

Dominique Mathieu

Act 3 | On the Edge of Things | solo exhibition | September 09 to November 21, 2015

opening Sunday, September 6, 2 - 7 p.m.

*To give up building worlds with our hands is
to take on the existence of a ghost.¹*

Designing conditions of existence

When we look at the practice of design as exercised by Dominique Mathieu, we might see it as “a triangular relationship between the individuals of a species, the organised activity of that species, and the environment of that activity. The environment is both the product and the condition for the activity, and thus for the survival of the species”. This pre-existing definition is commonly used to describe the field of human ecology. By shifting its referent, we wish to highlight the complex and dynamic ecosystem that Dominique Mathieu weaves between objects, the working conditions that bring them into being, their users, and the natural environment. We might speak of a certain form of functionalism, but at that point we would have to couch the famous principle of « form follows function » as an endless quasi-palindrome: form follows function follows context follows self-sufficiency follows tools follows economics follows growth follows decline follows severance follows clarity follows continuity follows philosophy follows politics follows conviviality follows responsibility follows nature...

The first solo exhibition by the designer at the Salle Principale gallery arose from a desire to highlight these ramified interactions and the current state of his research. He points to three distinct stages in his career. The first act (Act 1 | 1995-2007) was characterised by an experimental design process combined with industrial production. The second (Act 2 | 2008-2014) was determined by an awareness expressed in the exhibition entitled “Fracture sociale” (2007, Espace Mica, Rennes); in his work with the association Libre Art Bitre (Rennes); and in a residency lasting several years at CAC Brétigny, an art centre for which he organised several workshops, and where he designed installations and a number of objects (showcases, tables, seats, display units, storage units, office furniture) intended to be permanent and in harmony with the ways a particular place is used. The third and last act begins with the present exhibition, via objects, references to theory, and points of view expressed in textual and visual media. The idea is to embrace and pursue the processes set in motion in Brétigny in particular, paying special attention to the ethics of conditions of production, which he wishes to turn towards resonance with the natural environment.

In this regard, the slide presentation entitled *un monde* raises the question of the environment and hints at the Situationist definition of urban *dérive*: “moving hastily through varied atmospheres”. Through photographs taken by the designer and a selection of images harvested from the Web, the idea is to create new images focusing in particular on the presence of Man in Nature, and to assert that *there is another world but it is in this one*².

Implicit in this third act is the urgent need to retrieve restrained relationships with the resources at our disposal, as well as the obvious existence of this state of affairs which should, these days, be manifest. To quote Margaret Thatcher out of context, “there is no alternative”³. Today, Man’s accumulated debt to nature cannot be measured as a percentage of GDP. Instead of austerity—a word whose severe connotations run counter to the notion of happiness—we suggest the terms “frugality”, “metanoia”⁴ and “ecotone”⁵.

¹ Le comité invisible, *À nos amis*, Paris, La Fabrique éditions, 2014, p.239

² Phrase attributed to Paul Eluard

³ *There Is No Alternative* is a political slogan attributed to Thatcher, former Prime Minister of the UK, uttered in defence of the inevitability of capitalistic globalisation, economic liberalism and ‘dénationalisation’ (the privatisation of public services).

⁴ Metanoia (Greek): a transformative change of heart.

⁵ Ecotone: from the Greek *eco* (harmless to the environment) and *tonos* (tension), the area of transition between two ecosystems.

To break away from the “de-functionalised” design exhibition, we have entirely rethought the way the gallery space is used. The distinction between public and private space is blurred by the exhibition layout, which delocalises the office space by placing it in the centre of the display area, somewhat evocative of the commercial art gallery stripped bare by Michael Asher⁶. The object that serves not only as a work table but also for discussion, eating meals, consulting documents, and public activities, is a new *Bistanclaque*, a furniture unit inspired by the weaving looms used by the Canuts in nineteenth century Lyon. Its onomatopoeic name references the sound produced by such looms, which were installed in the weavers’ homes. The designer, who was born and lived for a long time in the Croix-Rousse district of Lyon, thus pays tribute to the city’s weavers, a professional body whose many revolts fostered both awareness and declarations of workers’ rights. For this new *Bistanclaque*, Dominique Mathieu uses the same simple construction principles and “low-grade” materials, this time adopting a more rough-and-ready aesthetic almost reminiscent of makeshift furniture as it is assembled using planks taken from an abandoned shack.

Focusing on traditional crafts, several of the objects in the exhibition were made at the Royer tile factory (Soulaynes, Aube), where for six generations clay has been worked using ancestral techniques seeking to preserve harmony with nature. Three terracotta plant pots pay tribute, respectively, to Jacques Ellul, Ivan Illich and Cornelius Castoriadis, thinkers whose writings tackle a range of subjects such as the impact of technology on society, the role of education, the conviviality of tools, and self-sufficiency as a project for society. A brick, a building element which has, since the 7th millennium BC, been standardised according to the proportions of a human hand, bears the inscription *relocalisons l'économie* [let’s relocalise the economy]. The brick is both presented in the exhibition and inserted randomly into the output of the tile factory.

Several items in the *slogans* series express an ethics of modes of existence and production, also creating a special resonance with the media on which they appear or the wooden crates that contain them. Visible from the outside, Ivan Illich’s words “a ‘convivial’ society is one in which people control the tools” are written on Jacquard paper, perforated card used to programme weaving looms from 1801 onwards. A distant ancestor of computer storage systems, it also played a role in workers’ protests against automated industrialisation (it was, for example, one of the causes of the Canut Revolt).

To conclude as we began, referring to the words that end the book *À nos amis*⁷: The exhibition is the beginning of a plan. See you soon.

Émile Ouroumov*

* *Emile Ouroumov (b. 1979, Bulgaria)*

He has assisted the curators Pierre Bal-Blanc (Centre d'art contemporain de Brétigny, Greater Paris, 2011-12), Hans Ulrich Obrist (Serpentine Gallery, 2009-10) and Odile Burluroux (Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2009) and has also gained experience as a gallery assistant at gb agency in Paris (2010) and conservation department / public programmes assistant at MAMCO (Geneva, 2011-12), followed by residencies in Zurich, Geneva and São Paulo. His most recent project "The Galápagos Principle" (Palais de Tokyo, Paris, 2013). His current research and prospective interests include the conflicting porosity between the roles of the curator and the artist, unstable formats of curating, the relationship between language and art and the paratext accompanying contemporary art exhibitions such as critical writing and press releases.

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Wednesday to Friday | 2 – 7 p.m.
Saturday | 11 a.m. – 7 p.m.
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⁶ Michael Asher, exhibition at the Claire Copley Gallery, Los Angeles, 1974

⁷ Le comité invisible, *À nos amis*, op.cit., p.242