

simple observation

chris straetling

When Lise Duclaux asked me to document her project *L'observatoire des simples et des fous*, I was delighted and immediately accepted. We had worked together shortly before on an abortive attempt to give more autonomy to the members of the gourd family (Cucurbitaceae) in the gardens of the Villa Teirlinck¹. My own interest in researching phenomena subjectively under the auspices of my defunct *Royal Navel Observatory*² could interlock well with Lise's methods of investigation, which I had been admiring for some time now.

The idea of a plot for wild and medicinal plants seemed to me a perfect way to recall an issue that has been underlying both our practices... the inquiry into more or less forgotten connections between philosophy, nature, the arts and empirical sciences, which have become separate specialisations with only a casual overlap... We had been talking about the curious displacement of the Dodoens³ *Herbarium* by a design-pavilion and extension of the Middelheim sculpture park in Antwerp, to name a case in point.

A garden as an observatory for shunned, often near-forgotten and sometimes interdicted plants seemed to me a good way to reconsider our attitudes towards situations which do not fit neatly into the preconceptions that we formulate to run our daily lives. To do this in the

1. *PomPoenPoëzie*, plot and notes on the development of an autonomous pumpkin, part of the long term exhibition program of the Herman Teirlinckhuis museum and gallery in Beerse, 2012-13, cut short by the closing down of the museum. Documentation currently under production.

3. Rembert Dodoens (Malines 1517-85), Flemish botanist and writer of the *Stirpium historiae pemptades sex* (*Cruydenboek*), used extensively as a reference for other works. Translated into French (1557) by Charles de l'Ecluse (*Histoire des Plantes*) and from there into

context of therapeutic activities seemed a perfect marriage of the psychological and horticultural: replicating the Garden of Eden - of innocence, as it were - even if only on a small, experimental scale.

Perhaps one might call this endeavour 'psychohorticultural' in line with the 'psycho-geographical' investigations being rediscovered in the world of (social) architecture and the artistic zoning of public space... It might be likened to the notion of the *dérive* as practiced by the Situationists (or various movements before)⁴, and which is a basic method for many artists to

4. The notion of the Situationist *dérive* (Debord, Chtcheglov *Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau*, Paris 1953, *Internationale Situationniste #1*, Paris 1958) was preceded by Dadaist 'visits' such as the excursion to St. Julien le Pauvre in April 1921 'for the 1911 season' - preceding in turn the Surrealists' random excursion from Blois in May 1924; and had perhaps its basis in Baudelaire's notions of the *flâneur*...

gather and organise inspiration. Opening the investigative process to diverse sorts of participants makes it a highly experimental endeavour... combining sections of scientific methodology with subjective tendencies, serendipitous encounters and divergent approaches. Though a basic framework is considered, the project is left to its own devices... An excursion into the unknown, no matter how one defines or identifies it.

'Not knowing actively is to research'

The observatory as an artistic endeavour, departs from the purely scientific notion of research in as far as the investigation is run by those that do not know rather than the professional, whereby the specialist expands on already formulated knowledge... Much as Robert Filliou proposed... 'research is not the privilege of people who know'⁵. Here haphazard inquisi-

English by Henry Lyte. The work is based heavily on ancient and medieval sources (Hildegard von Bingen's *Causae et Curae*) and works by Muslim botanists in Al-

Andalus: such as Abulcasis (Cordoba - *The book of Simples* ca. 1000 AD) and Ibn-al-Baitar's *Corpus of Simples*, Malaga ca. 1200 AD)

5. Robert Filliou, *Teaching and Learning as Performing*

impressions and influences. This non-structured approach leads to unexpected combinations and perhaps surprising insights. It makes combinations possible which may seem far-fetched, but which are nonetheless part of the experience and, as such, equally valid... (here again, Filliou's notion of 'equivalence'). In addition to not adhering to a pre-set paradigm, the manner in which the information gathered is applied to a possible illustration of the experience is also divergent from an empirical investigation... Subjective criteria abound and references could possibly be entirely fabricated... undermining thus the whole notion of a neutral view of proceedings.

