

# OEDIPUSMAS SPECIAL

## NATHALIE HARTJES IN CONVERSATION WITH CONGLOMERATE

Anybody invited to realize a project in 1646 is asked to engage in conversation with a previously unknown correspondent.

This conversation takes place via e-mail and stretches through the whole period during which the artists develop their initial idea into final results. 1646 invites the correspondent at the other end of this contact to figure his/her way through this actual process.

In trying to picture what result the artists' work is going to, such exchange can become a reflection on the amount of otherwise untraceable choices of the moment which make up to the artists' practice.

This issue is part of the exhibition by CONGLOMERATE, *Oedipusmas Special*, December 9 2016 in 1646.

This artist  
CONGLOMERATE

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DECEMBER 2: Nathalie Hartjes [NH] to CONGLOMERATE [C]

Dear CONGLOMERATE, Christopher, Dafna, Derek, Ethan and Sol,  
First off ... 'Pizza Snake'.. Sheesh, I am afraid that word will haunt me for ever!

I am really pleased that our mutual friends at 1646 connected us, although I know some of your individual practices, I was not yet aware of the project CONGLOMERATE and it is a real pleasure to be launched into your midst like this.

I am going to start off with offering you some background on my own personal history, because viewing Block 1 & 2 just made me feel like taking a tumble through my childhood. A haunted confused childhood then, but still.

I was born in 1981 and through my dad's work we spent 1984 - 1988 in Miami and the icons of my youth are Star Wars, GI Joe, JAM (truly outrageous!), PeeWee Herman, Wuzzles (I was a proud owner of Hoppopotamus - image added below), Fraggle Rock and the Muppet Show. Looking back it does to an extent feel the 80s were the golden age of television. Shows presented fantastic microcosmoses of somewhat familiar yet outer/otherworldly communities.

It strikes me, that aside from certain aesthetic affinities with these TV productions in your practices, the blueprint for CONGLOMERATE is encapsulated in shows like Mr Rogers, Pee Wee Herman and the Muppets. These shows are not simply their own narrational devices, their sites and premise function as anchor to gather and disclose larger communities, whether actual people such our beloved guests in the Muppets and Sesame street, or fictional main stays like Mr McFeely\* from Mr Rogers' Neighborhood of Make Believe (\*my god, can you imagine such a name nowadays ...).

In any case - the sense of community is an emphatic feature - and I wonder how this relates to our current day viewing and leisure habits, pretty much entrenched in the internet. I think over such a brief time as the past 5 years our media consumption has become increasingly solitary. So much so that I am actually after 8 snobby years of not owning a television feel driven to get one again. Partly for collective viewing experiences in my own room, but I think even finding solace in knowing I am watching a show exactly simultaneously with other humans.

How do you experience community and the ways this is shaped via old and new media?

Warmest  
Nathalie



DEC 4: C - NH

Hi Nathalie!

Nice to meet you as well, we're in the midst of putting the finishing touches on our sets, we start our first day of shooting here at 1646 tomorrow morning.

Most of us in CONGLOMERATE haven't had a TV in 10-15 years, so when we think about TV, we're more orbiting around what it was and how it affected us than today's kind of programming. In terms of viewing, we know we can't make people watch the same thing at the same time (aside from during our theatre screenings), but we do use this 'block' format to program what channel is on and when it changes, guiding the viewing experience rather than allowing viewers to self-direct.

We're all from different places, so the community element for us is centered largely on the shared experience, especially in how we use a physical base to create our projects. We like having this concrete way of connecting, building up a network of people with various skills who may mostly work independently but have a need or desire to come together into an affect-based community of 'doing'. The model of a 'TV Station' initially appealed to us because of this physicality - a geographical meeting point - and also in how there's an accredited way of dividing the creative work on a project. It's easy to lose track of this feeling in art which comes from working together in various constellations and to varying degrees, allowing your ego and identity to get washed up in a different kind of tide that's generated.

So, for us, it's not (so much) a nostalgia for old TV and community that drives us, but to take what's useful for us from those existing models and utilize it to push out into new areas, challenging ourselves at the very least.

- CONGLOMERATE

DEC 5: NH - C

So, if I understand it correctly, you just had your first day of shooting at 1646 yesterday? We just opened a show at MAMA yesterday, which leads me to think about the exhibition as stage, regardless whether the artworks, the

artists or the audience are the actors that bring the set to life. The parallels with the TV-format simply just seems to make explicit that which for a part is already there. That there are always different planes of action that trigger one another.

With you directing 'the zapping' experience you take on this role of the invisible hand, taking away both agency and responsibility of the viewer to control the TV experience. However, how does this work in your physical installations? How do you feel about letting these new actors, the audience, find their own route - are there attempts to subtly or unconsciously guide them?

