: *“This architecture, just as with everything I seek to achieve with PEROU, strives to replant the present with those powers that everything, including architecture, (an architecture that washed away all vestiges of humanity in order to be able to shine by itself, pure, asexual) played a part in discarding: these daily acts, these delicate bonds, this is all that holds us together, all that binds humanity together. We have to work on replanting the world with such daily acts and delicate bonds. In any case, that's what I'm trying to do and to teach.”*

In this third segment of our conversation, I would like us to address the political dimension of this architecture of hospitality. Here, I would like to introduce the well-known text by Michel Foucault, taken from *Surveiller et Punir* (Discipline and Punish), in order to take note, in contrast to your work,

of what constitutes an architecture of violence, of surveillance, an inhospitable architecture that structures the invisible for power and submission. Let me cite the opening lines: *“At the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower, this tower is pierced by large windows that open onto the inner face of the ring...”*<sup>54</sup> This is

**54** Editor's note: Translation by John Barrett for Klaxon.



Walk conducted on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 2020 in Rome from the Villa Medici by PEROU and various migrant aid collectives. A direct action for the recognition of hospitality as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity © Sébastien Thiéry





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how Foucault depicts the famous panopticon, this disciplinary structure that he makes a phase of in his archaeology of power: it spans from a “logic of the dungeon” — the dungeon is that which is concealed — to a “logic of panopticons” — a form of discipline at a distance where human bodies, conversely, are subjected to being permanently visible. Nowadays, we know that this ubiquitous surveillance logic continues to be deployed through a multiplicity of guard towers, or techniques such as the infamous electronic bracelets which extend and ramify this general architecture of disciplinary visibility. And yet, we still observe a return of this “dungeon logic”: a rationale that seeks to render bodies invisible. I’m thinking of the various State rationales that are organising elimination in our societies’ blind spots. This is what effectively happened in the “Jungle” camp in Calais where you were engaged on the ground. This is equally what I could witness while working in Berlin of the Frontex security framework. On Europe’s outer borders — in the encampment at Moria, in Lesbos, Greece, for example — the institutional network of European powers has been organising this form of forgetting and abandonment. Down there, in Moria, more than 4,000 refugees have been waiting, in this blind spot, without the slightest possibility of being able to bring their hopes, their expectations, their lives into play. They are literally “repressed” until such time as a revolt or an emergency will serve as a conscious awakening of their plight.

As a counter-weight to this death-dealing architecture, institutionally violent in its capacity to *push one back into invisibility*, I would like to clarify this “potential hypothesis” about which I wrote and which, it strikes me, corresponds with your approach: this architecture of acts of hospitality that you bring together in the Très Grand Hôtel project [bit.ly/3h0VLjr](https://bit.ly/3h0VLjr). What’s at stake in both is that we’re not meant to despair and escape this critical rut of indignation. It is this stance, to save within ourselves that which wants to salvage this time, to constitute an archive of the will to be, of the power to be, that I sought to outline in the book co-authored with Aliocha Imhoff and Kantuta Quiros in 2018, *Les Potentiels du temps* (The Potentials of Time). To turn ourselves toward that which longs to happen, toward all those places where there’s an energy, a thirst for metamorphosis, to bring them together, to make them the present by dint of a discipline in thought: potentialities in reality that propose another way of inhabiting the present. I began to grasp this discipline of how to look — what we do look at in the present — by meditating on the works by the philosopher Ernst Bloch who, during the darkest hours of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was patiently writing a masterful work, *The Principle of Hope*. Hope, regrettably, tends to place life into the arms of a possible future. On the contrary, an awareness of that which affords us a way of inhabiting the world in the present is indeed “now” and “already here.” It strikes me that your work, in the wake of Gilles

Clément, of his thought of a planetary garden, is equally seeking to affirm this discipline of the eyes, of the senses. To recognise what is already here, that which is simply not seen or inadequately perceived in the present. There is that phrase by Gilles Clément concerning the garden I would like to cite: “Our civilisations submerged in the seductive world of exact sciences, driven by technological performance, the desire to subjugate nature, the control of space and time, have they not left out a vital part of our human capacity to perceive the environment and to communicate without any medium other than the mind? From my standpoint, the planetary gardening of the future will rely on increasing knowledge in order to continue practicing non-intervention.”<sup>55</sup>

You were talking about shifting from a rationale of planning to a rationale of protection.<sup>56</sup> “Protecting forms of life”, you said. I’ve a feeling that this is how a policy of hospitality asserts itself, by listening to what longs to be. In short, a politics of the potentialities of the present, of what *could be*, of what already is asserting itself as this power to be.

<sup>55</sup> Gilles Clément, « Un espace-temps recyclable », symposium *Ralentir la ville*, 30 January 2010 at Vaulx-en-Velin.

[bit.ly/303N4zg](https://bit.ly/303N4zg)

<sup>56</sup> In the French text, there is a word play on the French verb *aménager*. Written *aménager*, it signifies development (of a region). Conversely, *ménager* indicates to take good care of, to treat with respect.



