

Cul de sac

Interviews by Michela Alessandrini et Ekaterina Shcherbakova

On the 7th of April we were invited for the opening of a show at the Bastille Art Center (CAB) in Grenoble, France. The ongoing group exhibition OUTSIDER (un geste à part) developed the idea of madness as being multiple and more complex than what we reduce it to today, theory that reveals itself in the artworks of the artists presented, all from different generations. Works from local art school students were shown side by side with artists such as Marina Abramovich, Pipilotti Rist, Francis Alÿs, etc. Curious about this eclectic choice and with the desire to see our friend François Roux's latest work, we headed for the CAB, which is located on a small fortified mountain looking down onto Grenoble. We took the cable car, leading up to the Bastille, a highlight in Grenoble's sightseeing. Our trip up was accompanied by an unusual sound, what seemed to be singing, way too constant for something from below us, so that had to be from one of the other transparent balloon-like cable cars. When finally visited the show we found out that what we had heard, was a performance by the artist Alexandra David. Curator and director of the CAB Vincent Verlé then introduced us to Alexandra, who had just finished performing. So, this is how our first meeting took place.

Alexandra David was a student at the Grenoble School of Arts and at the Academy of fine Arts of Brera in Milan. Her work is based on her personal experiences, as if she were the persona of her own self. She depicts the absurd and seemingly usual events of contemporary life, questioning them and allowing the viewers to perceive them in a new way.

Alexandra welcomed us several times into her home in Grenoble, where life and work converge with intent, always entertaining our palates with delicious meals. Her hospitality could actually be seen as a part of her project Curating the Curator, in our case Curating the Curators. Curating the Curator took place in Mulhouse in 2006 with the curator Sophie Vigourous (Jousse Entreprise Gallery, Paris). Instead of producing a conventional show, Alexandra fully reorganized the curator's apartment who had fallen sick just when the artist arrived to prepare for her show. She took care of the curator, improved and transformed the curator's flat while taking video notes and photographs that were later shown in the flat itself. We also directly experienced her performance Cartes Divinatoires, with results that are coming true as we write. In this performance Alexandra foretells the artistic future of each viewer, with homemade tarot cards, each featuring a work by a contemporary artist.

She has an easy-going and open-minded personality. Still, it goes without saying; we may have been eating and drinking, but all our meetings involved discussions about art. Here are some extracts of our conversations that tell a lot about her approach to art:

MA-ES: *What is the role of narrative, the act of storytelling in your artworks?*

AD: I perceive the act of storytelling as the construction of a point of view on reality. It predates writing and has played a consistent role in our mind's evolution. When someone invents a tale -based on some sort of reality even if it can be far fetched- it reveals itself like a filter for real life events. Besides, when you repeat something that has been told, it may seem a repetition, but basically you are adding an extra filter to its verbal transmission. Some words exist this way. You repeat them enough in many different contexts and languages and they actually start to look as if they mean something. A quick example, the word "project" -which we use in art regularly- exists in so many languages, and you seem to need it for any and every circumstance. In France, it appears to be important for having a baby ("projet de naissance") and you can't get a loan if you don't have a proper "projet de vie" (life project). It's as if life -art isn't any different- didn't exist without "projects". I think this word reveals



Alexandra David, *Piñata*, performance, 2011

how capitalism has seized our everyday and professional lives, making us constantly “project” the story of a life instead of actually living it. This is exactly how we create filters through which we look at the world, at life. I believe that nowadays we don’t really recognize the strength and impact of a fairy-tale, a legend, a story and how it’s told, or a word on our daily living. In my work the compilation of real and invented layers are interrelated. It works in the same way as “fictional reality”, the mechanism exploited in movies and television - copying our life and then we copy it’s representation. Using a personal narrative is essential in how it helps me address life issues that we often prefer to keep quiet, such as the difficulties we encounter in love, shoplifting (more common than we think) or how we cope with ageing. My aim isn’t the narrative or the storytelling; it’s how I can use them as a tool to impact the real world. Words, images, imagination, sounds have power. If you put them together into a narrative there is a chance you can make an impact. On a more personal level it can also permit to unveil a form of awareness you weren’t necessarily conscious you had.

MA-ES: One could see your art with the perspective of the feminine. And it’s true that the themes you discuss, the media you use and how you use them reveal something that has existed for centuries, something eternal, constructiveness, resourcefulness, creativity... that is customarily considered as feminine. How far is this opinion from your approach?

AD: This question opens onto a slippery slope in terms of a logical answer so I will reply intuitively. To start with, I’m not convinced the feminine always belongs to the female gender. Some of the traits you underline are non-gender human characteristics. If we don’t see them in every art work it’s partly due to the fact that they are often turned down for an art which is more expected and therefore with a better immediate efficiency. I believe gender characteristics are only visible in some of the art today since, until recently in history, only works made by men were ever shown. Women actively created but for many reasons they were like forgotten -or set aside as unimportant- from History. Obviously codes, aesthetics and choice of media develop in a certain direction and don’t offer much alternative to the mind when that’s all you get to see. So when women do come out with traits or themes that aren’t typically mainstream, there is a chance the work appears different yet specific to the female gender. However, the fact of being a woman, knowing it’s going to be harder for you whatever you do, it can also give you the freedom to differ from what is expected from a perfect career artist. Most of us have understood this. Personally I have a tendency to feel norms and conventions like a lack of air and space. When I see a one-way road that everyone seems to be taking, it just makes me wonder why and what’s off the beaten track. Then again, since women have been placed as unimportant observers with other minorities

throughout History, maybe it has given us the possibility to develop an extrasensory perspective on what surrounds us. This could be the subtle perception that influences my decisions in art making and that can be sensed in my work as feminine.

MA-ES: How can you comment the particular intimacy, delicacy inherent in your work?

AD: I see what is intimate, familiar and personal, as part of a fractal. Observing something small helps in understanding the bigger picture. I frequently feel like a scientist looking at things, at myself, testing what can come out of what I experience. We have always been struck with the need to understand ourselves, this is even more obvious today when so many methods to do so are available online. I'm only mirroring the situation. We want to know our future; we want to know where to place ourselves in society, in our social and professional life. I just study consciously with curiosity what is happening today. As for delicacy, which I relate to subtleness, well, it is a profound mental method of analysis and report as it pays attention to detail, uses intuition, sensitivity and suggests an infinite possibility of results. Art doesn't have to work like publicity (a single message per picture, immediate and direct efficiency) and I see the world as something way more complex, full of synchronicity, where everything seems to interact sometimes quite unexpectedly.

Alexandra David is an Australian and French artiste. She lives and works in Paris and Grenoble (FR)

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