Then a whole different matter. I notice you sign off with CONGLOMERATE, consciously doing away with your personal signatures - yet I think in the work the explicit visual language of each of your practices are strongly recognizable (as well as made clear through the end titles) and function because of their interplay. Obviously the notion CONGLOMERATE, in and of itself invites for fluctuating participation, hence your guest contributors, but do you see yourselves as a necessary core group, or are you organizing a structure that is not necessarily personal and can/should shift over time?

And lastly, can you tell me a bit about the scenes you just shot, and perhaps also if and how the geographical meeting point of 1646 has influenced these? Will you find ways to insert personal (whether of yourselves or the audience) X-mas drama's into the new show, because after all, at least to my experience, not one Xmas is safe from some drama ! (but we laugh about it later, right?)

DEC 6: NH - C

I imagine you are really pressed for time. I just happened to see some images pass by on social media of the shots and see one of my questions below, partially, answered. Still, it would be great to hear you elaborate.

So first of all I noticed some familiar faces in the images, and can piece together your way of working with the local context for that a bit, involving local artists/actors to take part. I am curious about the process of engaging these people (like Laura Stamps, Rob Knijn, Katinka van Gorkum) - did you place an open call, do you rely on 1646 to act as matchmaker, where they people you were already interested in?

Earlier this year MAMA co-produced the pilot episode of a new anime Sci-Fi series titled *Culturesport*, brainchild of John Michael Boling. JM has his own team of (mostly self-taught) 3D artists and writers who he works with, but to develop the narrative of the episode, MAMA provided the research that offered the shape for JM's own crazy scientist storyline to run through. *Culturesport* will develop itself over various times and places, landing in a particular geography each time and taking from the artistic environment, history and resources that that place has to offer. In Rotterdam the Gabber

subculture from the nineties offered the context to connect the *Culturesport* team to fashion designer Nada van Dalen, hardcore legends Rotterdam Terror Corps, but also young writer Tommy Ventevogel and (voice)actors from collective Umland.

This created this fantastic byproduct of the episode + exhibition itself in the form of a platform to connect generations and practices. And these relationships actually become recurring and sustainable - they really raise the level of contributing to an artistic infrastructure, which then is not only of use in the relationship between us and the (primary) artist, but a larger network.

For a space like MAMA we are not only happy to contribute this way, it also validates us within a context of public funding. Simultaneously I also think - in a context of ever minimizing funding resources - it makes us, the artistic scene, stronger and more capable of challenging these conditions

So now my questions following from this observation:

How strong are your concerns/ambitions to provide a catalyzing context for others beyond yourselves (as the primary artists involved)?

And secondly, more technical, how much do practical, financial contexts present you with urgency or agency to develop CONGLOMERATE?

All best - good luck there!

C - NH

Hi Nathalie!

Ok here's a bunch of answersssssss!!

The sets within the physical space (in this case the gallery, which acts as a sound stage) are arranged in both a practical manner (i.e. reacting to the available architecture), as well as one that sensibly brings the audience through the story in an apparently linear way. Visitors to the space can experience the individual sets at their own pace; to enter into them, be absorbed and draw their own conclusions about what has taken place within them, as well as view them from afar, and to view the extents of the sets- where the carpet stops and the wallpaper runs out. Their hunches about the scenes that have taken place inside them are to be confirmed by the resulting video, once post-production is finished. The actors are, of course, directed throughout the space as is traditional.

To answer your second question, CONGLOMERATE has become a sort of collectively made artwork in itself, but also a producing body which the five of us operate. Within the project there are stratifications of collaboration and authorship. It's all still evolving so we try to leave room for ourselves and other guest contributors to have autonomy, while also letting some kind of sense of identity wash into a greater body of water. At the moment you could say that the five of us are the nucleus of a growing mass.

The main reason that our blocks don't have title cards or

credits after each small segment within them is mostly to allow it all to flow together and get rid of divisions that might allow the viewer too much of a breath (or to turn off their 'TV'), but also function as an editorial process which allows us to tightly adjoin the work of divergent and complementary personalities, almost like many machines arranged along the same electrical current.

Our way of working for *Oedipusmas Special* is one of the few instances within the videos where the five of us have had equal input into one show (*Teleton* being the other). Co-writing a script with five people will always end with a result that no one could've or would've come up with alone, so there's this element of letting go of some control which can be both freeing and challenging for any artist.

Ok, for the third question we'll start by describing a few scenes. The opening scene is a wide shot of the living room; the mother of the family, Paule, scrambles in all frazzled-looking for her guarana pills, keys and what-not. She's getting ready to run off to the weather station to report all night. She has a brief interaction with her husband, Penn, who surfaces from the basement and whom she seems to be more than happy to leave behind; her line: 'have fun at the family dinner, wish I could be there' is purely sarcastic. This initial scene is set up to reference a typical family sitcom like *Roxanne* or the *Cosby Show*, however pretty much from here on after, each scene gets darker and darker in terms of mood and content. Additionally the whole story is set to the backdrop of an ever growing insomnia affecting the members of the entire household.