**ST:** This question is often asked and always tricky: the political stance taken by PEROU. The affiliation with Gilles Clément is obvious; he is a long-time comrade with whom I founded PEROU in October 2012. Everything we advocate derives from his practice of the mobile garden that involves “bringing to life,” recognising and supporting all life-forms that arise. It is a question of protecting life, not of planning a city, whereby “to plan” is to be understood as to “construct ruthlessly.” But it’s obviously also a question of arbitration, of constantly negotiating with all the stakeholders, with every form of life involved in a struggle, for the garden is not the site of the Second Coming, the place of a natural harmony: it is equally a place of permanent struggle. So, you have to get to know all those that inhabit it. It becomes a matter of employing the detailed knowledge that a botanist such as Gilles Clément is familiar with in order to support energies, to bring to life, even in frictional circumstances.

This affiliation with Gilles Clément is beyond question; it has very strong political implications, for to adopt this life-sustaining stance taken by a gardener means confronting unpredictable and deadly policies. While we know to what extent criminal activities are organised at our borders by the States which have erected those very borders, we are less aware of that shared responsibility, of the fact that something in our languages kills, or allows to die out. That which kills is equally our way of poorly describing what is happening, of incessantly lodging complaints, of reiterating just how much the Jungle (in Calais) is nothing more than mud and an affront, of demanding that those regarded as being without resources or recourse be “taken care of,” of appealing to our “duty of hospitality” as though it might cost us something to welcome them. The language and images through which we articulate our positions are crushing all the powers, all the promises, the life and the vitality of what is taking place today, of what is being built. We are collectively co-responsible for a collapse, for the violence against what is unfolding. There is no question of minimising the responsibility of the public powers. We keep reiterating just how much the barbed wire in Calais has been killing men and women; it disfigures landscapes, instils terror and has been brainwashing the residents of Calais. The CRS

and the bulldozers deployed are the problem, and not the answer to the problem. And yet, I believe that in order to exercise leverage, and to oppose what is happening there, we must start anew within ourselves with what has as colluded with these deadly rationales. It is at this stage in my work that I’m revisiting this subdued power akin to a promise in the act of hospitality, a power of which we need to take the measure of in order to make it resound, as though a firewall. The work I’m doing in Rome consists precisely in having UNESCO recognise the act of hospitality as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, so that we can position ourselves differently faced with all that is unfolding by somehow supporting all those murmurs, all that is being built quietly on the margins. It’s a matter of taking these everyday acts seriously; to consider them for what they are: a crucial common good for future generations. It’s a case of considering how struggle can make these deeds resonate, can enable them to expand, to build in their wake. It’s a question of taking measure of the sphere in which acts are already powerful, of marking on the map the constellation of such vibrant and creative hospitality, this urbanity practiced beyond the borders where we

**“This attention to what is there, which manifests itself in literature, in architecture, in anthropology, in philosophy... underscores the disquiet for the rapidity at which our world regimes are wiping out hundreds of thousands of life forms.”**

**Camille de Toledo**

conspire and breathe together. This is a work of political representation that equally involves the need to re-echo the pleasure, the joy that plays out there, the joy generated through every act that transforms a foreigner into a guest. Perhaps the challenge is all there: to grasp this joy and to make it resound, and have it explode against the deadly forces that govern. We are in the throes of a battle, we’re living through a period of war that doesn’t speak its name and that kills every day, at our borders as well as on the margins, under the bridges of the Parisian ring-road just as in the small woods of Calais where the police are still hunting people down to this very day. How can we arm ourselves faced with this? First and foremost, I believe in the need to rearm ourselves with the confident awareness of this constructive joy that plays out through acts of hospitality in Lesbos, Lampedusa, Calais, Briçon, Roya, Bordeaux, Marseille. It’s a

geography in the literal sense of the term. Alongside PEROU, I’m engaged in depicting and writing the terrain of these conquests and these struggles. It is to render visible the text of these writings across the territory. So we come back to architecture which is a form of writing, which is a visible translation of the space that extends between living things, a writing that evinces its breathable character or not. The first building we constructed with the architect Julien Beller and the designer Malte Martin was the Embassy of PEROU in the slum of Ris-Orangis, a building like a ship with four words written on its sides: To Be, Here, Live, Now. For me, this Embassy was truly a re-presentation, notably of the daily deeds by Yvette, doyenne of the mobilised residents, who came almost every day to the slum to give the kids French lessons, and in particular to Ricardo and Dolari, and to help the families in dealing with administrative hurdles. For me, the Embassy was meant as a palace for Yvette. We constructed it as a centre that would enable the acts of Yvette and her friends to resonate, resound and multiply. This structure does indeed consist of an act of writing and even of writing on the territory of what, right in the midst of disaster, is not of the order of a

disaster. It strikes me that there is here, in this constructive act, something akin to a struggle through affirmation: to build is to describe what we hold dear. PEROU never engages in condemnation; this is also something I left behind after *Les Enfants de Don*

*Quichotte*. I poisoned myself with all that public condemnation, with this constant harking back to disaster whenever someone spoke out, the prevailing rhetoric full of terrible anger. With PEROU, I wanted to follow in the footsteps of the gardener and work at a distance from these afflictions, but not without determination, not without a program to struggle. To act upon this perspective: to expand within the territory that which we can affirm today.

