

SUPPORT PARTICIPATION

London-based architect **CÉLINE CONDORELLI** answers and poses questions on the duration of practice, the meaning of her “support structures,” the ideology of display, and the future of books.

interview by
MARKUS MIESSEN



IT'S INTERESTING AND SURPRISING—WE ARE BOTH SIMULTANEOUSLY ENDING A SPECIFIC PART OF OUR LIFE IN PRACTICE: YOU ARE PRESENTING THE LAST PHASE OF THE “SUPPORT STRUCTURE” PROJECT WITH GAVIN WADE, WHILE I AM LAUNCHING THE THIRD AND FINAL PART OF MY PARTICIPATION TRILOGY. WHY ARE THINGS COMING TO AN END, AND—AS AN END IS ALWAYS ALSO A BEGINNING OF SOMETHING ELSE—WHAT’S NEXT?

Perhaps it is a question of duration of practice: we have been doing what we are doing for about ten years now, and this may amount to the completion of a particular project and its corresponding set of practices. This completion doesn't need to be followed by a drastic break, but perhaps ten years is enough time dedicated to making a point and should allow for something to occur beyond that. We can take a certain amount of knowledge of experience in our luggage, but in a lighter way. I feel very strongly that my work will probably always be inscribed within notions of supporting structures, but that I may not need to state that or explain why that is the case as much as I have done until now. I can start proceeding beyond all the efforts involved in establishing a particular idea or position.

I AGREE ENTIRELY. IT WON'T BE A BREAK, BUT IT WILL ALLOW FOR A PRODUCTIVE DISTANCE OF REFLECTION THAT GENERATES CORRESPONDING SETS OF PROJECTS, PRACTICES AND KNOWLEDGE. IF “SUPPORT” AND “PARTICIPATION” ARE ALREADY PRESENT IN OUR PRACTICES, COULD IT BE USEFUL TO START THINKING THROUGH TERMS OF NON-SUPPORT AND NON-PARTICIPATION AND WHAT THEIR CONSEQUENCES MAY BE?

Defining things through their opposite is a useful exercise, especially when faced with such malleable and fuzzy concepts as support and participation. Have you found yourself saturated with ideas of participation or do you feel you've reached the end of its possibilities, at least conceptually?

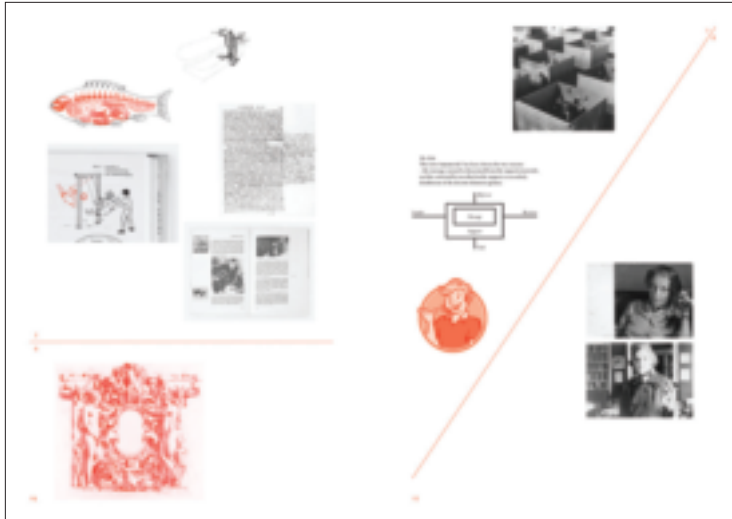
FOR ME, DEALING WITH AND THINKING THROUGH AND BEYOND ROMANTIC NOTIONS OF PARTICIPA-

