

These instituting bodies

For the 2022-2023 season, CAC Brétigny will pursue its experiments into uses of its space through different exhibitions that each establish a particular relationship with users, artists, curators or local residents. The individual and collective bodies invited will bring with them their rules, their ways of seeing things, their need for freedom and their constraints, entering into what we call the Institution, and modulating its borders and bounds. From professionalisation of amateurs to attempts at shared governance, passing via different methods of collaboration and pedagogy, “These instituting bodies” (*Ces corps instituants*) will inscribe the stories of their combats and intimate or public desires at the art centre in particular.

Céline Poulin: I started by reading this introduction because it illustrates CAC Brétigny’s programme this year, and in particular your exhibitions, and because it brings up questions that I’d like to discuss with you both today. On the one hand, there’s the issue of representing social struggles within the Institution (risk of social washing, appropriation, commodification...), and on the other, there’s the possibility for these bodies, whether they be social, individual or political, to transform the Institution.

Daisy, the notion of struggle is central to your residency and in the exhibition. How do you articulate your research within an institutional context? How do you think these struggling bodies will be received within an institution?

Daisy Lambert: Looking at subjects of combat and revolt, I quickly came up against a problem of methodology. I wanted to embed myself in the region and go looking in the archives for what could be considered a combat, how the combat was represented, and what was rendered visible. I wanted to connect this with theorist and curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung’s concept of “corpoliteracy”¹. He considers the body as a kind of platform, a place that is both a receiver and transmitter, which stores traces within itself and becomes a living archive. While I was looking for these traces, I was faced with a void, because in the archives you find clips from the media, really standardised images of what could be considered a combat. For my residency, I decided to work with artists who are interested in this question in a more sensitive and embodied, and so also more intimate, way. This intimacy manifests itself in different ways: through conversation and exchange in Fanny Souade Sow’s work, through collective bodily experience in Sacha Rey and Johanna Rocard’s work, or through the symbolism that Geneviève Dieng projects in her drawings, for example. These four artistic practices are part of a process of resistance with a strong tension between the visible and the invisible: what we can show of or consent to showing of a struggle, how and to whom, so as not to slip into voyeurism. In other words, in order to host these struggling bodies, we must be conscious of their traumatic experience and of the impossibility of exhibiting some of this violence directly,

whether it be police, medical, domestic, or social violence more broadly. In this particular case, the exhibition cannot simply be a restitution of the workshops held during the residency. It encourages the development of strategies of concealment and codification to preserve the integrity of these bodies.

CP: The CAC Brétigny is a public service that is part of a local government. The combats that interest you involve other French state services, notably the prison system and the police force. Did you consider the possibility that these causes might be exploited by the institution inviting you?

DL: Obviously, because there's always a risk of appropriation. I think our role involves a process of permanent repositioning. bell hooks² said something particularly apt about this. She said repositioning is an act of critical intervention in itself, fostering an attitude of vigilance rather than a denial of the mechanisms at work. For the workshops, choices are made in direct collaboration with the artists I've invited, artists who are constantly asking themselves these questions. On the subject of police violence, with Fanny [Souade Sow], we're trying to conduct work on the ground to look at how local actors recognise how this violence exerts itself in the area, in Essonne. It's quite complicated, because we don't know if there will be a response, if the dialogue will really get going. I think that to avoid this appropriation, we also tried to step outside of the art centre a bit. In a way, the exhibition will conclude work that first took place outside of the institution.

CP: Thomas, in the exhibition you're preparing, the question of social struggles is central, particularly in the texts that Emanuel [Almborg] worked on with the people he met, participants who have gone on to become partners in his project. How do you perceive the way in which he will bring these combats into the Institution through fiction? Has this exhibition, or other projects you've worked on with the New Patrons or around queer activism, at the Maison populaire in Montreuil, nourished your reflections on how exhibitions can deal with social struggles?

