

1/11/2019

HELLO ECHO

CÉLINE MATHIEU
IN CONVERSATION WITH
BERNICE NAUTA

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 artist develops 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 getting 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 Bernice Nauta, *Hello Echo*, 1st of November 2019, in 1646.

1646.

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SEPT 30: - Céline Mathieu [CM] to Bernice Nauta [BN]

Dear Bernice,
I find myself in a small room on the tenth floor of Nathan Road. My legs fully stretched reach a beam that separates the room in 2/3, the leg-length is 1/3, I feel supported and square, if it weren't for the sleepless night I think I had what must have been yesterday. The reason I'm writing you this is because I was thinking about how to put to words how I feel while I was showering off the stuff the plane glued to my skin, and I thought about the title of your show; I thought of Echoes, and it does feel like the place I am in, somewhat undulates my experience of it. As if my sight is a faint sound, more than an image. I'm in-between time zones and realizations, blinking at resemblances and sheer enthusiasm. The bed linen's grey and white stripes are temporarily stored on my lenses, and superposed on the white screen, in colors I can't distinguish because they are right out of focal point.

All of this I write because that's where I'm at, in a jetlag, when thinking about your upcoming exhibition, and it's mingling with the thoughts I have of it, since I briefly met you in Juan's studio's hallway and you told me in the staircase about what you planned to do for this specific show. The staircase became an important element of you telling that. Also, the staircase added to the remembrance of a book that uses doubles and memory. And I imagine in your show you will have elements of all that echo-ing back and forth in space.

Without projecting any further; how have you been? How are you moving towards the exhibition? What terms do you use to think about it? How do you anticipate the plans? Can you uncover them?

Fresh air-blown greetings,
Céline

OCT 4: BN - CM

Dear Céline,
I have a clear picture in my mind of you sitting in this hotel room, I imagine wooden elements in the room, painted dark, almost black, semi shiny. Long flights always feel like a strange time travel, when flying east you go the opposite direction of the sun, right? Meeting each other on the other side much sooner than you normally would. The air in the aircraft is dry and warm. This feeling you express, of the aircraft's layer that you like to shower off, is similar to the layer that you get onto you after being in a museum with mostly older paintings, such as Louvre or El Prado. I always feel like a raisin when I come out of these rooms with air (de)humidifiers and heaters. I suppose these buildings are similar to the aircraft, practicing a form of time travel.

I have been visiting 1646 frequently over the last weeks. I keep coming back to look at the entrance, measure it, photograph all its details. Every time I come back I see things I haven't seen before. The space of 1646 has quite a light character to me. The two rooms bring me into a good mood usually when I visit them. Particularly I like how the 'Coco Sex' shop across the street has blue neon lights that reflect onto the facade of 1646. This same color of light is later to be found in their toilet. The architect that renovated 1646 in 2007 told me that the facade of the building was meant to look like a car window. Specifically the rubber strip that holds the glass into the frame. The whole facade's surface is like a rubber, orange skin. It looks very soft and comfortable.

The book you recommended me in Juan's studio caught my interest, I've ordered it now and waiting for it to arrive. As I've read so far, the protagonist is making reconstructions and re-enactments of the past that he can't remember, trying to form an image of what that was. I've been thinking how this exhibition is more and more becoming something similar, with growing

references to my own past. Which makes me think of AI films, in which the cyborg's identity is partially constructed out of implanted fictional memories, constituting a sense of origin and a sense of 'self'. So perhaps remembering your memories is in a way constituting your existence and identity. Yet the thing that I try to accomplish here is not to constitute identity in that sense, rather to question it, by questioning the factual nature of memory, and furthermore fictionalizing them purposely, by the act of doubling. This doubling is in a way stepping aside, or outside of myself, finding another in yourself. I can explain that a bit better... Making a drawing of a personal memory, can be seen as a form of expressionism, expressing your feelings, sensations and thoughts that you have with this particular memory. The act of duplicating this memory-drawing, changes expressionism into hyperrealism. No longer are you expressing yourself, you are very precisely tracing lines, stains, colors, of 'another'.

