

RATHER THAN NOTHING

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The opportunity offered by the Maison populaire to organise an annual programme of exhibitions on the concept of transformation¹ led me to follow up a line of thought begun with another exhibition, *Ce qui vient* (What Comes),² two years previously. The works in that exhibition put our relationship with the future into perspective, notably with regard to the strategies we develop for trying to cope with what is going to happen: with what does not yet exist and so eludes our control; and, symmetrically, with the freedom stemming from this enforced indeterminacy. Together with philosopher Frédéric Neyrat, whose research into the biopolitics of catastrophe, the critique of flows, and becoming had been a source of inspiration for me since then, I came up with the project *Plutôt que rien* (Rather Than Nothing), which I structured as a three-part curatorial venture: for the first two parts transformation, or more precisely alteration, was to be the underlying thrust of an experiment carried out by the artists according to a working protocol aimed at modifying the format of a group exhibition; while for the third, transformation was addressed by the Art Orienté objet (object-Oriented Art) duo in terms of the physical mutation of the world we live in.

The title *Rather Than Nothing* refers to the fundamental functioning of living systems, as evoked in Leibniz's famous question: "Why is there something rather than nothing?". Frédéric Neyrat and I decided to set the "something" aside,³ given that it constitutes an affirmation of a situation preexisting the event of being and its becoming. As we wished to make room for the event, we opted for an absence, an anomie. Nothing would counterbalance nothing.

The alteration explored here is an expression of alterity caught up in a creative dynamic: the becoming-other. As such it is characteristic of any event, in the sense of the "happening" of what was not yet nameable, or even possible, and which becomes possible only by happening. For the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, this altering event is linked to desire, less in the sense of a quest for an object – whose outlines have already been anticipated – than of an increment of being in the encounter with what still remains unknown. This encounter effects a displacement without which there is no true intelligibility, no sensibility, and hence no meaning.⁴

¹ The theme of the Maison populaire's cultural programme for 2011 was prompted by an observation by the French chemist, philosopher and economist Antoine Lavoisier: "Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed."

² *Ce qui vient* (*What Comes*), second edition of the Ateliers de Rennes biennial, May-July 2010, www.lesateliersderennes.fr/edition-2010

³ See his text "The Art Gap", p.16 of this volume.

⁴ Boyan Manchev, "Entretien avec Jean-Luc Nancy - La Métamorphose. Le Monde", in *Rue Descartes* no. 64, "La Métamorphose", PUF, May 2009.

I see the displacement Jean-Luc Nancy speaks of as something like the “gap”, the term Frédéric Neyrat applies to the disruptive onward movement of art as it came into play in *Rather Than Nothing*. There the artists opened up a space-time in which alteration processes could develop and so modify the standard pattern of the group exhibition: in a cyclical movement of appearance-disappearance in the first part, *Démontages* (Dismantlings), and through the organic mode of production of a collective, mutating form in the second, *Formation(s)*. The third part, titled by the artists *Plutôt que tout* (Rather Than Everything) as a counterpoint to the overall title, looked into the process of radical alteration – eradication – of a vital element of our ecosystem: the thrombolite, a concretion of the bacteria which triggered life on Earth and whose existence is now endangered.

Looking back after a few months at the images of *Dismantlings* and *Formation(s)*, I understand what led me to initiate these projects: the urge to attempt something other than a collective exhibition in which I would stamp a meaning, even an open-ended one, on the finished works by arranging them spatially in line with a discourse; the urge, rather, to propose a spatiotemporal framework in (and with) which everything could be enacted and re-enacted, in which meaning would gush forth from the acts themselves, amid the eddying of the adventure.

DISMANTLINGS:

CONTRACTION OF TIME/DILATION OF SPACE

A single, pristine space: the art centre’s rectangular room; and a continuous duration: one day, from opening to closing time. These set the working context for each artist. In contrast with most group exhibitions, time contracted here into a single stream of eleven hours, while the space expanded out of all proportion, totally available to a single art project. The artists worked there during opening hours, neither preparing their offering “in the wings” nor concealing it until it was “ready” for the public gaze. The art centre was in a state of permanent mutation, modulating from studio to white cube in time with the successive installations and dismantlings of the works.