Arts originally published by K&W König, Köln, 1970, now republished by Occasional Papers... The citation in question was used as an abstract in an interesting article by Emma Bolland: *Trespassing Knowledge, research as being, research as doing, research as practice.* MFA course © Jordanstone College of Art & Design 2014

'Non verbal' insights communicated in any which way is an additional variable... Often in the first instance one might query its relevance, and to apply one's creative brain to find a link even if none is apparent. One might even suspend one's usual need for meaningful significance and accept that some actions might not have a reason at all, ostensive or hidden.

In this way (also) we can arrive at that subjective mapping of the surroundings, a sort of 'psychohorticultural cartography' - or vegetative *dérive* - as proposed by the Situationists and their predecessors⁶. Perhaps it is the closest one can get to finding fixed points in an undefined field of rough, wild, untamed (unkempt) vegetation⁷... Would this not be a more accurate reflection of society rather than attempting to force personalities and tendencies into handy

6. Whilst considering the ramifications for the *Pom-PoenPoëzie* project and general refurbishment of the Teirlinck garden in Beersel, I was inspired by the writer's long, solitary, inspirational walks in the area,

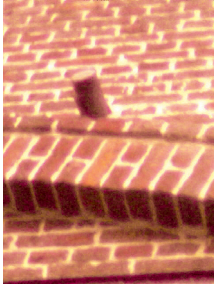
to triangulation... Chance, conceptual containers; and the fact that these following an object thrown usually festooned with were, in fact, 'aimless wanderings' or 'driftings'... in intuitively, and using its di- exceptions and prereq- fact any creative process rection as the new course uisites? Until recently needs a certain amount of at every stage... awry of this approach was not leeway in order to thrive expectations... deemed very useful in (see also the introduction by the field of applied arts, but things are chang- Willem Pee to Henri Storck's ing and one might wonder if this operation, lim- film Teirlinck from 1953). ited in scope as it is, could also produce some methodical insights that otherwise might fall foul.

Preparation

Preparing the terrain for assisted chance encounters is an interesting proposition. A field. In the middle of the field, a tree. A horse-chestnut. The observatory is to be constructed around this tree. A small Garden of Eden with, at its centre, the tree of knowledge... one might say. The ground needs to be turned. Having been a pasture for quite some time it might yield quite a few dormant species, but needs to be assisted with wild seeds. Wild seeds are hand-collected and, somewhat paradoxically, are much more expensive than cultivated seeds... Furthermore the ground needs to be deeply disturbed. A challenge for our available equipment, and it took a while to consider all the ramifications of each step of the sowing... In the end the tractor and its bedsheet-muffled roll were put to one side and the actual sowing was done 19th century style, as in a painting Millet or Van Gogh might have made.

(Speaking of Van Gogh and the fact that this project is embedded in the Mons 2015 European City of Culture program, one cannot help but situate it: this small field in Saint Symphorien, situated not far from the region where the artist tried his hand at missioning among the mines... this quiet pasture a stone's throw away from major sites of battle for

Mons during the First World War - in fact, the local war cemetery sports the first and the last Commonwealth soldier killed in the 1914-18 conflict, and a grenade is lodged forever above the doorway of a nearby farmhouse... Who knows what this earth might turn up if ploughed too deep - there would be poppies for sure).



Projectile lodged in a nearby farmhouse facade since the Battle of Mons in 1914. The then new psychological phenomenon called 'shell shock' was a complex condition, which baffled experts for many years, misunderstood (soldiers suffering from it were sometimes executed for cowardice), discussed and debated to little effect, renamed 'combat stress disorder' on the eve of the Second World War...

The English term weeds (simply *herbes* as opposed to *mauvaises herbes*) is neutral, though its connotation is negative... The significance being that they are plants that are merely not in the desired place and time in relation to an abstract precondition, predilection, preconception... which, one might consider, is also the case for most of the residents at the *Carrosse*. Perchance in the wrong place at the wrong time... fate... (like the first and last Commonwealth soldier to die in the Great War - for their young lives it was a bad deal, for their name to go down to posterity, a major windfall...).

