

l'observatoire des simples et des fous

the intricate force of the banal

chris straetling

The *Observatoire des simples et des fous* developed in layers, overlapping each other organically, changing with season and external influences... The title itself being a controversial entity as it grew from innocuous to irritant. Older descriptions of the mentally challenged were based on IQ 'norms' once accepted as neutral... moron, idiot, stupid; used exclusively as derogatory nowadays... 'Handicapped' was once the politically correct term, but it seems that disabled associations themselves reject it, preferring to be called disabled...¹

So what would 'simple' and 'crazy' carry with them as terms that is so difficult... Aside from the fact that we use them disparagingly; if one has enough self-knowledge to admit one is also a fool, stupid, even idiotic at times there is nothing wrong, and this is a natural state... Plants are no longer called simple or crazy in the sense of free-ranging, wild, un-managed, un-cultivated... We have also curtailed and restrained them, just as we still don straightjackets as a recreational pass time.

1. Terms moron, stupid and idiot were once straightjackets for the forward sections of the IQ scale - but I also came across un-abled or, as the CIFAS* conference put it, 'unproductive bodies' - individuals as producers of added value, a liberal capitalist 'norm' imposed on natural life... But then

Setting up a circular field of observation around a central point reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon*, but replacing the all-seeing eye with a tree: it is not we, the protagonists, who observe subjects, but all are observant subjects as well as protagonists. The view is not (only) from the centre outwards, but towards the middle also, and there are no walls - containing and constraining are fluid terms in this case... even though it all occurs in a wider field of dispersed sanctuary islands².

The Structure of *Le Carrosse*
 A group of some 20 residential (site) is in part based on theories of the asylum and the sub-sectioning into smaller interconnected units (rafts) rather than

The dynamics of this centrally-configured space are at the same time chaotic as well as being naturally structured, alternately emanating and retracting towards the centre, itself an ailing tree in need of care.

*See previous publication as well as participation in CIFA conference 2015 at CO Jacques Franck, Brussels
 **Unica Zürn, *Der Mann im* *jasmin* and other writings

Institutions nonetheless, and with similar constraints. Interestingly enough, the growth process of the undertaking was immediately apparent, while the importance of various aspects took more time to germinate... On the one hand perhaps the therapeutic intentions, the promotional aspects, the artistic investigation, but more importantly, what have two years of 'observing the simple and foolishly mad' taught us, if anything?

A quick review, with added hindsight...

The preparatory year 2014 was more or less classically structured along educational lines: workshop sessions explaining various aspects of plants, some hands-on gardening. Quite a large group of participants from various satellite institutions. A field trip atmosphere prevailed... The observatory grew into a pretty cottage-style garden, in line with general expectations of all concerned. The summer break saw a slowdown, and in the autumn far fewer patients visited regularly, so we settled into a smaller gaggle of enthusiasts... The relationship between artists and residents became less defined, and a certain amount of free creativity began to emerge... Occasionally larger groups would come by, during 'conferences' and visiting artist sessions, especially the last pleasant picnic BBQ...

A lot of information was divulged which was only partially appreciated... It was a period of finding the right tenor and pace for the group at hand, which had to shrink to a manageable entity, being too large for purpose at the beginning - more recreational excursion than real interchange. That is not to say that the early sessions were inconsequential. Quite the contrary: disturbing discussions with one resident were in

themselves very interesting. Had he remained, it could have made a significant contribution the project³.

It was only when the group reduced to a more natural level that more personal insight could be gleaned from each individual's idiosyncrasies, allowing us to become acquainted with each other's thoughts and fears, building trust and dissipating nervousness... touching a wider discussion on how best to manage groups of patients - and to a degree the obvious: more time and space for the individual - colliding with budgetary and practical constraints. Also apparent was a difference between the free, open-ended creative research we were conducting, and the regular roster of the day that the institution had to adhere to... Admittedly there was some leeway, but the meals had to be taken and medication administered at the usual times.

In terms of documentation, preconceived notions were soon discarded: a static camera was nigh on impossible, steady images difficult, so that rough, hand-held footage, with occasional interventions by residents, obviously intrigued and responding to the presence of a camera, made for a surreal, impressionistic clutch of heterogeneous material... in itself an interestingly steep learning curve.

The first year had a very positive slant to it: A wonderful wildflower garden, enthusiastic participants, forward-looking towards the development of the project, with the exhibition itself as a goal to give everyone a sense of direction...