Thomas Conchou: At the New Patrons, which works at the intersection between art and social work, we're mediators not curators. This is something that really informs the way in which I consider the function of collective work. I think that the combat also lies in the collective process. With the New Patrons, for me it was about going and finding groups in society that were establishing themselves as custodians of a grievance. There was an ambition to defend a need or a desire for which, as mediators, we could provide both the institutional tools and financial means as well as contact with the creative force of an artist, a designer or a collective. Putting yourself at the service of a common project also means giving up a part of your position as an author. The difficult part is finding a way to

safeguard everybody's right to individual expression, whilst exploring the possibilities of working together. This is a balance that you have to constantly renegotiate. Like you just said Daisy, I think you have to be able to constantly reposition yourself.

My interest in Emanuel [Almborg's] work is a logical continuation of this reflection. He was invited to produce this first film, *The Nth Degree*, with institutional means and support. He sought out participants from Wales and North London, and created an artistic platform that is self-structured and which is now taking on authorship of its own projects. What interests me is seeing how this has repositioned members of the collective, how it works inside an institution and what kind of shift this engenders. During the production period of the exhibition, we realised that this forces us to reinvent methodological territories. We don't typically inherit spaces that take into account, and exhibit properly, collective ways of working. I think there's a historical reason for that. I feel like I've grown up professionally with the "Social Turn"³ of contemporary art. Obviously, these practices existed before they were theorised, but we're part of a movement where there is a growing desire and more and more space to occupy institutions in this way.

CP: That's really optimistic!

DL: I agree with you Thomas, and at the same time, I think French institutions could learn a lot from what's being done elsewhere. This was my experience when I worked at Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. They had "constituencies" within the museum, meaning activist groups of which the uses weren't always linked to what we might consider to be an institutional artistic practice. The Queer Constituency, for example, was formed in order to propose a new form of mediation and went on to become autonomous and propose events outside of the framework of the exhibitions. This created an exchange with visitors, between people rather than around the works. I think that it's through these openings that bridges can be built between a non-institutional artistic practice and a circulation of the spaces' uses. I have the impression that while this idea is making its way into French mentality a bit, it still manifests itself only very exceptionally.

CP: There's La Semeuse at the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. At first, it was the artist Marjetica Potrč's project, but it later became an independent not-for-profit organisation working outside of the site. At CAC, we've tried to develop something akin to it through the project l'École⁴, with the constraint of being a public service, within a building that belongs to a local authority, unlike the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers which is a not-for-profit organisation, for example. To begin with, we had thought about l'École in terms of questions

3 See Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents", *Artforum*, vol.44, N°6 February 2006; and Maria Lind's response, "The Collaborative Turn" in Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, Lars Nilsson, *Taking the Matter Into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007).

4 L'École is a group dedicated to experimenting in knowledge and practices in the visual arts. It brings together people from diverse walks of life who all share a desire to learn and to do things differently. It is a nebulous group of which the composition varies according to the season, the desire and the availability of each person.

around transmission, but when we began using it, we realised that it could also be a space for a different kind of dialogue about the way the art centre could function. You've both talked about a permanent repositioning of approaches and of an ever-reflective position in terms of the way we work. Could this be considered as a method for avoiding processes of commodification?

TC: I think that the question of the mutability of processes in collective work is really dependant on something else: a deferment of hierarchical positions. In a way, if we try to make modes of expression horizontal and be as transparent as possible in these spaces of collective, radical pedagogical practices, it's in order to create spaces in which we can detach ourselves from hierarchisation or assigned roles that can sometimes make the places or roles we occupy in society oppressive, rigid, and very limiting. The creation of floating pedagogical spaces also enables us to be constantly surprised by what we are able to invent there.

