



Changing Courses

A conversation between
Nat Muller and Omar Muñoz-Cremers

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Nat Muller . Omar Muñoz-Cremers

Zicht . Op . Zalmhaven

I Bread and Onion Chutney

Setting: At a dinner table independent curator and critic Nat Muller takes a seat opposite sociologist and writer Omar Muñoz-Cremers. Esmé pours a glass of red wine for Nat. Omar is drinking an Asian beer.

Nat Muller: Water?

Omar Muñoz-Cremers: Yes, please.

[Esmé brings bread to the table accompanied by olive oil and vegetable butter.]

Esmé Valk: This is a kind of onion spread to go with the bread. It has a strong flavour, so you might want to spread it thinly.

NM: Cheers!

OMC: Cheers.

EV: Proost.

OMC: My idea was, maybe as a courtesy to your invitation, to start by speaking about our mutual interest in a method of writing, so we have that out of the way. Also, because maybe later we can go to more abstract discussions not talking about 'I' and 'me', which I don't like so much. Because I was honoured by your interest in method, almost nobody asks about that. In a sense there isn't that much to talk about also because it is something I just begin with.

NM: Well, in that respect I also think that the setting is interesting as a method, because it is constructing this artificial, social interface, but it's still artificial. And I was wondering how you, also as a sociologist, look at this setting because it is also somehow performative.

OMC: I will come back to that, I have my thoughts about that also. You have writer-writers who like to write and you have readers who eventually start to write. I can see there's something different in stuff that I write, but it comes through the reading; it comes through being interested in things. That is the beginning of everything. Out of interest the writing comes. You start to combine things. Even though I don't know how other people write, but I can't imagine that it would be that different from the things I do. I've been saved many times, when writing a text, by a sentence that just popped in my mind when I was just turning pages in a book. And: "Oh, that was just what I was looking for."

NM: Serendipity.

OMC: Yes, indeed.

NM: But, it's true. Maybe the right word is to be captured by something.

OMC: Yes.



Esmé cutting asparagus in the kitchen while the peas are blanching.

NM: That's maybe a nicer way of putting it. And that this being captured on the one hand keeps the process captivating and that's actually how the process of writing somehow develops. For many people this happens in very different ways. Some people are extremely structured when they start writing. I never have that. I always let myself be taken by the text and that takes you places. It's a different way if you already have it structured and you know what the outcome will be. When I write I develop thoughts. Some people are extremely good with, off the top of their head, just shooting the most brilliant theories and arguments at you. And I need to go through this process of weighing words and articulating on text to develop thoughts. Which is a different process.

OMC: Yeah. But it's also, I think, a scary process. I have the same thing; in the process of writing things develop. And even so, at the beginning you sort of wish you have the text laid out and you just have to waste time to put everything in order. And it's impossible.

NM: The beginning is always the hardest and sometimes it takes two weeks before I can get over that beginning. It's like, I know what I want to say but you haven't found that entry. And to me, it normally comes in the shower. [Laughs]

OMC: For me, it's most of the time when I'm riding a bike. It's probably motion with the emptying of the mind.

NM: I think, it's also about this moment of being a bit out of place, a tranquility which you can have when you're in the mechanics of riding a bike or you have when hot water is pouring over you. It's a different space somehow and all of a sudden it's like: [Snaps her fingers] "Okay." And often with me it starts with a sentence that makes sense. Not as much an abstract idea but a sentence that triggers something and then it becomes a snowball effect and it rolls from there.

OMC: I always find it a strange process – many writers of course have commented on it – the accident is also special to me. I never want to analyse why it works. Let it be that way. Afterwards it can be very strange to see ones own text. It can be different from text to text, but sometimes I can't imagine how I wrote it.

NM: Yeah, it's very recognisable. Especially when you're done with the editing process and a week later or even a few months later you read the text and you're like: "It doesn't seem as if this is from my hand." It's really alien somehow.

OMC: Yes! As if a different mindset was taking over you. Almost like 'spirits' fall down. [Laughter]

NM: Divine intervention. But it's strange.

I guess you also work with an extreme proximity to your subject matter, as do I. Then it's strange that after you've written it that there's this actual output on paper, that then there's this distance. It's weird how that works out somehow.

OMC: Yes. And then there's of course also internet, which I find as strange as paper. Paper is a beautiful thing of course; it's this tactile thing that pushes ink into the paper. The internet also has this sort of disappearance of text that eventually finds people. Also there's this surprise at people who read your text. Even after all these years, that seems very weird for me.

NM: To have an audience actually?

OMC: Yeah.