All the best,
Bernice

OCT 12: CM - BN

Dear Bernice,
Thank you for your e-mail, I enjoyed reading it and lingered on the pleasant feeling of having received it for a few days. Meanwhile I had many conversations, listened to podcasts, had rather life-altering events, and still, one of the thoughts that keeps coming back to me this week, is this thing I can't quite figure out. My friend told me that cats don't have feelings of love. She told me she'd heard it on the radio, a scientist explaining how cats don't have feelings beyond basic instinctive ones like fear; but that because of the fact that they don't have a sense of past and future, they can't store memories and that's what loving emotions stem from.

I've been slightly torn by all the elements; the scientist - saying it - on the radio - the cats - no feelings of love - no past tense - no memory. And somehow I kept relating it to the show, both in the idea of a whiplashing experience of time and of understanding. How do memory, and past present future tense define how we feel about what surrounds us? Like the character in the book who indeed has people work hard to build an architectural, sonic and bodily reconstruction, for him to live an experience he had in the past again. I imagine what he's looking for is a sensibility, a thin layer of feeling recalling, somewhere between consciousness and control? The experience of looking backward, will similarly arise in the exhibition space, right? How do you think of the relation between the work and thoughts on control and consciousness? In the experience of re-encountering something you've seen before, the play on memory is direct. A re-evaluation of instant and past viewing experiences shift back and forth. In what you see at the moment, you adjust what you've seen, or overlooked. Can you tell me more about the title of the piece and the conceptual pleasures you had coming up with the show?

It's nice how the email conversation along with my imagined shape of the work, live as a little extra chamber for thought, where I lock the cat's love when I encounter it, with passages of the book, and thoughts on how I can imagine it relating to your other work. The two main words that pop up thinking about your practice now, though I only know it from afar; are indeed as you mentioned 'self' and also 'trickery'. Two words that have an equally rounded and ever un-solid quality to them. They are constructions of loose and solid elements that use time spacing to make their appearance.

A memory wires the exact same neurons as when you had the actual experience in the first place, did you know that? What

were your first thoughts when looking at the facade more closely, imagining making a reproduction of it? How did your view of it change? How do you feel about it now? Do you ever imagine how it'll look when it is documented; how you can mimic the experience of mimicking? What materials are you using in the show? How did you choose them? Did it steer or follow in this making process?

Warm greetings,
Céline

OCT 16: BN - CM

Dear Céline,
I hope you had safe travels from Honkong. But I suppose so, receiving your e-mail now.

What a coincidence you write to me about cats in relation to memory and the capability to love. One of the works in the exhibition is a mould of a cat, referring to a volume which is not there, a present absence. It is a remake of a work I made during art school, which at the time referred to my cat that passed away. I thought about how the volume of the cat's body started to decay, but as an imaginary form it would always remain, thus being a present absent volume. I've also been writing down memories for this exhibition, that could be seen as constituting meaning to these works, it's an art historian's method I used for framing the meaning of works, the biographical method. In one of these memories I talk about that cat, how I felt love towards it, the cat was a friend to me. Thinking now about the possibility, or the harsh truth, of the cat never having loved me back, because of not being able to remember me, turns the memory and the mould of the cat into a tragic but also humorous one sided love situation. The work immediately changes into a gesture stemming from love sickness, a narrative we are all very familiar with. Still I wonder how it is possible cats leave for days, something this particular cat from my memory

would do on a regular basis, he would always 'remember' the house he came from, and return back to it. Maybe that comes from conditioning, which might not need a memory?