There's a really strong theoretical foundation to Emanuel's work, around Soviet pedagogy from the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, schools for blind or deaf people, and what experiments in these places were able to produce in terms of ways of learning or teaching. At the same time, there is a constant confrontation between a principle of reality and experimentation in reality, because from this he draws methods that are implemented in the projects. I think this also raises the issue of generosity, because to make room for these practices is to consider them in the way we consider artistic practices in general. At the *Maison populaire*, for example, we organised a collective creation and transmission project with Lou Masduraud around ceramics with adults and children. Sometimes, the children took on the role of instructors for the sessions, because some of them had been doing pottery for years while the adults were just starting out. I think the fact that the outcome of these workshops was displayed at the heart of the exhibition, and so at the heart of the art centre, created a real change in the way the people interacted with each other. Members of the *Maison populaire*, who come first and foremost for the amateur workshops and then, perhaps, for the exhibitions, really felt like they connected with the art centre in a new way.

CP: Yes, that raises the question of recognition. We worked a lot on the question of deferring status with Marie Preston, we also experimented around this with Fanny Lallart as part of the ELGER⁵ project and, through *l'École*, we experienced first-hand the changes in relationships it produces. Transparency, as you mentioned, is important. A deferment of statuses doesn't hide power relations, but it's important to be conscious of them. For

5

ELGER is pronounced *Elles gèrent*, meaning "women handling it" and spells *règle* (a word meaning both "rule" and "menstrual period") backwards. It is a research-action project around collective transmission between female artists and amateurs curated by Fanny Lallart and Céline Poulin. A cross between popular education and contemporary art, ELGER draws on methods of self-determination formulated by the various waves of feminism since the 1970s. It has resulted in several artistic workshops organised by six artists (Laura Burucoa, Juliette Beau Denès, Morgane Brien-Hamdane, Pauline Lecerf, Vinciane Mandrin and Zoé Philibert) with groups of local people in Essonne over the course of two years.

example, when I speak, I have to make it clear that I'm just giving my opinion and it's not an instruction, because as a member of management, my speech is performative. It's quite complex, but really interesting, to unpick the status from the speech.

TC: We spoke about the margin for flexibility in an institution. This is a tricky point, because institutions have difficulty translating the heterogeneity of the spaces and venues where artistic discourses and practices are expressed. It's no coincidence that it's within art centres, spaces that are regional and often more collective, that this kind of project has become part of institutional life. It's not the case in the bigger organisations. Daisy, you spoke about a museum in the Netherlands, and it's true that in France we're still far behind.

DL: Exactly. In France, you can find a more developed sense of collaboration in art centres between visitors and amateur practices, but the museum as an institution is still very cut off and very exclusive.

CP: It's true that there's more room for flexibility within art centres.

TC: Yes, and I wouldn't have wanted to do the project I did at the Maison populaire anywhere else. I wouldn't have been at all interested in spotlighting queer artistic practices in some Parisian white cube in which there can be instances of "pink-washing" or where practices that are experienced and particular to a certain location appear out-of-context.

CP: We can see the discrepancy in certain organisations between that which is presented and the reality of daily working life there. From the outside, it's difficult to differentiate between an honourable institution well placed to take on certain subjects and one that is not.

DL: That is exactly where the responsibility of an institution lies, in the need to be aware of its own practices. It's up to an institution to determine whether what it chooses to show is coherent with the way in which it develops over the long term.

TC: I think that at the same time as this work of rendering practices and struggles visible, there has to be work done from within institutions, for which we are all jointly responsible as workers within the cultural sector. This is a political and historical responsibility, which starts with an awareness of who makes up the selection and management committees and other parts of the organisation that operate in relative opacity. We always come back to discussing our individual positions on these questions, but we don't have any figures or methodological proposals that could go on to be followed by institutions. We need an observatory dedicated to these issues, to ethics and the make-up of all of the chains of hierarchy in institutions.

CP: As freelancers, do either of you feel like you could change an institution from within? Do you get a sense of a malleability that allows you to put your own work processes in place?