NM: It's an invisible audience.

OMC: Of course it's different from, let's say, popular literature where you go out and meet your audience. And you talk a lot about your work.

NM: Envisioning your audience makes it interesting too, because you do write for a specific publication or a specific interest group. But somehow they remain abstract. It's this invis-

ibility of the audience and then when someone pops up as a real person, a real figure and actually tell me: "Oh, I love what you wrote there and there." That's maybe the moment when this proximity comes back again to you, like: "Oh yeah, this was my text." It's almost that by writing the text becomes externalised to a certain extent.

OMC: Uh huh, yes.

NM: Which is a strange process. I wonder whether that is congruous to how artists work? Or how other people work with subjects that are very dear to them.

OMC: Well, let's take for instance the painter. I think the painter has the same thing; he externalises something. So I don't want to say: "Well, with writing it's different, it's special." I suspect that with all creative acts there will be this strange process of being taken over by something, whatever it is, a reorganisation of concepts in your brain that feels as if it's an outside force.

NM: But what would set that apart from, let's say, academic writing, scientific writing or journalism?

OMC: In journalism there's a functionality where you are bound by more rules, I think. It depends for what paper you write, for which magazine. I can choose the writing I do. For the writing that I get asked to do I have the freedom to write what I want.

NM: Do you think that has to do with accountability? Because these are genres of writing that have a specific accountability.

OMC: That's difficult to say. It depends on what science also. There was this discussion recently in physics where someone said: "Well, maybe physicists writing should develop poetics." Some physicists replied with: "We can't do that, because it's about the facts. The facts speak and how we write is a sort of side show to ..." I haven't followed it, but the idea was that if you develop a writing of physics then more people will be seduced and understand what you present with those facts. I think, that touched a nerve when rules of a genre are questioned.

NM: Well, I guess every writer – because writing is a public act in the end – has accountability to some extent but it's not always predefined to what or to whom. I think that probably makes a difference to how the process develops. But also what is the value of the text?

OMC: The value of the text ... [Laughter]

NM: This is heavy stuff! [Laughs]
OMC: Well, the word 'value' ... [Sighs]
NM: Is that an allergic reaction?
OMC: It's very heavy [Laughs] It immediately brings up these left overs of Marxism in sociology.
NM: That's what everyone says. Every time I use the word value in art criticism ...



Food preparations

II Mango and King Prawn Salad

[Esmé brings the first course to the table.]

NM: Wow!
EV: This on top is chili but it's not really hot because I did something with it.
NM: That looks great. The value of food is very appreciated.
 [Laughter]
EV: It's King Prawns with mango and a sour-sweet-spicy dressing with fresh mint and some coriander and cashew nuts.
NM: Yum!
OMC: Thank you.
NM: Every time I use the term 'use value' in art criticism I get all my editors going: "Oh, Marx." While I never really mean it within that Marxist discourse per se. It's as if every term has been co-opted by an ideology. You can't break out of that box and I find that extremely constraining.
OMC: I understand. [Nat laughs] Of course there's the value of pleasure if you open up the term 'value', take it away from Marx.
NM: If that's possible at all, whether we can still take certain concepts away that have been so rusted within definitions.
OMC: Yes, it's unfair. The word 'value' of course ...
NM: It's a very rich word. But it has been reduced to a very narrow meaning.
OMC: But even so, the moment you used it I was ... [Gasps]. Is it going *that* way?
 [Laughter]
NM: Like a gut reaction. That is affect. Bon appetit.
 [A moment of silence as they start eating.]
NM: In this setting the multi-tasking between eating and keeping the conversation going was something I was worried about.
OMC: Yes!
EV: I really like this everyday-ness that comes back in the conversation. This switch between this moment of the dinner and when it's transcribed to a text the reader will have to imagine how it has been. And there's this constant flux between the subject you're talking about and these moments that the food is mentioned.
OMC: Also, we worry because we're self-conscious about ...
NM: Being here, the setting.



The table setting with the microphone.

