

RESISTING THE COLLECTION

- On artistic deal making -

In *l'édition spéciale Le Monde Diplomatique* entitled '*Artistes, domestiqués ou révoltés?*' (August-September 2016) the question is raised whether contemporary art still holds any civic relevance. Two of the most cunning phrasings read as follows: '*La "subversion" fait consensus. Elle n'attaque en rien les valeurs du système en place.*' and '*L'art qui joue pleinement le rôle de supplément d'âme du liberalism*'. These truisms are of course not valid for all contemporary artistic endeavors, but they nevertheless corner a realistic dilemma and an even more so asphyxiating predicament related to the praxis of contemporary art.

In the same volume a huge advertisement for *Fondation Louis Vuitton* markets Daniel Buren's newest intervention applied onto Frank O. Gehry's building at Bois de Boulogne, entitled '*L'observatoire de la Lumière*'. All critical ambition seems absent. The checkered multicolored patches simply content as *l'art pour faire plaisir, l'art pour plaiser*; one hundred percent eye candy. This most recent work embodies the perfect and most perverse antithetical attitude towards Buren's own inquisitive practice of *le neutre* since 1965, a practice resisting the cultural and even political a priori that an artist should be original, unique and produce masterpieces. Buren's *FLV* installation is a masterpiece.

The by now cantankerous platitude of an art market that is ultimately self-serving can perfectly be underscored by the almost randomly chosen latter art sample. The visual arts seem to have skipped a beat, aloof from society's urgencies, leap frogging into a market frenzy that is completely closing in on itself. This post-capitalist imperial overstretch shouldn't be lamented by the art world itself, it should all the more be lamented by society, because the societal losses are immense. The self-celebratory *de profundis* system of contemporary art has - almost overnight - eradicated its most vital and sole capital: its civic independence.

The rampant urge to increasingly collect art, often on a private basis, hasn't necessarily unnerved this open-ended crisis. What to do when the artistically produced stock isn't endless, contrary to the mercantile itch to acquire unique artistic work? Scarcity and exclusivity have become the art market's main speculation tools. But isn't the main and only destination of all art (the) public? In various degrees? The predominant tendency of art's privatization and commodification is denuding an incremental amount of art works and collections to (ever) be publically presented or exchanged. The freeport system and the adhering savvy fiscal policies are but one acute illustration of such a degenerate policy. The collections are becoming progressively invisible, and the public sector - at the outset the arts' patron *par excellence* - incessantly curtails its civic providence of collecting diligently. The art of collecting publically has (almost) ceased to withstand.

Admittedly more and more art practices try to resist the idea of unilaterally and passively being confiscated to a collection, private or public. Cynically enough this makes their attractiveness for the collector even more outstanding: a catch-22 logic that couldn't be more wayward. The only redemption at hand would be to seriously dare to question the idea and impulse of collecting in general and the psychologies of artistic deal making - between collectors and artists - in particular. For there is a myriad of alternative reciprocities between the actors that are the 'collecting client' and the 'artist'. Importantly both (!) should be willing to resist the impulse of the collection. But especially the artist - often more speculatively endowed than the collector - should be considered amenable to engage within a less mercantile exchange realm *vis-à-vis* the public or private client.

Imagine the antagonized relationship between art production and financial value becoming agonistic? Imagine that objects are no longer collected but attitudes are gathered and exchanged. Imagine that both producer and end user become longtime stakeholders of a process with ongoing shared responsibilities. Leaving behind the hollowed out sequential relationship of 'creator' and 'collector' could allow for a new relevance for the arts in society. The vocabulary and syntax for resisting or at least postponing the collection are however still to be developed entirely. Assuredly an endless series of artists and collectors will never be interested in such an intensified relationship, since it acquires a completely new

understanding of the visual arts' liability. At the same time numerous artists and 'collectors' have been intuitively expanding the unchartered territories of such an artistic deal making since early Modernism.