DL: It's more the weight of the collective, or an ecosystem of supportive actors, that makes it possible to instil change. I don't think we can bring about change from the inside on an individual scale. For example, Céline, you put your season together with Thomas' and my work in mind. We ourselves have invited artists who create zones of friction between the art centre's institutionalised space and their work approaches and methods. So the permanent repositioning that we've spoken about also manifests itself through the invitations we extend, in the space we afford less established proposals while being conscious of the limits at play.

TC: I often think about a project by the artist Maria Eichhorn at the Chisenhale Gallery in London⁶. For her solo exhibition in 2016, she closed the space and gave the whole team a month's holiday. This raises the question of what degree of flexibility an institution has, although this project has to be looked at within the context of the Chisenhale, an art centre that has patrons but is not publicly accountable. It would be impossible for you to do that Céline, given your duties to public service and to providing educational activities.

CP: Yes, and because CAC Brétigny is one of the only visual arts actors in the whole area, so that would really restrict access to contemporary art. We're quite far out, it's different accommodating that kind of project in Brétigny compared to London, where there is an extensive offer in terms of visual arts and experiences.

TC: As for this question about whether freelancers can bring about change within institutions, I feel like I have often sought out spaces where a conversation about the way I think about my work was happening. I've never worked with an institution that first came across as hostile, that I could then try to change.

CP: When Daisy and I met, we immediately saw eye-to-eye about how to work the Institution. I think all three of us share this position, which brings together theoretical conception with a pragmatic, structural incarnation of projects. This helps us find the right positions.

DL: Céline, I think that this year is the first time that the three exhibitions at CAC have been planned by three different people. In this process of repositioning, how, as director of an art centre, do you manage to maintain coherence across this kind of proposal?

CP: I don't do seasons around themes but issues, they're built successively out of other exhibitions, at a kind of meta level. The idea for "These instituting bodies" (Ces corps

instituants) came after I invited you both. In my project, there are these issues that run through all of the exhibitions, but it's important for me that each proposal be different in terms of aesthetics, artistic execution and atmosphere. We're not from the same generation, we aren't necessarily looking at the same things, so your projects are going to be different from what I would have proposed, and that's really important to me. I'm not looking for something univocal, I want there to be a certain polyphony. I love rediscovering the space in a different way, and I build the programme like spaces for experimentation, for testing ideas. Each time, it nourishes my thinking, it helps me move forward personally and collectively with the team. What interests me is building things together, without knowing exactly where we might end up.

TC: That's also what we learn from collaboration: to expect a certain level of diversity in the propositions, and complexity in the forms and organisation. We have everything to gain from cultivating a diversity of practices and everything to lose from locking ourselves into certain aesthetic lines.

CP: Yes, but it's true that it's more complicated, in terms of budget and proposal writing, for example. Accommodating different people, each with their own desires, way of seeing things and vision, can cause friction. The fact that there is no standard way of working is really complicated at every level, because each artist, each curator has their own methods, so we have to try and find common ground.

TC: This all raises the question of failure too. Methods ensure that projects come to something, because there are standardised processes of working geared towards efficiency. I think it's important to consider failure of projects as a question of point of view and temporality. The failure to arrive at a certain outcome, the trial and error, the delays, etc., are parts of working that help us learn a huge amount⁷.

CP: Marie Preston and I talk about this a lot in terms of working methods for co-creation⁸, but it doesn't work as well with exhibitions. That's actually why we've decided that the project l'École won't do any exhibitions. We wanted it to be able to fail, to go in diverse and varied directions... So we've chosen instead to invite artists who could host l'École's experiments.

Transcription and editing: Anne-Charlotte Michaut

7 For more on this subject, read Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

8 For more on this subject, see Céline Poulin and Marie Preston, with Stéphanie Airaud (eds.), *Co-Creation*, (Paris: Éditions Empire; CAC Brétigny, 2019) and Céline Poulin and Marie Preston (eds.), Marie Preston, *Inventer l'école, penser la co-création*, (CAC Brétigny; Nevers : Tombolo Presses, 2021).

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