

Energy as a vehicle / About the work of Séverin Guelpa

by Simon Lamunière, curator (Geneva, CH), 2018

Séverin Guelpa likes to work with others, creating spaces, works and events. His practice is both individual and collective. It is as much about bringing people together for a shared experience, as it is about producing projects which proffer works and interpersonal encounters. This yields further work, exhibitions, documents and experiences.

In the beginning, it was through his studies in political science that Séverin Guelpa first appeared on the artistic scene; he notably participated with others engaged in the fight for the creation of alternative cultural spaces, which were cruelly lacking in Geneva at the beginning of 2000, due to the closure of a number of squats. His practice developed from the discussions around and the research for new spaces, and from a social and economic conscience. Therefore it is completely natural for him to implicate himself as much as he does creating works in relation to natural resources and their flux.

Whether it be from a curatorial perspective, in his manifesto *Matza*; in his associated projects or in the production of sculptures and installations, a similar vocabulary can be found, while the grammar and concepts evolve. Earth, water, sun, energy and their transmission, the relaying of knowledge and experiences express for the artist, questions of socio-economic survival and community struggle.

The collective project titled *Matza*, which has recently gained widespread attention, is the natural progression of a work that has developed over several years, which relates to complex questions with reference to resources and environments. Guelpa is interested in energies and their displacement; which is what has pushed him to extreme locations such as the American desert, an alpine glacier and more recently a Mediterranean island. During his expeditions to these environments, Séverin Guelpa has invited artists and researchers to work around the themes of water, energy and resources, in the form of workshops, forums, exhibitions and publications.

This monograph is not only the occasion to write an overview of the vision of the artist and his experiences to date, but it is also an opportunity to reflect in prospective way and give an indication of future leads and lines of questioning.

Even before starting the project Matza, Séverin Guelpa was already interested in materials as resources. Recurrent elements such as earth, water, their systems of transport, of equilibrium and exchange appear throughout his practice, taking turns at different functions according to the situation. By permutation, earth can transform into weight, signify an economic value or be the name of our planet. Light, can be electricity, energy, lighting or signage. Water is fluid or solid, a life source, a fundamental right, or a source of scripture.

For a cultural exchange project between Leipzig and Geneva during his Masters at Geneva's Haut Ecole d'Art et Design (HEAD), students rented vehicles so that the journey between the two cities became in itself a part of the project. Throughout the trip, Guelpa left white paint to drip out of one of the cars onto the road, linking Geneva and Leipzig via a very simple and symbolic action. This pictorial trace, the residue of loss, also denotes concepts of the accidental, of spoilage and of pollution, all the while marking out the link, the route and the distance between the two cities. This fluid streak, irregular, made of waves and curves, rather than being straight and angled, demonstrates a spontaneous and offhand gesture that is far from Cartesian rigour. At the same time, Guelpa took samples of earth from different plots of land that were for sale, at different points during the journey. He then very carefully labelled them with the price of the land, calculated from the median property price by the square metre. The price is marked in Euro by the kilo. The square metre then becomes kilos. The sample is diminished and re-asserts itself as an art object with an economic value determined by the price of another market, in the same way as it would in the property market. This gesture combines gold diggers, pioneers, scientists and spectators in a curious combination.

These initial actions already characterise the singular focus of Guelpa's practice: he links his work to the place in which he finds himself, the spaces through which he travels and associates the economic value of matter that is found in these spaces to existing resources.

During the same year, in 2013, in Beijing, he created another performance on the road with rickshaw drivers 'sowing' corn grains. In this piece, the action evokes the exploitation of displacement, that of a victim population in rural exodus; exterior workers who head to large urban centres, and who live by transporting people and merchandise. This work also encompasses Guelpa's socio-political engagement and his will

ingness to implicate local protagonists to develop a critique around the development of these artistic endeavours.

The context is clear in his work, bringing us to strongly reflect upon the relationship between the individual and the site, and the link between community and resources. As a pioneer, he is also in search of extreme locations from which he can extract some sort of virtue. He is drawn to locations where survival is difficult, and commodities are difficult to extract. It is probably this interest which has driven him to the vast American west, in the desert region of Marfa, Indian territory, or the Mojave desert, the regions colonised according to the Homestead Act. The artist discovered awe-inspiring sites in this region, he found signs of past occupation and traces of abandon by colonists who were unable to stay, as it was so difficult to survive in these regions. Different cultures succeeded but only for those realised in relationship to the elements had a real reason to stay and took a chance to endure for the long-term.

Guelpa also filmed a video (*Kayenta, 18'*) in the Navajo reservation, showing a true demonstration of the impossible coexistence between natives and non-native US citizens. The town of Amboy is found along the artist's route (incorporating Route 66), between the Joshua Tree and Mojave deserts in California. The artist automatically identified the potential of this for the most part abandoned small town in the middle of nowhere. It plays an important role in the American myth, with its urban elements, its connection to the landscape, to the road and to the conquest, but also its constraints—the lack of resources, isolation and the battle for survival. During this period Guelpa promised himself that he will return to the site one day to undertake collective research.

Initially, he returned to the site on his own, and experienced life there living off the resources of the local environment, creating objects and an exhibition which he put on in an unused building. He worked with found objects sourced on site, interpreting their desiccated interiors. This experience allowed him to build contacts and to meet several rare characters, who live and manage in these desert regions. He used this time to start an initial process that he will go on to develop with other collaborators.

Thus, he created his manifesto *Matza*, which he called 'the factory of the common' and which is reframed in his own words, "by the capacity of a community to associate and come up with its own tools of emancipation".