SO

The observatory is oval in shape, surrounding the chestnut tree, with a pathway left for access under the canopy... in order to observe from within as well as without... some 15 metres of separation between the two, enough to see the other side, but not enough to admire anything in detail... oscillating between the detailed and general view, from above the birds see an eye of sorts, a green pupil in a leafy retina, a swaying grassy white and shortcut lid (an open-sided panopticon). There is enough room for various activities around the observatory, and there is an auxiliary patch behind the shed for smaller interventions and study... Whereas the

main observatory is to be left alone, the additional garden can field cuttings and ravages of allsorts, and is sown by the residents themselves. That goes for a herbaceous border of marigolds (*soucis*)⁸ as well,

8. Calendula : Bury your worries in the ground (soil)

and watch a golden flower grow. The flower petals of the calendula plant (*Calendula Officinalis*), or pot marigold, have been used for medicinal purposes since at least the 12th century. Calendula has high amounts of flavonoids, plant-based antioxidants that protect cells from being damaged by unstable molecules called free radicals. Calendula appears to fight inflammation, viruses, and bacteria. 'Traditionally, calendula has been used to treat stomach upset and ulcers, as well as to relieve menstrual cramps, but there is no scientific evidence that calendula works for these problems. Today, calendula is often used topically, meaning it is applied to the skin. Calendula has been shown to help wounds heal faster, possibly by increasing blood flow

planted upon the first encounter in March.

Planting calendula as a point of departure can be seen as an abstract of the project... an edible wild plant that has been used medicinally for centuries, used in garlands for Hindu deities, in Pre-Colombian culture, potted in soups and for colouring butter, as a soothing and coagulating antiseptic, for healing and bandaging wounds in the First World War... a soothing gesture... toward all the participants coming together to begin this series of observations.

The participants

Due to the nature of the situation, the participants were very diverse... thrown together by life's circumstances, ordained with various degrees of proficiency in physical and mental abilities, but all with a great openness of spirit. Mainly residents of the *Carrosse* where the observatory is situated, along with a somewhat variable section of visiting residents from other institutions... or rather, at the beginning of the series, for it became too difficult to re-start every session, given the fact that a different group showed up each time...

So, to begin with there was a process of getting

and oxygen to the affected area, which helps the body grow new tissue. It is also used to improve skin hydration and firmness. The dried petals of the calendula plant are used in tinctures, ointments, and washes to treat burns, bruises, and cuts, as well as the minor infections they cause. Calendula has also been shown to help prevent dermatitis or skin inflammation in breast cancer patients during radiation therapy'. Source: Calendula, umm.edu, University of Maryland Medical Center, 31 May 2013

to know each other and considering aptitudes... Some residents were keen gardeners, others nature enthusiasts, some had a more philosophical approach, some enjoyed drawing, others decided that they preferred another of the activities on offer that day... Not all participants could be present during every session, not all participants were always equally energetic, depending on other factors, occurrences, courses of medication, and such... But after some time a handful of enthusiasts distilled into a core group, around which others moved in a slightly more peripheral manner.

I will not be going into individual details at this stage, reserving a more personal approach for after the summer of activities in which the group of residents interacts with visitors and invited guests... At this point one should consider it as work in progress rather than encounters with specific persons (this is not to say that there are not very interesting points of view already at this stage, but I prefer to have a broader scope in which to situate each participant further towards the end of the second summer)⁹.

Subjective Lens

It would always be difficult to keep an objective distance to the activities. Having begun the project with a rather large camera and a tripod in reserve, I found that there would be too much movement to make static takes, and the large camera would be too obtrusive. Hand-held and

9. This is not to say that there were no personal reports with participants, but that in some cases the situation of portrayal rights were not yet cleared up. With only one resident disallowing images, there were a few unclear situations which prohibit the full disclosure of

chaotic takes would have to be the basis for my documentation, with the occasional foray into the experimental, especially when a resident contributes directly by physically moving the camera towards one or the other point of interest... The result is somewhat *Dogma 95* but, during editing, an attempt is made to limit abrupt movement while retaining a close-up, intermingling feel. To some degree choices are made that pertain more to the subjective participation than an objective documentation, maybe even to the point of becoming 'unreadable' - a certain amount of confusion represents the less structured moments of the observatory activity¹⁰.