TION AS A PLURALISTIC NOTION WAS IN MANY WAYS LIKE DEALING WITH AND OVERCOMING A FATHER COMPLEX. MAYBE IT HAS TO DO WITH THE SPECIFIC TIME THAT I GREW UP IN ARCHITECTURE— THE LATE '90S AND EARLY '00S—, YEARS THAT WERE OVERWHELMED BY A DISCOURSE AROUND TWO BUZZWORDS: PARTICIPATION AND SUSTAINABILITY. BY NOW, I HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF THE PARTICIPATION NOSTALGIA, REALLY. I HAVE RARELY SEEN IT WORK. I THINK WE LIKE TO SEE OURSELVES IN THE CONTEXT OF SEEMINGLY SMART SYSTEMS AND POLITICAL THEORIES, BUT—HONESTLY—WHEN DO THEY WORK OUT IN A PRODUCTIVE AND SELF-REFLEXIVE MANNER? I STRONGLY SUGGEST TO ANY MARXIST THEORIST THAT HE OR SHE SHOULD WALK ACROSS THE DMZ INTO NORTH KOREA OR SPEND SOME TIME AS A JOURNALIST IN CUBA. HE OR SHE MAY START TO THINK OTHERWISE. THIS IS NOT TO ARGUE AGAINST PARTICIPATORY STRUCTURES PER SE, BUT RATHER TO SUGGEST THAT THEY MAY HAVE TO BE RETHOUGHT IN TERMS OF A REALISTIC RENDERING OF A PRO-ACTIVE AND TARGETED INDIVIDUAL INVOLVEMENT INSTEAD OF SIMPLY INVITING OTHER AUTHORS TO THE TABLE. COULD IT BE PRODUCTIVE TO THINK THROUGH THE OPPOSITES FOR A CHANGE?

I have been toying with the idea that the opposite of support may be resistance. Both movements may be directed toward similar aims, but they go about it in very different ways: while in support, the emphasis is put on the positive and therefore constructive direction towards change over everything else, resistance is an act of force-in-defense. They are both important political actions, yet driven by polar opposites. But of course, I state this as a provocation.

WHAT, MORE PRECISELY, CONSTITUTES YOUR PRACTICE OF SUPPORT?

Support, I think, allows us to think through an equalizing movement, and this is perhaps its most important aspect. What I mean by this is that support is a carrier for inter-dependency as a form of re-equalization. The proposition of support, therefore, is to transform



what we produce by revisiting the way we do things, our modes of production, and by rethinking the very processes through which we operate, through the practice of supporting. Defining a relationship such as support aims at a different category for action; it is concerned with how the political is staged and performed, the inherent ideology of frames and display, organizational forms, appropriation, dependency and temporariness. I work, broadly speaking, with art and architecture, and combine a number of approaches, from developing possibilities for “supporting” (the work of others, forms of political imaginary, existing and fictional realities) to leading broader inquiries into forms of commonality and discursive sites, resulting in projects merging exhibitions, politics, fiction, public space and whatever else feels urgent at the time. I think perhaps my book is a good example of what you mean: *Support Structures* is a manual, but in truth, it is also a compendium. It gathers together a broad variety of essays, images and small works that address the notion of support in relationship to what we do in cultural practice. The book as a whole is also the culmination of the collaborative project entitled “Support Structure,” undertaken by myself with Gavin Wade between 2003 and 2009.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND SUPPORT AS SIMILAR TO THE NOTION OF A HELPING HAND, AND THEREFORE ALWAYS “SUPPORTIVE” OR HARMONIC?

I think support appears to do that, but it might not always help you achieve your own ends—so the first question that needs to be asked is: supportive of what? Part of this project on support seeks to open up *how* practices of support take place, and to focus our attention on what is often considered a subaltern, insignificant or simply positive set of actions. The deployment of support is an operation, and as such is politics-specific, whether these politics are desirable, dangerous or utopian.

DOES SUPPORT NEED TO CONSENT TO WHAT IT SUPPORTS?

Let me respond by asking you a question: do you consider that participation is the condition for any democratic organization to occur? Is participation in the ways that you have witnessed and analyzed an actual process of involvement of those who were previously excluded? Or can it also be used as a form of manipulation, or as a distraction from the reality of a decision-making process?