In concrete terms of fabricating and physically occupying a space, the usual working conditions were drastically changed. A few hours in a place open to all and sundry calls for a quite different artistic presence than an exhibition prepared out of sight and revealed, in all its fixity, at the opening. The oddness of the situation was substantially increased by the use of real-time webcam transmission of everything that happened on the Maison populaire website. That way everyone could follow, at a distance, the work’s appearance-disappearance process. Artists, curator, team, passers-by, visitors – everyone became actors on a stage with no director, constructed and deconstructed as the days went by.

So the artists were physically involved, or at least they could be if they wanted to. Some put themselves through an endurance test: Kel Glaister, wearing herself out trying to move 100 kilograms of modelling clay; Jakob Gautel, countering “Big Brother” – the webcam – with a cyclopean gaze that filled the room; Guillaume Robert, opposing the visibility of nothing with the invisibility of 680 holes drilled in the wall; Charlie Jeffery who, for the first time – and like Olivier Capparos before him – extended his spoken/sung/guitar improvisation over several hours, using texts from his paintings and notebooks.

Others appropriated the place as a life-size studio: Bertrand Lamarche who found new freedom as he tested out his *Map* in this “vacant zone”; Damien Marchal who fiddled for eight hours with explosive fuse, then brought the result out into the backyard in the evening and incinerated it; Gerald Petit who shot a film, using the art centre as a location in the morning, an editing room in the afternoon and a movie house at night; Roxane Borujerdi who made a giant modular game, an articulated snake that provided a metaphor for the passing of the days. Here we saw bodies hard at work, outside their studios.

There were concealment games as well: Marylène Negro, who disappeared for her opening/dismantling, just like the character in her video; and Cyril Verde, who set up his work – a decoy model of the art centre filmed from inside by the webcam – while internaut visitors contemplated a deserted space.

Laurent Tixador would vanish later, too, using his day for the public launch of a manhunt in which he was the prey.

The challenge of the day’s elusiveness made time topological. It stretched and retracted, slowed down and sped up, changed character. It was acted on, played with, taken over in every sense. There was Marie-Jeanne Hoffner’s spatialised time, each section of the wall photographed and then the edited images unreeling filmically and summoning the visitor to a motionless journey to the outer limits of the space; LNG’s matter-time, paintings subjected to the variations of daylight; Evariste Richer’s abyss-time, a fossil tree millions of years old whirling like a Duchamp rotorelief; time for doing nothing at all while everyone watched, in Laurent Pernel’s patriotic hammock; time limit for Pauline Bastard, flooding the art centre with images gleaned from the social networks in a sequence restricted to opening hours but capable of running on indefinitely; time seemingly immobile, suddenly brought into being by an imperceptible transformation and Keren Benbenisty’s video projected globe of the moon – immaculate in the morning, then in the evening covered all over with black marks, without our having been able to follow what went on; and lastly walking time with Neal Beggs, who we accompanied on a stroll from home to Mont Blanc.

Only in a few cases did processuality and bodies lead to the performance format. Some artists made the claim, but what was involved was less a gesture intended to trigger affects in the spectator, less the expression of a “doing” than the “doing” of the expression, the process of creating the work. Nonetheless, making the operation public required more or less conscious, more or less accentuated recourse to *mise en scène*. A situation reinforced by the webcam and one which the collective 1.0.3 skilfully used to highlight this aspect of the system with an

ingenious, overlit sculpture of white books: the image showed the art centre transformed into a panoramic movie screen, a depthless black zone which, responding to the camera's automatic contrast, revealed the space as people crossed it like actors on some elusive stage.

MAKING PLAY WITH CONSTRAINT

The artists had to share the exhibition time, but the space was all theirs. This generated attentiveness to its boundaries: its volume, for example, saturated by Romain Pellas's enormous white city; and its walls, where Julien Nédélec's rubbing revealed the scars of earlier exhibitions. Boundaries are only boundaries to the extent that they exclude an exterior – which Armand Behar, using a camera and computer-image inlay, invited us to break into by traversing the image and actually entering the world of representation. Those boundaries split open sometimes, to make way for the light of Julien Tiberi's "cracked" people. Other artists used the dual register of space perception – bodily on the one hand and webcam-visual on the other – to stop the cybernauts from getting into the place. Maïté Ceglia blocked the camera with a plastic bag and Aymeric Ebrard broke up the stills of a sequence from Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, some of them accidentally altered, into two imperceptibly elliptical videos, one on show in the space, the other on the Internet site. Both referenced censorship of the Internet by the Egyptian authorities faced with the recent revolution.