I've started reading the book now. I liked how the character talks about being fake. Especially after the accident he had, how he had to re-learn how to move his body, redirecting brain signals to limbs. How he walks down his street thinking about how he would look like walking down his street, as if he is in a film. He talks about how Robert De Niro moves his body so smoothly, every physical gesture is so convincing and stylish. De Niro seems so natural to him, not thinking but just doing. Later a friend reminds him of how characters in films are mostly depicted not being self aware of the things they do in the films, or of how they would look, but just doing them, to create a convincing and 'realistic' story to look at. It's funny how such fictions seem more natural than reality. How this mimesis on people's lives actually creates this fictionality within people's real lives. This made me think about something someone told me in Brussels a few months ago. He said: 'we make originals out of copies', explaining that without a copy there is no original.

An act of looking back will happen in the exhibition, yes. It is like a repetition, an echo, which the title of the exhibition makes a greeting to: hello echo. I started thinking about the myth of Narcissus, how he looks into a pool of water, seeing himself and falling crazily in love. I thought about Narcissus because to me there is always an awkward and humorous component of narcissism in being an artist. For the past five years I addressed fictional characters as a sham to communicate indirectly. I now see this also as a way to always take a step aside from responsibility, not having to stand directly behind your works. The months before being invited to make an exhibition here at 1646, I started feeling the desire to remove the sham in a way, and take the full responsibility for the

gestures I make, without the layer of a fictional character in between. After conversations with fellow artists, friends, I came to the realization that it would be violent to radically break with these characters, both to myself and to the characters, taking them seriously as agents. Also the process of change in the work is something that goes slowly anyway, it takes time. So what remains now in the exhibition are echoes from these characters, along with an echo of myself, which makes myself as a whole into a character too, placing myself equally next to them. Another thought is that a friend reminded me of Echo, the nymph, who is present in the myth and in every painting depicting the myth. She is desperately in love with Narcissus, but due to a curse not being able to speak directly, only to repeat another person's words. She's always lingering on the side of the pool, where you see Narcissus dwelling over his own reflection. From this I got this fantasy of Narcissus looking up for the first time, where he stops being in love with 'himself' / his reflection (the image he has of himself) and sees Echo, saying hello to her. Later I thought she is actually a reflection too, just like the one in the pool of water, since all her words will be a composed copy of his own words. He can love another, but love himself too, because she will always reflect him. Anyway, the gesture of Narcissus looking up and seeing the other seemed most relevant for this exhibition. Also because I've invited other artists to participate. It's in a way about seeing the others too in yourself, seeing that you're not singular but plural, how we're all kind of reflections of each other.

It's interesting what you said about memories, being a 'copy' of something that happened, but how your mind re-experiences them similarly. I like that a lot, it seems the mind actually doesn't make any hierarchy between the original and the copy, in that sense. Why do you think we then still make a hierarchy between those? The original usually being the higher one?

About the facade I have to say that the copy was very different in my imagination than how it looks now. Somehow inside the space the facade looks much more sculptural than it does on the street side. Also it is much more monumental than I expected. It feels very strange still, because it really is a trick, you recognize it and from that you get a kind of safe feeling. Today I was working with some people on it, filling holes and painting, I really felt like a restorer working on a real facade. I'm looking forward to installing the other works, flyers, paintings, drawings and some sculptures. Most materials used in the exhibitions are quite conventional, paint on canvas, pencil on paper and plaster sculptures. Materials that really signify 'I am art', I suppose. The copy might make them cartoonish in a way...

About the documentation, I figured it would work to take photos of both the real facade and the copy, and so forth, take the same photos in the first exhibition as taken in the copied exhibition. Basically I will ask the photographer to make the documentation twice as well.

I read you had an open studio in Antwerpen, how did that go? Opening your studio for visitors also transforms your daily habitat into this staged scene somehow. Everything you leave in the space is suddenly something someone can look at. You become more aware of things that usually are just there, unnoticed.

Warm greetings,
Bernice

OCT 25: CM - BN

Dear Bernice,
I hope you are well? I wonder how the days counting down to the opening are influencing your experience of the show's effective outlook. How are you, and how are things?