OMC: ... the setting. Normally when you're eating ...
NM: It's informal.
OMC: ... you talk and you eat ...
NM: It just flows.
OMC: ... and it flows. And eventually that will also happen here.
NM: But that was something I was actually thinking about in the beginning. It is a social interface; having two people eat together. It immediately breaks down certain boundaries and facades because you literally break bread together.
OMC: Brilliant idea.
NM: But on the other hand, it's a very artificial set-up.
OMC: Yeah, but even five minutes ago I had already forgotten the whole set-up of this being recorded, when you get into the conversation. And then, of course when the first course comes then you go like: "This is new and how do I go about it ..."
NM: I think with every course you get shaken out of your thing again. That's also interesting how that works. But I also wonder: "Yes we're conscious and that consciousness might slip at certain moments but what is the reactivity really?" Because we know that this is going to be recorded, we know there's going to be a publication. How much performativity is scripted within this conversation, in what we say?
OMC: Yes. A famous sociologist Erving Goffman, who a lot of people know because he got very popular in the Sixties – and of course there are different schools of sociology – he would say that it doesn't make any difference because we perform all the time. Everything is

a performance, we use masks and situations, which he calls front-stage. And these masks are very important when we're at work, when we have to speak to someone in the street, there are these rules and we put on a metaphorical mask. And then sometimes, there's this back-stage when we can just drop the mask and for a moment just let things be.

NM: But this is the idea that most of the time there is a mask present and that those instances of dropping the mask are very rare. Because you're always in a socialised environment that requires you to conduct yourself in a specific way.

OMC: So maybe something like getting a shower is sort of back-stage.

NM: And then things come to you. [Laughter]

OMC: Yeah, that's interesting, maybe that's important.

NM: The moments when you really actually think, or when ideas or concepts are being generated is when you drop the mask.

OMC: Uh huh, it appears to be that way, because you can develop ideas in a social situation like in a discussion but personally I think the development of ideas is more of a lonely experience, instead of a social one.

NM: More in the sense of influences or triggers.

OMC: Yes, but eventually you'll go to yourself.

NM: But I think that is true. If you look at how symposia or panels are run, of course these are epitomies of performativity. These are performances where actually something is being shared, but there's no real generation of knowledge. It's not about things being exchanged and getting a surplus value. Sorry to use that word again. [Laughter]

OMC: Please go ahead.

NM: But it is very much a sort of constrained type of environment where people say whatever they have to say what they thought of saying and there are always these masks.

OMC: I always feel a bit nagging when I say: "Well, this isn't a real exchange of ideas." Symposia and discussions always leave me a bit unsatisfied in that sense. And maybe we've touched on something ... I have to think more about this because maybe it's a crucial thing we've touched upon. Of course it's not always true, it can be a great exchange of ideas. For instance, you have these very bad quality recordings of talks Deleuze gave at a university and they look so cool! Him at a table and lots of

students around him. And everybody is smoking and surrounded by tapes and he's explaining something to the student next to him; very communal almost. It's flattened out of course, he's there because he's famous. But nevertheless it feels like a right way to exchange ideas and you don't see that often.

NM: No, I think it's very scripted most of the time which doesn't allow for these moments that actually something unexpected or new happens. When you talk about the generation of knowledge and the sharing of ideas and developing concepts, you need that space. You know, there are so many symposia and panels and these types of knowledge events, but they are so hermetic in their format that they almost do not allow for that moment to happen. These moments happen when you have a cup of coffee during the lunch break with a person, but not during the moment of showing. It's very exegetic in that sense. I'm somehow obsessed by formats and the politics of format and what they allow or disallow within these settings. Whether you talk about symposia or panels or even exhibitions. Of course much has been written about that but I think still the mission or the objective is to exchange, reach a certain goal in ... I don't know, it can even be activism, it can be artistic, it can be poetic but the hermeticism of things completely disallows it.

OMC: Right. I completely understand what you're getting at. There isn't room for participation.

NM: Participation is so overrated as a concept.

OMC: Right. There will be someone from the audience who will ask a question, who will be badly understood and then they reply: "Oh well, it's time. We'll talk about it next time."

NM: There is something about protocol in these events that really makes putting things out on the table almost impossible. There is a protocol of; okay a question is being asked, maybe it's a sensitive question, maybe they don't even know the answer so you beat around the bush.

OMC: Yeah, there are all these rules...

NM: You'll do the dance, no?

OMC: And breaking these rules is very rude.

NM: That's a taboo. Why is there all this protocol? Yes we're all having this extremely polite exchange because whenever someone from the audience will attack the speaker in a certain way – well, you have different forms of attacking, some might be more intelligent than

others – but if it is done in an intelligent way and it actually gets to the core of a certain argument, then there will be such a beating around the bush. It's really interesting to see the whole theatrics of the event taking place and nothing new will be generated.

OMC: No, it will be labeled under eccentricity. The example you gave of someone from the audience who gets to the core of the argument is extremely rare. Less rare is this sort of rude 'know-it-all' who has put on this mask of 'I will show them'. And that doesn't get anywhere.

NM: Yeah, but I also think that it's really a lack or an impossibility of generosity there.