Any protocol always brings constraints. In addition to matters of time and space, the *Dismantlings* protocol included limitations on budgets and equipment. Some artists were quick to make play with this: Nicolas Simarik, whose relay batons got slipped into viewer's pockets or fitted onto broom handles and other on-site discoveries, forming impromptu sculptures; or Fayçal Baghriche, making microphones, loudspeakers, videoprojectors, monitors and computers work to no purpose; while elevating these objects to the status of works of art, Baghriche underscored the distinctiveness of *Démontages* in its call more for revelation of a preexisting spirit than the bringing out of any particular content. This spirit comprised the vital forces of the place, its light, its history, its matter, the beings who inhabited⁵ or traversed it – those whose shadows Dominique Blais tried to count in his infra-thin installation. It comprised, too, the polyglot Maison populaire members, who Frédéric Dumont called upon when speaking in tongues about the "here and now". Not to mention the care Régis Perray lavished on the place with the household cleaning products he pulled out of the cupboards and lined up around the carpet, where he then settled down with his dictionary of proper names.

⁵ Especially hostesses Malika and Claudine, the main witnesses to the process.

Another constraint tweaked by the artists was the presence of a curator armed with a statement – in my case I considered it a grid, rather than a framework or paratext – in the sense of a set of coordinates initially intended to inform, not to say transform. So Marie Reinert offered to become my tool, “a body in a space” obeying my every instruction in real time; while I myself was consigned to the space for six hours by Carole Douillard. Aurélien Mole took over the curatorial side of his own exhibition, even to the point of writing the presentation text. And P.Nicolas Ledoux tried to belie the exhibition’s title by asking the artists who preceded and succeeded him to leave their works in place – until one of them, after three days of accumulation, demanded a virgin space.

The ultimate, and probably most unusual constraint was that the works had to disappear the same evening; sometimes they had only just been finished, and the continuously unstable formal process this set in motion generated a totally new visibility system. Five artists came to grips with this in their own different ways: Guillaume Aubry by releasing three sister mice whose definitive disappearance proved unverifiable; Didier Courbot by donating flowers which the visitors took away in bouquets; Ludovic Paquelier with a scrupulously executed fresco of a mayfly, an insect with a one-day lifespan, which he blanked out when night fell; while a pirate work by the collective involved a musical patchwork hidden in the wall, and Julie C. Fortier produced a fade to white via successive overexposures of the work by Emilie Pitoiset, the artist who had preceded her.

The public played a core role throughout. But what public? Principally, the one that had inspired the experiment: the project originated in the way the *Maison populaire* is used by its members – its main visitors – who nonetheless are not viewers. They come through the art centre every few days or so, glancing more or less attentively at a setting that as a rule stays unchanged for several weeks. So what startled them about *Dismantlings* was finding a configuration, an energy, a light and artworks that were never the same twice running, together with the presence of artists most of the time. Sometimes the openings and dismantlings triggered exchanges: enthusiasm or bafflement on a full-time worksite with forms crystallising here and there.

The locals had also been invited: leaflets in letterboxes, information in the local press. From time to time a head would peep around the door – and there were people who came back more than once.

The usual art audience was not the main target of the exhibition, having been deliberately left in the dark as to what would be on show: at the outset there was no list of artists – the main tool of art’s “reputation economy” – which instead got written as the days went by. The communication business, which requires an event to be presented before it happens, has trouble with the processual. What happened – unexpectedly – was that the absence of artists’ names in the promotional material resulted in a disproportionate profile for what was actually known: the structure, the protocol, the curatorship. This phenomenon diminished, though, as each day saw an artist and his proposal become a reality and the proliferation of works gradually took precedence over the infrastructure.

The websurfing public – mainly art lovers and professionals saving themselves a trip – made quite a contribution to the originality of the concept and to the attendance rate at an art centre transformed into an extension of the desktop. For some of them the day-to-day monitoring became addictive. The static framing and the low-definition image created a distinctive vision of the process, the upshot being a second version of *Dismantlings*.