The main exhibition year 2015 was, in many ways, a very different one, the observational field itself now becoming really wild. There were disagreements about the use of some words in the title⁴, creating an air of dissonance in the proceedings... In many ways representing more truly the situation at hand: It was no longer a pleasant showcase of artistic collaboration and institutional openness, but a real slice of life, illustrating the ups and downs of such an endeavour...

While relations with the organization became more strained, the coherence of the smaller group itself became stronger - individuals found specific tasks and preferences, creating their own spaces within the whole, not always without irritation, but finding balance, and just learning to live with each other in an unrestrained manner - unimpeded by regulation... The educational aspect took more of a back seat and integrated itself into a self-investigative 'area of activities' which would comprise gardening, storytelling, drawing, reading, observing, not only of nature, but of each other; and as such oneself in nature. A sense of rhythm rhyming with the immediate surroundings... somewhat hidden from the world, like a secret tree-house in a wood far from housing and highway... a feeling of childhood

Reminding us of the discovery and playfulness, a time of unfettered comment made by Maude carefreeness / sans soucis⁵.

together with her charges in the countryside around the institution, after bombs had destroyed their usual activities in the war - see first publication of *L'Observatoire des simples et des fous, ou des simplices zizania observato-rium*, 2015.

We, 'the artists', also became more relaxed and open to chance, letting things flow as they came, while concurrently occupied with the exhibition at hand - a schizophrenic period, wherein on the one hand carefree enjoyment was contrasted with irritating frustration with some aspects of the exhibition: aside from the title, there was a problem in showing drawings made by the patients themselves; the opening ceremony did not originally foresee participation by the residents of the institutions taking part, and (the usual) small technical problems... thus more headwind than expected; the madness came more from the institutional side... In the end there was a special vernissage for residents, family and friends, and everyone was more or less content.

The conference held under the chestnut tree was an agreeable success, and the reception well received, so that, for a moment, all the effort seemed to have been worthwhile - certainly a highlight and, as such, memorable for all.

Whereas for most of the participating projects, the exhibition in Mons was the final presentation, for the *Observatoire des simples et des fous* it was but one of the activities... After all, it was the middle of the growing season. So, unfettered by exhibition stress, we continued our sessions, enjoying picnics, music, banter and each other's company... continuing carefree as far as it would take us, fully knowing that there would have to be an end to it somewhere. We extended with a foray into the ether: radio interviews taken from each other, touching on problems such as the use of certain words to describe the condition

of the residents, the boundaries of what can and cannot be said in the given context...

The last session in October was also a well-visited and pleasant affair with participating artists, song and campfire coziness, albeit slightly sad due to the fact that this was to be the end of our observations. Ritual burning of the leaves in the hope that our action might prove to be a slight relief for 'our' tree beset by the leaf-mining moth, and possibly 'bleeding canker' - we treated the trunk with silicate... after all, this observatory also functioned as a place for soothing...

Pause / assessment

The sessions stopped, and it was good to have a break since the ongoing involvement over two years needed to be considered from a distance, with a fresh eye... we did however continue with the radio broadcast, meeting at *Radio Campus* in the University of Brussels (ULB) early in the year...

Extensive footage of the goings-on were reviewed, a compilation made, as well as a rundown of activities... What became most apparent was the strength of the banal - the force of the everyday, or how small notions and incidents make up a wider picture - somewhat pointillist, not apparent when viewed close up... As mentioned, the second year was less about plants than the social interactions - one might even consider that we were observed by the plants rather than the other way around, linking up to the fact that Carol's *Alice in Wonderland* was one of the main tomes used in reading sessions - the whole idea being that of an artistic research rather than an empirical one...

So too, editing the visuals. Initially concerned with the best method to capture and document the proceedings - with an attempt at feigned neutrality - otherwise latching on to the *Dogma 95* as proposed by Vinterberg and von Trier (even beginning with the old 1/1.3 format) since it seemed to fulfill the criteria for the situation... while being aware that it was, in itself, a ploy (already being a 'historic' method... Films of Lars von Trier such as *Idioterne* and *Festen* were a discussion point with visitor to the exhibition at Lukaskaseri, who herself had experience of psychiatric institutions and took exception to the notion of artists playing with or around mental problems... certainly a double-edged blade... While the first video presentation (used in the

ade... While the first video presentation (used in the exhibition) was jammed with visual information, and a simultaneous soundtrack doubled into two split-screen versions, a bit like a cacophonous manic episode... the next offering was to be more abstract and laid-back, minimizing the soundtrack and selecting seemingly insignificant moments... using more footage shot by the residents and considering, in part, some of the notions put forward by Deligny himself...