I truly believe that the generation of knowledge is really about allowing generosity, intellectual generosity or poetic generosity even. These events are almost designed that this becomes impossible somehow. I think it's also rare in other settings to have intellectual generosity. Because we're performing the role either of expert or of protection, by whatever theoretic buffers are available to us, which get in the way of producing novel things. I think that is true for the arts but also for other disciplines. This brings us back to this idea of value. Yeah, value and generosity. Can knowledge, it is a commodity of course, transcend its own packaging?

OMC: Right. I would think that's very difficult in that load of packages. That's why in the end I like the book the most, it is a sort of individual search. The knowledge in a sense hopes to find you. Through books somehow that works best. Of course it doesn't have to be that way. But these sort of communal breaks where someone has had a lot of xtc and says: "Oh, we've found something together." are extremely rare.

NM: I'm not a believer in 'collective intelligence' and all these types of hip things.

OMC: It makes me think of swarms of bees.

NM: Yeah, that's also what I thought. It's like *Star Trek* and *The Borg*.

OMC: They don't have a 'Self'.

NM: I think it's really funny how the more individualised society becomes, the more communal things (commodities, rhetoric) becomes packaged. Take for example, a lot of social networking, as seen in web 2.0 applications and social networking applications, which all are about creating a so-called community. But it's so much about the mask and performativity of that. Or the current fetishisation in the art world of "collectives" or the push towards the "collaborative".

OMC: In the end it doesn't make a difference whether it's with the computer and a collective network, it's still about creating a mask, a persona. With the internet people become more conscious of the process, I think.

NM: Because you're constructing it almost consciously?

OMC: Yes. Where, since you were born in normal life, you don't know that you're using a mask until Goffman was so kind to alert us to it. In this sense, to make it sort of feedback to our situation, again in the last 10 or 15 minutes the artificial aspect of this whole set up was gone. I must have found this mask that works.

[Nat laughs]

NM: Yeah, there's a transparent moment of transparency, or collapse ...

OMC: Well, of course it's also very important because you can't function if you all the time think: "Oh, does my voice sound good on tape? What is Esmé doing?"

NM: She's bringing all kinds of interesting things to the table. Tofu ... This was very good.

[Referring to the first course.] Very nice, very fresh.

EV: Yeah? Thank you.

III Cashew-Carrot Fondue

EV: I have something special as a main course; it's a vegan fondue.

NM: Oh, wow.

EV: It's with carrot and cashew nuts. Here's a selection of things for you to dip into the fondue and a salad on the side.

OMC: Great.

NM: I really love this onion spread you made, it tastes a bit of Baba Ghanoush, the aubergine caviar.

EV: Yeah. I wanted to make a substitute for butter or something that has a similar taste to herbal butter. This is just onions cooked very slowly with some spices.

NM: Really like a relish almost, a chutney. [A moment of silence.] I lost our train of thought. Every time she comes with a different dish I'm like: "Oh! [Surprised sound] Chapter two."

OMC: It's a nice moment to change the subject.

NM: You're free to change the subject. I think we should talk about food, since all three of us are into food.

OMC: Uh huh.

NM: I started cooking very late.

OMC: What's late?

NM: At the age of 25.

OMC: Well.

NM: That's not late?

OMC: When does one start cooking?

NM: I refused to cook out of feminist conviction.

OMC: Really?

NM: Yeah, it was a conscious decision not to cook.

OMC: That's understandable in a way. I started to cook out of boredom.

[Laughter]

NM: With what?

OMC: With the time of day. Five o'clock is the time of day ...

NM: Not out of hunger?

OMC: Well, that as well of course. But it's a strange time of day where you've done things and it's before going into the evening. I never knew what to do and so I started to cook.

NM: I have that as well, when I want to take a break from a work routine or something, then I start cooking. Because it's very tactile. But I never have ideas while I'm cooking.

OMC: I can't say I have them when I'm cooking. It was already working with concepts, I think.

NM: Producing an idea on your plate.

OMC: Yeah. It's already a creative act even if your making a known dish.

[Esmé comes and brings the food to the table.]

EV: If it turns out not to be enough then I have more.

NM: What is it?

EV: It's carrots and cashew nuts, tofu and some lemongrass and lime.

OMC: Very interesting.

EV: Shall I take these plates? [She takes the smaller plates used for the first course.] In these two dishes there's tofu in different marinades; this is more of a fresh limy one and this is more soya sauce based. The mushrooms are also marinated in soya sauce, this is with ginger – I can't remember completely what I did ... [Laughter] And then the side salad consists of Chinese broccoli with asparagus and peas.