PARTICIPATION CAN BUT NEEDN'T NECESSARILY BE A MANIFESTATION OF DEMOCRATIC INVOLVEMENT. WHAT I HAVE ATTEMPTED IN MY LATEST BOOK IS TO TURN THE NOTION OF PARTICIPATION ON ITS HEAD, AWAY FROM CONCEPTS OF ALL-INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING AND ROUND-TABLE-LIKE



All images from Céline Condorelli (ed.), *Support Structures*, Berlin-New York, Sternberg Press, 2009

INVITATIONS AND TOWARD A MORE PRO-ACTIVE AND SELF-INITIATED MEANS OF INVOLVEMENT BY WHICH INDIVIDUALS OR GROUPS FORCE THEMSELVES INTO CONTEXTS, FRAMEWORKS AND COURSES THAT THEY HAVE NOT NECESSARILY BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART IN. IT IS A MEANS OF UNDERSTANDING PRACTICE AS PRAXIS, A PRO-ACTIVE ENDEAVOR IN WHICH THERE IS A DIRECT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH, POLITICAL AMBITION, FORCEFUL BELIEF AND PROPOSITIONAL THINKING, ALL OF WHICH ARE DIRECTED TOWARDS ACTUALIZING CHANGE. DOES YOUR BOOK SEEK TO ACCUMULATE AND ILLUSTRATE SOME KIND OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE?

Support Structures was produced by and constitutes the last phase of the “Support Structure” project, and includes its corresponding sets of works, actions and manifestations. Therefore, the ten phases of “Support Structure” do constitute a process of investigation, and as you say, an accumulation of practice-based research into the methodologies and conceptual devices offered by thinking through what a support structure could or might be. The cumulative parts of this project form a research archive with a set of terms and possibilities for thinking through support outside the traditional terms that are assigned to it. “Support Structure” is presented in this book as an art project as well as the primary means of research towards developing the argument that support, though often unrecognized or belittled, is important, productive and qualitative work.

IN THE CONTEXT OF YOUR VARIOUS SUPPORT PROJECTS, “SUPPORT” IS UNDERSTOOD AS A PRO-ACTIVE AND SELF-DRIVEN FORMAT, SIMILAR TO MY RENDERING OF PARTICIPATION AS “FIRST-PERSON-SINGULAR.” YOUR BOOK OPENS UP ITS CONTENTS IN THE FORM AND FORMAT OF A DISCURSIVE SITE. WHY A BOOK?

This is indeed how I felt it needed to be set up: a discursive site in the shape of a book, in order to create the first reader; a compendium, a supporting structure for the creation of support’s discourse, which I feel had been missing until now. It had to be a book because through the process of developing a project like “Support Structure,” what we were lacking most acutely was background material—texts or essays that would open theoretically what we were doing and what was emerging around us practically. I thought a book would allow us to revive, not a subject in the taxonomic sense, but a particular way of engaging in and with subjects in a desire towards emancipation—in total seriousness, earnestness, even. But you have produced more books than I have. Can you tell me how working in and on books has shaped your practice, and what you think it allows?

YES, I HAVE BEEN INTERESTED AND—TO A CERTAIN EXTENT—OBSESSED WITH BOOKS FOR A LONG TIME. I UNDERSTAND THE DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION OF BOOKS AS A VITAL AND PARALLEL PRACTICE OF INVESTIGATION AND INQUIRY, WHICH CONSTANTLY FEEDS INTO AND SOMETIMES GENERATES OTHER PROJECTS. ON ONE HAND, BOOKS CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AS CARRIERS, MACHINES AND DISTRIBUTORS OF KNOWLEDGE. ON THE OTHER, THEY GENERATE ENTRY POINTS, BACKDROPS AND NEW LINEAGES FOR SOMETHING THAT IS YET TO COME; THEY OPEN DOORS AND OFTEN INDICATE THAT—AS HANS ULRICH WOULD SAY WHEN HE QUOTES DOUGLAS GOR-