**CdT:** Whenever I sought to conjure up a mental representation of this mapping of potentials, and here in this instance, of hospitalities, in this Très Grand Hôtel on a scale of a continent as vast as Europe, I could envisage a massive booking field that would be launched toward the invisible, an unconscious becoming conscious; the opposite, in short, of something such

as Booking or Airbnb. I imagined a counter-narrative, or a minor narrative in the sense that Kafka wrote of minor literature, asserting itself as the horizon of what is already there: like another language, spoken from the present, a language of dreams, of the unconscious, rising from the ruins of the present, a language which the overall din of predominant languages submerges. A minor tale that depicts a vast city, welcoming and vibrant. The clock is ticking, so I will wrap up. I'll simply finish with a few sentences from your writing through which you draw the contours of this Très Grand Hôtel, constantly present, still under construction: *"The Très Grand Hotel will be the form that we give to our*

*multiple presences and gatherings in the city in order to build another life than the one the police and health procedures organise, unbearable [...]. It will be material and immaterial, an architecture of deeds and symbols such as an architecture of fabrics and wood. It remains to be done, yet the most difficult is behind us: we know it to be perfectly conceivable and viable, desirable and necessary. In short: unstoppable. [...] We will build the Très Grand Hôtel in the same way that we add a legend about what is, just as we write the caption of what the future holds."*<sup>57</sup>

Like a footnote, a vestige of a shared path, there is this text that I wrote during a dark period of my life: *Écrire*

*la légende*.<sup>58</sup> I truly hope that we will thus caption this present of ours, toward this power to be.

**This conversation between Camille de Toledo and Sébastien Thiéry took place on 14 June 2020 as part of the cycle: "Investigate, Investigate, yet to Solve what Crime" steered by Camille de Toledo with the École urbaine de Lyon, the European Lab, and La Fête du livre de Bron around the theme of "investigation."**

**57** [bit.ly/302mExX](https://bit.ly/302mExX)

**58** [bit.ly/30La0Cw](https://bit.ly/30La0Cw)



## Camille de Toledo



Camille de Toledo is a writer with a doctorate in comparative literature. He teaches at the Contemporary Writing Workshop at ENSAV (La Cambre), in Brussels. He is the author of numerous outstanding publications, notably *Le Hêtre et le Bouleau, essai sur la tristesse européenne* (2009), *Vies pøtentielles* (2010), *L'Inquiétude d'être au monde* (2012) and *Le livre de la faim et de la soif* (2017), or *Herzl, une histoire européenne* (2018). Stemming from a Jewish family in Turkey, he studied history, law, and literature. In 2004, he obtained a Villa Medici scholarship. In 2008, he founded the European Society of Authors in order to promote "translation as language." In 2012, in the wake of the death of his brother, mother, and father, he relocated to Berlin along with his three children. Committed to legal recognition of the natural elements, he is currently orchestrating, as an associate author, the process establishing the Hearings for a Parliament of the River Loire (2019-2020), in conjunction with the *pOlau art et urbanisme en region Centre-Val de Loire* (refer to *Klaxon* 12). His forthcoming publication, *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle* is scheduled to be published by Éditions Verdier in September 2020.

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Sébastien Thiéry has a doctorate in political science. He taught public law and political science at the Sorbonne, then developed his research and teaching at the intersection of contemporary art and activism in schools of art and architecture. He became a member of *Les Enfants de Don Quichotte* in 2006; with Gilles Clément he co-founded PER-OU (Urban Resources Exploration Centre) in 2012, and has ever since been steering its research-actions. He is currently a resident at the Villa Medici (2020) where, in collaboration with a broad spectrum of artists, researchers, and collectives around the Mediterranean seaboard, he is coordinating the preliminary investigations and hearings before UNESCO aimed at obtaining recognition for the act of hospitality and to have it added to the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Member of the editorial board of the journal *Multitudes*, he is author of various books and films, including *Considérant qu'il est plausible que de tels événements puissent à nouveau survenir. Sur l'art municipal de détruire un bidonville* (2013, Post Éditions) and *Des Actes. À Calais et tout autour* (2018, Post Éditions).

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Klaxon 13 - TAKING ACTION WITH THE LIVING

## Sébastien Thiéry



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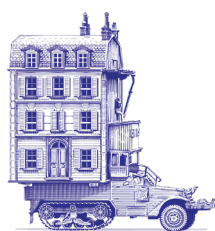
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More to come soon.

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