Rather than a technical playfulness, it is an attempt to recreate some of the rather diffuse experience that comes about when attempting to listen, see and act in divergent ways, in addition to possible medication and specific conditions... Without too much affect, the double or insert screen divides attention to a degree which might be comparable to the culmination of the aforementioned influences... giving the viewer an inkling of the subjective camera referred to here.

As with the project itself, there is no script beyond the bare structure and some reference points. Decisions need to be made during the process, resulting in an organic construct that may or may not be fit for purpose.

identities and images...(still to be considered). There are also interesting interchanges with educators and chaperones that have been excluded.

10. Considering the various sources: *Forget Godard, the Cinematic Abductions of Passolini and Debord* (Farris Wahbeh academia.edu 2014) and C.S. Peirce's 'abduction/induction: The abductive concept taken from Peirce's abduction is the first stage of investigation that begins an interpretive process. An abductive practice is opposed to induction, which is another form of hypothesis formulation that is carried out on the premise that observed facts can be fulfilled with favourable and notable results. Abduction works in reverse, facts are not known, and

Seasoned Observation

The observation sessions usually began with the artist taking a moment or two (if possible, sometimes residents would join in early) to walk once around the field to measure its progress. Various factors making a definitive projection difficult, this updating filled in possible gaps in the day's program - based loosely on the season's expectation combined with chance themes surfacing during the course of the proceedings. These could be questions or problems encountered during the previous session... Some documentary photographs, some notes, and the session could begin.

one must intuit a reason for why a fact most simply is' ... and then of course Fernand Deligny's *Ce gamin, là* (with Renaud Victor, 1975) and *Le Moindre Geste* (1971) as well as the *Dogma 95* manifesto (Von Trier, Dargakis, Vinterberg)...

Usually the interaction started with a procession of residents circumnavigating the 'field of observation' stopping at this or that point of interest and engaging in explanations, Q&A sessions or discussion, picking perhaps a specimen or two for further investigation. A table loaded with reference books and additional literature concerning wild and medicinal plants, birds, insects and diseases, as well as some historical references concerning specific questions encountered earlier. Depending on what came up during the previous session, discussions could range from Napoleonic law to the history of drug use and cultivation, or anything inbetween. More often than not these would not be as linear as might be expected, interjected frequently with other notions and going off on various tangents at the same time.

After the initial surveying of the observation field small groups would distil depending on specific interest... For some, the drawing of plants was of major interest, others preferred browsing the books and photocopies, whilst still others would be engaged otherwise, or continue
11. I would also like to mention the work of Maud Though not having the full freedom¹¹ to wander

Mannoni (Magda Van der Spoel) in relation to the research surrounding autistic children and her approach - related to Deligny's project - when setting up an experimental school in Bonneuil-sur-Marne. Often a compromise must be reached as to what is desirable and what is doable... Though situated in the 'countryside' the domain was not of such proportions as to allow a general freedom to all participants. Close to a road and, in fact, with only part of the pasture at our disposal - activities remained centred around the tree with an occasional secondary area such as said table or fireplace... so a real wandering or roaming could not take place... But on the whole, the activities were spread sufficiently so as to create an atmosphere of having been 'away for the day'.

and follow the various impressions offered by the wider surroundings, there was a certain carefree enjoyment apparent once the participants got used to the interplay between educative leisure, investigative loitering, haphazard banter... One could liken the sessions rather to a picnic without a hamper containing foodstuffs (but instead, boxes of reference books and drawing materials).

Weather permitting, the whole session would take place outside. On warm summer days we used the canopy of the chestnut tree to protect us from the sun - giving the scene an African impression - where one sees schools and meetings taking place under large baobabs... On blustery days we would stay closer to the buildings, making use of umbrellas and canopies; and if the weather turned really foul we could make use of the day-room, mingling with other residents who were not specifically part of our group. There is always a bit of leeway, and no session had exactly the same participants, so a certain amount of mingling and interaction with non-participants was no problem.