It was the members and the cybernauts that Julien Discret called on to fuel his Leibniz-style machine for asking “why?” – not that it was able to offer them any answers.

A PROJECT WITH NO GOAL

What kind of texture did the exhibition take on and endow each work with? What dialogues started up, and how did the works interact? *Dismantlings* was marked by a refusal to orchestrate content and form. The protocol, laid down as a basic minimum, opened up all sorts of possibilities, leaving room for the unpredictable, the unscripted, the random. Each new work transformed the whole, but without any control of the way things changed. The allotting of a day to each artist was not stage-managed and the order of the contributions says no more than it seems to.

The outcome is a strange, slightly wild kind of collective poem, a relay race with no finishing line and no record-breaking pretensions. In the final analysis, *Dismantlings* is a project with no goal, a sort of obverse of the invasive reification of art by the art market and by art marketing, a project inspired by Jean-Luc Nancy’s call to “try to let a new desire in: the desire to relate to a mortality or finitude of *the world* which frees us of the stubborn, anguished concern with thinking of meaning (the meaning of the world, the world as meaning) as a store of knowledge, a signification (nature, history, fate, man, god, etc.). To think of it rather as reciprocal interplay of existing entities within a whole which itself only exists suspended over nothing, over no bottom or even over any abyss – for we must reject equally fantasies of the vertiginous and fantasies of bedrock. A meaning which by itself is no more than a brief resonance in the midst of nothingness, the space-time of our appearance-disappearance.”⁶

⁶ Boyan Manchev, “Entretien avec Jean-Luc Nancy - La métamorphose, le monde”, *op. cit.*, p.92.

FORMATION(S): MUTUAL ALTERATIONS

The second sequence extended the experiment with transformation via an exploration of the codes of the group exhibition. As a venture symmetrical to *Dismantlings*, *Formation(s)* brought together four artists from the first sequence – Guillaume Aubry, Dominique Blais, Carole Douillard and Marie-Jeanne Hoffner – in the experience of a shared output which they go back over in this book.⁷ *Formation(s)* does not consist in the careful juxtaposition of works by different hands, any more than it is the “personal” exhibition of a collective, since the artists had no intention of working together. This enforced collaboration gave the project its dynamic, with four separate artistic personalities invited to find common ground for coexisting in a given space, with a purely joint signature for the results. In moving beyond individual creativity, beyond the boundaries between different styles and different worlds, these initiatives lay bare the single-author monopoly of the mode of creation in the visual arts, as compared to music, dance and architecture, all of them more open to collaborative approaches.

Implementation of the project, to which the artists reacted with real enthusiasm and a taste for adventure, was based on negotiation between the individual participants that saw each of them oscillating between their personal wishes and the consistency of a collective subject; between the urge to preserve the precision and singularity of the initial thrust and the need to incorporate input from the others.

In the course of exchanges via the work diary, phone conversations, videoconferences and meetings, some ideas were quickly adopted while others required more time for discussion. In an inherent consequence of the group configuration, the artists took the immediate context as their material: the physical setting (light, ceiling, switchboard, visitor movement), the temporality of the exhibition (ongoing shifts in lighting and sound) and the curatorial givens (a photograph of a movement of my hands, an introductory text broadcast through a loudspeaker). In addition to enabling the artists to share a directly graspable reality, this concentration on the here and now gave the venture as a whole its visual density and dramatic tension.

Another crucial aspect of *Formation(s)* lay in its amendability: the opening did not put the seal on a definitive configuration, being just one visible stage in the exhibition’s development. The organic, living dimension of a four-person creation could outlive the opening via modifications agreed on by all concerned or not. This arrangement left room for changes to individual stances within a shared artistic production, as well as for the freedom to change a form, whether it were an action or an object. In addition the rough drafts inevitable in any act of creation peeped through here, at the very same time as the work took on a public existence.

⁷ See p.92 for the discussion between the artists, a collage of fragments from the work diary they shared on the Internet from the beginning of the collaboration. Added to throughout the process, this document served as a collection of ideas and a locus for comparison and generation of forms.