I had picked up on some of the references to Deligny's films, and knew of his involvement with early Truffaut films - but decided to refrain from using any for this project, attempting to keep it open to chance influences... But at this later stage it became interesting and pertinent to delve deeper into his realm, partly because some of the notions that came out of the process of documenting the *Observatoire des simples et des fous* lead naturally to what Deligny had done - the fact that not all residents have the faculty of language certainly being one that plays a major role - and later I read Deligny's *Acheminement vers l'image*⁷ with great interest - even the strange parallel coincidence with the natural world, in his case wild and domestic geese, gave food for thought... (wondering why as basic premise).

7. *Acheminement vers l'image* by Fernand Deligny (1982) as published in *Chimères*. See also letters

But just as an attempt to capture an image, without its intentional baggage or significant references, is difficult to the point that one has to redefine oneself (one's position) - or accept using language with all its pitfalls - so too is an attempt to illustrate the reality of being beside oneself - call it insane, crazy, verrückt... Most interesting are the writings of Unica Zürn who, with great composure, identifies oncoming manic episodes, lucidly illustrates the strange things that take place and coherently describes the surreal thought processes involved in this separate, parallel reality... Art is certainly a language adaptable enough to encompass the impossible - though mostly also by proxy.

Attempts to consider different ideas on how to go about filming the observational - skimming through various theories without letting them become too adherent - results in a non-committal 'cloud of possibles' - and, as such, on the brink of nonsensical and / or irrelevant. Next to the edited versions - each version specifically concocted for a presentation situation, installation, context... and on the other just raw material, and small compositions, one might say chance compositions... though they can stand by themselves and next to each other - thinking of the principle of equivalence here* - one might have to see all simultaneously to begin to get a feel for the unreal.

isselsdorf Academy 1966
 and shown at Schmella in 69.
 version 1973 at the Museo
 eina Sofia - various rubber
 amp versions circulating
 eely...

So the video material becomes the secondary
 observatory, reflecting not only the proceedings
 themselves, but also the way in which they
 were registered, choices made at the time, as
 well as the way the fragments are compiled,
 composed, cut. The problematic of language,
 its usage, its 'baggage', comes to the fore again - thinking here of
 Deligny's considerations but also of Isidor Isou and others who were
 thinking of dissipating and dissecting language (to better under-
 stand it) during this heady period of anti-psychiatry... All still very
 relevant today, even though tending towards the practical rather than
 the experimental.

Mixed in with these notions is a wild array of medicinal plants, their
 position in botany, society, tradition, and the more recent considera-
 tions of genetics, at the same time reflecting and modifying our view of
 our own position in the ever-wider observational field of natural pheno-
 mena. Here one might consider the reading of a genome sequence as
 dada poetry and / or the key to mitigating migrant diseases such as, for
 instance, ash trees (*Hymenosyphus fraxineus*)⁹ 9. See article in Nature #
 or the ailment befalling our horse chestnut at the
 centre of the observatory...

5417 pp. 212-216, 12 January
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So, from the observatory one might view the world microscopically, or travel into the macro-space of endless speculations, elastically combined to form various mutations which may or may not be significant to a proposed set of queries... The point is to retain this flexibility while attempting to delineate some sort of area in which to operate. Positions have become flexible and interchangeable and / or self-reflective. Tendency is away from an 'us versus them' approach, as proposed, for instance, by Britta Peters in her project *Krankheit als Metapher; Das Irre im Garten der Arten (Disease as Metaphor, Errant in the garden of Sorts (species))*¹⁰ in which the question is raised as to whether the norm is not 'the unrealistic'... and in that series Dora Garcia's work with groups challenging their condition as 'abnormal' - in this case the Voice-Hearing community (*Stimmenhörer*).

Essentially we are tending towards a more inclusive attitude, but still have some way to go, since the pace of life has become very hectic, constant availability with little space for alternatives - Space and Time - and money, of course: as Unica Zürn writes in a letter to her doctor Gaston Ferdière (also Artaud's doctor) in which she puts it succinctly:

*La chose la plus simple, qui ne vous dérange pas beaucoup, ce sera de m'envoyer simplement un cheque barré de 250 000 A.F. à mon nom Ruth Zürn. Excuse-moi mais j'ai très besoin de cet argent*¹¹.

Freedom of movement, unfettered creativity: So far the ideal, and obviously not always attainable. But perhaps we've erred more than slightly from the original idea of asylum, a refuge from the madding world, and now sequester patients as a practical solution for ourselves rather than to help them. Just as we do with our gardens, more recently preferring neat lawns and low-maintenance shrubbery, to the wild romantic enclaves teeming with biologically-diverse life and creating bizarre shadow plays... something we need to seriously reconsider and re-evaluate.