As mentioned, the linearity of the project was mainly in the abstract - sessions did not necessarily follow each other thematically, albeit somewhat driven by the season, but rather randomly picking up on themes now and again, with some repetition, some review and elaboration. One might say the themes spread out from the middle like an ink-spot dispersal... emanating from the artist to a core group of interested residents and then on

to the more peripheral participants. Although Lise would do her best to parry all queries and give equal attention to all, the fact that participants helped each other and cross-pollinated ideas as it were, made the whole experience more interesting and agreeable...



Produced from snippets by Jean-Marie during one of the observatory sessions, and placed in amongst the branches to emulate the beginnings of a nest... who knows whether some opportunistic bird might care to continue its construction? A good example of extracurricular creative intervention.

Obviously the senses are not limited to the observatory only: the surrounding field and hedgerows were also of interest. Not every digression could be documented, but one specific item represents the creativity apparent... a replica bird's nest (or basic structure thereof) placed in the hedge by the road... a minuscule sculptural object for both passers-by and birds to ponder upon... a result of the general freedom of associations rather than a systematic structure of activities... and in fact far beyond the brief of 'observation' as such - a creative intervention, in fact.

Autumn, with its falling leaves and bumper crop of seeds... meant more laborious sessions than mere observation - gathering plants and seeds, removing leaves from under the diseased tree to try and better its chances for the following year - fire being the best way to dispose of them... Fire functioning as a cleansing ritual, an end point to a season and the summing up of activities... returning to Robert Filliou's notions of art & life entwined, considering his 'Teaching and Learning as Performance Arts' (video version 1977)¹² considering a fire as part of the 'eternal network' experience.

12. Robert Filliou : *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts* in book form, K&W König, Köln, 1970 – augmented by video versions, 1977 (*Artans Video*, Calgary, Robertson, Bienvenue) and

Winter witnessed the difficult task of collating

the material from a good 10 months, interpreting and selecting it for a reasonably coherent presentation... but one that leaves ample space for the subjective, which is of utmost importance here - the questionable is paramount rather than the definitive end result as might be in a scientific endeavour. Its nearest cousin would be the poetic, perhaps the theatrical with its suspended reality, the 'psychogrammatic'¹³ in terms of a confluence of visual verbal and symbolic language...

13. As opposed to 'psychographic' as used in market research. An example: *The Photogrammatic Pawnshop* was an interactive exhibition series (*Inexistent*, Antwerp, 1989) in which participants would read and perform freely in a pawnshop setting, documented mug shot style for publication at a later date in the *La Jeune Avrill* fanzine (a photogram is made without a camera, just drawing with light and shadow on photosensitive material)...

Hopefully the account of this past year will serve as a base plate for this year's continuation, and be part of a wider and deeper investigation into the 'simple follies' of our society - matching grand schemes with small but essential human elements without which we would be but machines... We, as simple wall-flowers, are a product of nature as much as the world we live in, and more often than not, forget that we never fit fully into our preconceived notions. Those that are set aside are as much, if not more representative of nature's diversity than we care to consider.

The annuals have had their bloom, and now it is the turn of the perennials, along with all the other plants that have taken the opportunity

distributed by *Western Front*, Vancouver, as a supplement to the printed version with fragments, interviews and performances collated in part from older material like *Porta Filliou* - among others - Düsseldorf fragments by Tony Morgan, including said fire-scene... presented recently in a show at *Bukta-paktop*, Brussels, curated by Serge Paternoster.



Perhaps a scene from *Cucumberland?* (a gardening alternative to the *Territory of the Genial Republic* he espoused earlier in the 70s)... a territory where, upon entering, every act is creative.

of this wild field of observation to manifest themselves as they might in nature - less manipulated than we are used to... Of course, there is an element of healthy competition built into nature, and we will have to intervene here and there to keep the basic premise on track. But, judging by the first year, every indication is that we will have a good season all round.