**RATHER THAN EVERYTHING:
CONCRETE UTOPIA**

The third segment sprang from my ecological concerns, the first of which is the transformation of the living conditions of species, whatever those species may be. Already acquainted with the commitment of Art Orienté objet, an art duo very much up with current changes to the world as both a physical entity and a rich canvas of diverse, interwoven cultures, I invited them to come up with an outward-looking exhibition, one involving other latitudes and other participants. Residents of Montreuil, Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin decided to hook the Maison populaire up to the other side of the world by tying their proposal in with a residency already under way in Western Australia. Playing on the connection between local and global, they introduced the inhabitants of Montreuil to the – highly distinctive – denizens of Lake Clifton: thrombolites, strange concretions formed by cyanobacteria, the earliest known form of life on Earth. The looming disappearance of these organisms takes on apocalyptic proportions in the mythology of the local Aboriginal people, for whom the death of these eggs of the primal snake, Wagyl, would signify the end of the world. The artists met with the Aboriginals, local scientists, and the mayor of nearby Mandurah, torn between expansion of her municipality and her sensitivity to ecological issues.

Rather Than Everything, their ironic transcription of my programme's title and a pointer to the human tendency to seek total possession and control, used this geographically distant situation to shape a media presentation for the people of Montreuil. This presentation accompanied the artists' launching of an international petition to have Lake Clifton given UNESCO World Heritage listing.

And so the art centre became a TV studio, with backing from the local TVM network and Laure Noualhat, environment correspondent for Paris daily *Libération*, also known to webservers as Bridget Kyoto.⁸ On a set made up of their own works, the Art Orienté objet pair organised two broadcasts featuring public figures with varying degrees of involvement in what was happening to the lake. In the first programme, titled "Why Nothing, Rather Than Everything?", journalist and author Agnès Sinai, sociologist Bertrand Méheust, microbiologist Purificación López-García and, via a sham link with Bucharest, Romanian historian Lucian Boia, got together with the artists in a discussion of the crisis of the Anthropocene – the present geological age – and mythological views of the end of the world.

⁸ www.youtube.com/user/BridgetKyoto

For the second broadcast, “Act Glocally”, economist Yann Moulier-Boutang, architect/landscaper Christophe Laurens, artist Mileece, and Frédéric Neyrat, prerecorded in the United States, debated the issues of global warming and negative growth. Punctuated by parodic, talk show-style “reports”, interviews and music videos, the two sequences closed with a live band singing a song related to the subject. There was a studio audience and recordings of the broadcasts went out on TVM a few days later.

A third high point, a videoconference organised by the artists for the mayors of Montreuil and Mandurah, gave an official, concrete edge to a quest its instigators like to call utopian. There was talk of a symbolic twinning of the two municipalities, in the interests of toughening up the movement to save the lake and at the same time bringing two local campaigns together around a global issue.

Like the first two segments, this third part of *Rather Than Nothing* breaks with the standard exhibition codes, in an oscillation between two forms of reality: art and television. When the harsh lighting of the TV studio gives way to the soft glow of hurricane lamps, the objects used on the set regain their status as works of art: the empty armchairs revert to being sculptures made of wood hundreds of years old,⁹ the monitor screens go back to videos by the artists, the background images become art photography again, the blue neon stork lapses once more into expressive silence, and so on. A feeling of latency persists in this semi-darkness until the return of the spotlights and cameras. The overall visual quality takes on a special flavour in this uncertain inbetweenness, pointing up Art Orienté objet’s skill in uniting attentiveness to form and social awareness in a single, original proposal, with a commitment and acuity whose impact extends far beyond the art centre.

The *Rather Than Nothing* trilogy marks a decisive stage in the definition of my current field of research: exploration of the forms events take in the art of today. The event, the unforeseeable happening arising out of the moment and short-circuiting all expectations, is especially present in certain works and certain curatorial initiatives – including those presented in this book – and gives expression to the need artists feel to distance themselves from the established formulae their work can be subjected to. If we believe that the most important requirement of our epoch is unblocking flows – economic, informational, social – and that the speed and self-generating nature of these flows causes them to loop back on themselves and ossify, it seems vital to clear the way for these distancing processes, these manifestations of something we cannot put a name to and of which, in the wake of Leibniz, we continue to explore the *raison d’être*, rather than nothing.

⁹ The armchairs and the table for the guests were made from the oldest pine on the Ile de Ré, the first one to fall during the hurricane of the winter of 1999.