A real-life example could render this potential more vivid. The client at hand is a Belgian sexagenarian couple: Julie Vandembroucke and Michel Espeel. At first glance they could be weighed in as any regular small-scale private collector of contemporary art. Interestingly enough, since their dawn as collectors in 1976, they went through the prototypical stages of an art collector's coming of age: from early 'emotional haphazard' purchases over 'erratic and nervously market driven' acquisitions to finally developing a very personalized vision on patronage focused on dialogue and alliances with the artists. This last stage started in the late 80's, when Michel Espeel's steel company was increasingly solicited by artists to produce work. Instead of reverting back towards a normalized 'performed service / paid service' relationship Michel Espeel and Julie Vandembroucke started to entail intense and almost intimate exchanges with the artists. In an unscripted manner they spearheaded new ways of value exchange, beyond simple hard cash or private ownership*.

This probing attitude was further picked up by Julie Vandembroucke's ambitious project *Arteconomy*, an association aiming at intertwining visual arts and the economy, '*Because both art and the economy can and*

*should have an impact on the organization of society, on the organization of the connections that form our res publica. The economy enables relationships through exchangeability and art is the extreme symbol of the space for everything specific, alternatively different, not exchangeable, not product oriented.’*** The keystone completing the couple’s ‘exchanging attitude’ was the fundamental refurbishment of their private house in 2009 by 51N4E***. This spatial chapter opened up a completely different set of hands-on possibilities for testing artistic deal making in real time. All of a sudden the house became an artistic haven without the need for ‘collectable’ or personally owned end products. Numerous artists did accept the couple’s *carte blanche* challenge since, a challenge constituting the unbound re-reading of the house, and hence producing new personal ways of artistic production. These talks, silences, impulses and doubts were systematically recorded via publications as the sole and free associative gathering of such vulnerable and momentaneous insights.

The radical chapter of sharing freed-up artistic attitudes had been pre-cursored by a pivotal collaboration in 1999 with the artist Honoré d’O. Before producing anything (collectable) he did scribble the promised ‘collaborative results’ onto a tiny shred of paper. The promise read: eating together, philosophical discussions, a performance and a certificate. The artistic certificate was - luckily - never delivered. d’O proposed a synergetic effort that voluntarily sought to procrastinate the eventual end of an artistic process, a

perennial moment of exchange as an uncertain yet productive technique. In a way the couple ended empty-handed collection-wise, yet the desire to continue the chosen path of impassioned and reciprocal artistic association had never been clearer.

Since the house's rebirth some ten 'non-collectable' artists have rubbed backs with the couple. All of them did gain new artistic insights for future work and personal attitudes, equally rendering the house into an exquisite zero point of sorts. The latest collaboration in this respect poignantly illustrates the effects of Julie Vandenbroucke and Michel Espeel's paramount ritual. The couple had been frequenting the atelier of the Brussels based artists Sarah and Charles since 2006. However, time and time again they failed to soothe their lust to spot and purchase something collectable from the atelier. In the years ahead the hitherto nervous flirting did but intensify, yet without the required alleviating result. So in 2012 the couple decided to directly commission the artists to produce an artistic process of exchange. At first, none of the proposals were withheld. However, the discussions' quality grew exponentially, unavoidably gravitating towards a new and yet to be discovered point of departure for the one and the other. Interestingly enough, as a side trope, all works proposed within this period grew into autonomous works for Sarah and Charles, without ever being collected by the couple. Another more implicit deal making to resist the collection?

But it was only with their most recent motion *Wander Meander* that the whole ambition of finding a mutual stakeholdership became self-evident. The performance *Wander Meander* will be executed only once under the auspices of Sarah and Charles, more specifically on August 28, 2016. The protocol developed by Sarah and Charles stipulates that from there on the couple becomes the administrator in charge of future editions or re-enactments of the performance. Notwithstanding this apparent autonomy granted by the artists the guidelines for any future performances are encrypted and engraved into a copper placard, kept safe in a vault owned by Sarah and Charles. This crucial action of ‘safeguarding’ avoids the artistic work to be commodified, either by the couple or the artists, since the pair of them have become perennially interdependent if ever wanting to (re-)produce the work. The couple should be found willing to open up the vault that is their house, whilst the artists should be ready to remember the cryptolect protocol code. The so far unfinished result becomes a truly uncollectable art piece that can but be activated on mutual demand. A shared artistic deal making as an everlasting cultural engagement . Ceaseless. Fearless.

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* *Walk with me*, Lannoo 2008 (ed. Charlotte Bonduel & Luc Derycke)

** *website Arteconomy*, 2009 (Bart Debaere/M HKA)

*** *Reasons for walling a house*, Ruby Press 2011 (ed. Peter Swinnen)