I opened another text frame next to your previous e-mail, as if to transpose its content from one container to another formulating a reply. You spoke of the cat's mould – dazzling, the imaginary space translated in the presence of a mould. I love it! I always imagine matter pressing outwards into the set contours. Like blowing up your cheeks, or filling your chest with air to a maximum. The set contours and moulds make me think of Marcel Broodthaers' clam shells and thoughts in the exhibition I recently visited. Juan who was there with me, was so moved by seeing a specific work live, he cried. He'd only ever known the work on a postcard in his studio, and seeing it live, he pushed his fingers under his glasses to catch the tears. A last note on the cat: "There's no such thing as love. There are only proofs of love."

I like to think about the mental shape of concepts like time, a week being a straight line that ends abruptly, an activity falling off of it at the end to come to the next week. I had a conversation about this with my friend Ode De Kort, and I think back of it every week. I've thus been meaning to ask what mental shapes do you have when you think of time and also when you think of "self"?

I had a conversation the other day about how you take over gestures and little things of the people around you, like pulling your mouth to one side when you're considering something, or touching your hair.

I was thinking of Narcissus being in love with himself, also embodies other thoughts on love in self and others. In a way he becomes the other through the fascinating and magic workings of the mirror, which allows him that, alongside the security; he's found a way to secure his love: both by his own presence, as by the impossibility of it. Does that make sense?

When yesterday I tried to tame my feverish dreams caused by the flu I listened to a French man doing an ASMR interpretation of the relativity theory to try to get to sleep. In a soft whispering voice and an accent he must be very aware of, he explained how things are always only what they are, in relation to each other.

The best interview question I read this week, was "what's the biggest misconception about your work?" I'd like to ask you the same.

Warm greetings,
I'm actively trying to keep this e-mail short, to let yours resonate further. It was really nice. Good luck with the final preparations,

Céline

OCT 30: BN - CM

Dear Céline,
I will also actively try to keep this last e-mail short, meanwhile being aware of the audience that gets to read this e-mail conversation we've had. It makes me think of the character in that book, who is hyper aware of how the way he is walking down his street might look. We're almost finished building up the show, which is good.

Juan told me about his tears! I suppose that inanimate object could have felt to him like finally meeting a good friend, after having this image of it in your home for so long, passing by it day by day. What thoughts must Juan have had all that time looking at that postcard wandering through his studio / home?

I like how your mental shape for time is a straight line that ends abruptly, and I suppose a new line starts in the next week. It's like a linear cycle that you've created. For me rooms are mental shapes of concepts like 'self'. I suppose that comes from Mark Manders, but also from David Lynch and

Werner Herzog. The last two having spoken both about the mind as a room. Lynch said ideas come to him, as sitting in a room that has one little window. Through that window, ideas get thrown in. Herzog said that ideas come to him as a burglar breaking into his home. They enter so aggressively that he has to immediately deal with them. I also have a friend, Isabel, whose mode of thought is quite inspiring to me. She designs spaces that are for example dedicated and designed to portray a specific sound or her brother's garden. I like a lot how she translates the intangible into a space. In the show I made one work which is a double of the left half of my body. This half is sticking out the wall, meaning to signify that the other half of the body is the room itself. Thus, half of the body is inside its own other half. Within this mode of thought the other works are hanging both in and on the body.

What's the biggest misconception about my work? Hmm, difficult question. I really don't know what I could state as misconception. I suppose because I don't have such a fixed paradigm, it's always shifting a bit, therefore a misconception, or anomaly can become actually a sharper conception of the work and shift the paradigm. I like how Mike Kelley said that Dalí, the artist who is often bashed by the contemporary art world, was actually quite a genius when seeing him as a very early pop artist, instead of a surrealist. Just by shifting this corner that an artist is in, it changes the whole conception of the work.

Thank you for your conversation Céline.

Hope to meet you again soon.

All the best,
Bernice