To recount some of the more intense scenes, yesterday for example, we shot a whole day of the siblings, Evver and Oscar, reuniting in their childhood bedroom, where their insomnia and sexual tension slowly builds up. They go from reminiscing about the furniture, and cracks in the walls, to an innocent massage supposed to 'help sis sleep' to Oscar pretend-sleeping while Evver smells his palms to finally the pair revisiting their childhood game of playing 'operation'. The latter action leading them into an intense moment of stares and touches we never quite find out how far the siblings will take. In the younger kids room a more innocent version is taking place between the two teenagers playing dentist.

On Monday we also shot some great scenes with grandma Penelopee. She's like the family rebel: solitary, mischievous and does what she wants, which includes framing her teenage great grandson Odie as a 'bedwetter' by sneaking into his bedroom and peeing on his bed while he's supposed to be sleeping. A little later in the film though, she is confronted by her grandkids upon which she bursts into an eerie emotional confession explaining her actions, exclaiming: 'do you really know your grandma, do you really want to know your grandma?'. The confession however is interrupted by sleep deprived dad Penn, who urgently needs the whole family to gather in mama's bed because of some form of emergency. Well that's a taste for now re: scenes!

The shooting has been really fun so far, although exhausting (starting at 8.30 every morning and usually not done before midnight, at least not for the crew). We have

a pretty varied cast in terms of ages, and experience, I think they influence the script for sure, more than the geographical meeting point. And the 1646 gang, of course influences by helping, and facilitating and making for good ears to talk things through.

Some of the actors have interesting physical contrasts too; like the siblings Evver and Oscar who are just very different in size, which translates really well on camera, and works well for building tension between them. It's also been fun and rewarding because here and there the script is still malleable, so at times we improvise a new ending for a scene on the spot, or come up with new lines or actions as we go. This type of working is exciting and dynamic, especially when it works in a group, it's a super gratifying experience, and feels much like a well oiled machine.

In terms of adding our own dramas for sure, it's always there somehow. Nothing is one-to-one, but even the way we initially started was through the five of us going on a three-day retreat where we shared old awkward family stories and pictures as well as references from shows we used to watch or family scenes we liked from existing films et cetera. From there we started building an new story, which we of course exaggerated and made more absurd and dark. Slowly, the ideas started to come together and then the writing became smoother as we started understanding the internal world of the thing we had created, choices then become logical, to the point we naturally stop veering off to unneeded side plots. We were all surprised we got there pretty fast. And for sure there are small details, picked from each of our memories and families, like someone always forgetting a cup of chamomile tea in the microwave, having prepared it but then never remembering to nuke it. The *Oedipusmas* family has three microwaves, and are often nuking chamomile teas to fight their sleep-dep. Further, the idea of the family with its tensions was also an exciting topic to dive into, as its a kind of a parallel to the collective, which we of course are. We were also thinking of the family as a relational structure that's very exclusive, and insular, something that felt timely in relation to recent political power structures we are worried about. But now this is veering off, so ... beep beep full stop. More soon!

- CONGLOMERATE

C - NH

Just got your follow up, somehow it's partly already answered in our previous mail. We're still in the mids of setting up for tomorrow, last day of shoot, so we'll try to sneak you a more precise answer at some point. But for now briefly, re: How strong are your concerns/ambitions to provide a catalyzing context for others beyond yourselves (as the primary artists involved)?

In the case of the *Oedipusmas Special*, we were really happy to work with 1646, some of us know them since longer, and we all really like their program and way of working. Further 1646 did place an open call for us, but of course

also searched through their own contacts to find the right matches for us. We didn't know any of the actors before apart from Oscar Peters, an artist from Amsterdam whom we wanted to work with. The others we did interview over skype the weeks before arriving. Our main concern was to find good amateur actors/performers and good people to work with, that means people who are excited and up for it. We work with a large community of artists around us in Berlin, and involve them in many ways, in our shoots, next to of course featuring them in the blocks and organizing events, curating shows etc. Community always plays a part as we are always doing ambitious things with groups of people, where no one's main concern is payment, but rather the experience, and having meaningful experiences together. However doing a show at 1646 was also an exciting opportunity for us too as a collective, get to be 'the artist' the maker, and this time not the curator. It's our first solo show as a collective.

Ok bis später

- CONGLOMERATE

DEC 8: NH - C  
Dear CONGLOMERATE,

Not even counting on that you can see this message before things kick off tonight. Just wanted to wish you to break a few legs - I am planning to make it.

Maybe sneaking in one last question. What's your thoughts on 'Technicolor'?

DEC 9: C - NH

uh busy busy, but uh what? Why Technicolor?

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