DON—“IT HAS ONLY JUST BEGUN.” I DO NOT THINK OF BOOKS AS SOMETHING PRECIOUS AND FINAL, BUT AS SOMETHING THAT NEEDS TO BE SCRUTINIZED, WORKED WITH AND LEARNED FROM. BOOKS WERE ALSO THE STARTING POINT FOR MY INTEREST IN ARCHIVES AS PRODUCTIVE SPACES OF KNOWLEDGE, ZONES OF CONFLICT FROM WHICH NEW REALITIES CAN EMERGE. I AM WORKING WITH MY ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN FIRM NOFFICE ON A SERIES OF PROJECTS CONCENTRATING ON AND, IN A WAY, BUILDING UP AN EXPERTISE REGARDING THE SPATIAL TYPOLOGIES OF ARCHIVES, LIBRARIES AND HUBS AS CULTURAL CENTERS, WHICH CAN BE BASTARDIZED INTO NEW SPATIAL AND PRODUCTIVE CONFIGURATIONS. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT THE PHYSICAL FORMAT OF THE BOOK WILL REMAIN AS IS, OR WILL IT HAVE TO DEAL WITH AN INCREASINGLY WIDESPREAD SHIFT FROM PHYSICAL TO VIRTUAL STORAGE? WHERE ARE WE IN TERMS OF OTHER FORMATS OF INTEREST?

I remember asking someone that question a few years ago, when Skype was booming and Google was like the oracle, and I just couldn’t leave Wikipedia alone. He replied by pointing out that one of the most successful Internet sites had been the steadily growing Amazon.com, used to, well, buy and sell books. I just love how reality always exceeds our expectations of it, and how clueless we are in predicting the consequences of any technological advance. What do you think the future of books is?

BOOKS WILL ALWAYS BE BOOKS. AND YES, SURE, OTHER FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER HAVE ALWAYS EXISTED, WILL CONTINUE TO EMERGE, AND WILL PROBABLY CHANGE THE WAY AND SPEED IN WHICH WE COMMUNICATE. THERE IS SOMETHING REALLY HANDY ABOUT TOOLS SUCH AS SMARTPHONES AS WELL AS APPLICATIONS THAT ALLOW YOU TO READ AND WORK VIRTUALLY. BUT THESE NEW TECHNOLOGIES ARE HEAVILY CONNECTED TO ISSUES OF ANTICIPATED DURATION, SPEED OF READING AND CONTENT: NEWS APPLICATIONS WORK BRILLIANTLY IN THIS WAY. NEVERTHELESS, THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT THE PHYSICALITY OF BOOKS THAT CANNOT BE NEGATED, BOTH IN TERMS OF HOW ONE CAN WORK WITH THEM AND THE WAY IN WHICH THEY CREATE A PHYSICAL ARCHIVE THAT ONE CAN ENGAGE WITH IN SPACE.

BIO

CÉLINE CONDORELLI (b. 1974 in Paris) is an architect and curator at Eastside Projects, Birmingham and a Senior Lecturer at London Metropolitan University. One half of the collaboration Support Band and a doctoral candidate in Research Architecture at Goldsmiths in London, she published *Support Structures*, a co-production with Gavin Wade and James Langdon, with Sternberg Press in October 2009. www.supportstructures.org

AUTHOR

Markus Miessen is an architect, researcher and writer based in Berlin. He is the author of many books and articles and has written for *Artforum*, *032c*, *Bidoun*, and *Volume* amongst others. He is now an editor of *Archive Journal*. *The Nightmare of Participation*, published in 2010 by Sternberg Press (English), Merve (German), dpr editorial (Spanish) and Archive Books (Italian) is Markus Miessen’s third and final part of his participation trilogy. www.studiomiessen.com