This is a wording that holds a lot more precision and potential with regard to spaces and communities with whom he had already worked with after founding Zabriskie Point in 2011, an artist-run alternative space, he was also responsible for the conception of BIG (Biennale of Independent Art Spaces in Geneva) in 2015, presented in the form of a temporary village of alternative spaces on the Plaine of Plainpalais.

The artist took the term Matza from the Valaisan word matze, which was used to describe wooden posts (and were sometimes sculptured in the form of a human face), which were taken from village to village between the 15th and 16th centuries to rally the population against a person or a particular authority. Those that rallied to the cause, planted a nail in the stick which was symbolic of adhesion. Guelpa views this as premises of democracy and collective expression in favour of a common cause. With this in mind, the artist places a matze, with nails and a hammer, in the locations that he exhibits or at the sites in Aletsh, or in Amboy.

With Matza, Guelpa finds a motto and a way to create sites that are specific to the investigation of each territory and to the development of a method of working that corresponds to his cooperative mentality, and to his preoccupation with natural resources. The key word which appears to characterize his willingness, his project and his works is 'energy'.

The stakes are ecological, political and economical. Each successive Matza brings together artists, architects and scientists over the period of 2 to 3 weeks with the aim of creating, via an ephemeral community of shared or individual projects with reference to one particular site, its location and its resources. To date, the Matzas have taken place in Amboy, in the Mojave desert in the United States, on the Aletsch glacier in Switzerland, and on Kerkennah Island in Tunisia. At Amboy, over the course of several years the project has brought together participants who share their skills and produce works or experimental site-specific projects. At Aletsch, participants were invited to stay on the glacier and to immerse themselves in an environment which is currently under threat, in order to engage in practical and artistic theoretical procedures. On Kerkennah, a dialogue was developed between the participants and the community of fishermen on the island throughout their stay to connect the Mediterranean space with the body of work already developed in the territory.

However, that which the participants and the artists undertake in each of these spaces is only a fraction of their entire experience. That's why reconfigurations of

these works on different sites and the production of consequent documentation is important. The participants come back with videos, sketches, photos and sculptures. It is close to Land Art as it engages in the act of the transposition of one place to another, however Matza is strongly reinforced by both ecologically and economically engaged community dimensions. It is not so much a question of landscape and of the relationship with its representation, it is rather an exchange of energies and of resources—in a world where the climate poses problems and the possession of raw materials is a genuine struggle. Which is why, in the works of Séverin Guelpa, materials are displaced, weighed and transported. These vital and universal materials/commodities are reconfigured into a framework or works like thermodynamic and economic mechanisms. They shift, in a physical sense, the negotiations, the longed for claims, the battles for their appropriation and their value of exchange.

In *Big Breath* at the Palais de Tokyo in 2017, or *The Offering and the Scar*, a double action in Mongolia in 2016, the artist uses air and aluminium survival blankets to create breathing cushions, and a huge kite flown with the help of a large group of people. The air and the wind serve as motors so that the pieces are constantly in movement. In Mongolia, a second action completes the first: he drags an anchor behind a pick-up truck over the dry earth, to the point where it scars the earth with an impossible irrigation canal. The wind also serves as a motor in Aletsch when the currents of air descend down the mountain filling a plastic tube as the aluminium survival blankets serve to delineate the rocks that are destined to move in time anyway. During the Valais Triennale in 2017, air served to inflate enormous air chambers which descended in a cascade towards the Rhône, the very image of a glacier melting.

Flux and cascades appear in the exhibitions of Matza *Undergrounds* and *Radical Biotope* ; water flows between the two exhibitions, from the outside to the interior of the building, after following an intense and complex journey. The water completely floods the space and at the same time is linked to other works completed by participants or by Guelpa himself during the Matza in Aletsch or Amboy.

He often uses different types of materials to transport the raw materials of air, water or earth, or as a marker. These materials, whether they be synthetic or metallic, wood, in fabric or in aluminium, are all by-products of human and industrial production. This could be considered as contradictory. In fact, container and content are in total opposition to each other, they are eternal foes, just like builders and nature, colonists and natives, the economy and natural resources, enterprise and individuals. Yet they need

each other. Born from this tension additional questions are posed for which Guelpa seeks neither a response, nor a solution.

Are we thus imprisoned in a world of artificial vocation, where our essential and universal resources are subjected to manufacturing and transformation? Guelpa does not necessarily seek confrontation, instead he sets forth an idea and works with it in order to bring to light a situation which is difficult to grasp. Such as when he places megaphones in forms that are evocative of the fishing nets of Kerkennah. A cry in the desert?

If these serious subjects are already debated in a number of domains in society, the business of Séverin Guelpa remains a visual expression and a spatial experience. His work is a construction and as such, it uncovers phenomena and transposes elements of reality, in a way that can anyhow only be artificial. Whether it be constructing sites, undertaking expeditions, producing works or projects, Guelpa focuses on both human and material resources in order to investigate our relationship with the things that are absolutely essential.

One can see that he finds it necessary to surround himself with and make dialogue with his peers. Constructing group projects and seeking out collaborations is characteristic of his practice. It is via collective experimentation that Guelpa develops and this gives him the energy that drives his own. He creates with the people and the materials, he lives in production, he collects and he constructs. But quite the contrary of the conquerors and the missionaries of colonisations, and as opposed to the revolt of the matze, he adapts and questions existing resources with natives and seeks, using artistic language, more than an economic exchange or a political action; he seeks an exchange of views and energy.