NM: Wow.

EV: [To Omar] Do you want another beer?

OMC: No, I think I'll switch to wine.

NM: Shall I pour you some wine? It's very nice wine, actually.

[The sound of wine being poured in the glasses.]

NM: This is a very communal act; the fondue. [Laughs] I'm sure she did that on purpose. [Nat takes a bite.] Very nice.



Omar Muñoz-Cremers and Nat Muller eating the fondue.

EV: It's funny, isn't it? It's unexpected.

OMC: Heel anders dan anders. (Very unusual.)

EV: Yeah, I was thinking for a long time what to make for you. I wanted to make something for you that I thought you would not have tasted before.

NM: You very much succeeded.

[Laughter]

OMC: So now we've got that out of the way ... is there something that we, in our short email exchange, something we can hook on to now?

NM: Well, I'm fascinated by the term 'Melancholic Futurist', you used on one of your online profiles.

OMC: Right. [Laughs]

NM: What does that mean?

OMC: I guess it comes from the retro-futurists, you found it somewhere and I haven't given it that much thought, but of course it's about a sort of lost idea of futurism.

NM: Futurism in which sense? In the Marinetti sense?

OMC: No, no, no. Of course they were pretty cool [Laughter] and not so cool in other ways. But ...

NM: I love their cookbook by the way.

OMC: Yeah. Spaghetti slows people down. It must be forbidden.

[Laughter]

NM: No pasta and colour co-ordinated dinners.

OMC: Well, in that sense it is lovely how they presented a world view.

NM: Very holistic.

OMC: Yes, you don't see that anymore. But it's more about the futurism that found its apex in the Sixties. A sort of careless futurism where things were to be changed and made. For instance, this retro-futurism now feels something like Pierre Cardin's house in the Côte d'Azur. It's all round forms; beautiful, beautiful house. It breathes with positivity and a wide eyed look into how things should be for everyone. And of course that wasn't the case. There's this other picture I love; it's these three models wearing Courrèges clothing from around '66. Sort of looking back, happy astronauts. They're walking on steps and they also move with a sort of: "Ah, we're happy and we're looking cool and futuristic." This makes me melancholic to see something that has been lost.

NM: Is that melancholy or is that nostalgia?

OMC: No, it can't be nostalgia because I wasn't there.

NM: Oh, you should try these, they're very nice.

OMC: Okay, we can switch bowls then.

NM: Yes, swap.

OMC: Of course in the Seventies as a child you could pick out remainders of it. That might be the nostalgic aspect of it. But even then it was probably too late. The energy behind it was lost after the oil crisis and that, I think, killed off futurism, in the old sense.

NM: But you're alluding to a futurism that has a certain aspect of innocence in it.

OMC: I'm realistic and skeptical enough to see my own naivety, but being naive can be very nice. Sometimes you can feel let down when your naivety is put down for a reason. And, let's face it, it was a real feeling of barriers being broken. Men did get on the moon in the Sixties so there was hope for more, for various reasons that didn't work out. I'm sort of melancholic, not jealous ... putting a man on the moon, putting a guy in space weren't innocent things. The man on the moon was a military, almost evangelical, operation to get ahead of the Russians. Because getting a guy into space was spreading communism into the cosmos. The Russians had an almost naive approach.

NM: But is it then the longing for new frontiers or lost frontiers?

OMC: Yes, new frontiers, I guess. And it will happen again, but even now we live in a very futuristic moment in a sense.

NM: Maybe it does not compute, because it's so futuristic it doesn't compute.

OMC: Sometimes I try to back track in a thought experience: "Well, what if I was living in 1977 and was confronted with 2009." It would be mind blowing. Other things maybe not so. In 1977 you would maybe expect people to walk in silver clothing and to have a flying car by now. But nobody predicted, for instance, the Walkman.

NM: But don't you think that futurism is also about, somehow, writing banality out? Because okay, 1977, 2009 but in the end our lives are still ruled by banality.

OM: You're so right about that. The thing I always think, and it's maybe a bit nasty to say, but 'Apeldoorn will always be there.'

[Laughter]

NM: Je kan altijd Apeldoorn even bellen. [You can always ring Apeldoorn.]

OMC: I always say Apeldoorn, but it could be some other town too. The architecture of the Thirties, those houses will probably still be there in 2099. The Hema will still be there,

Blokker and the Kruidvat; it's the archaic shopping street that takes over the Netherlands.

NM: So it's also a desire for ...

OMC: ... an exciting life probably.

NM: Yeah, and going beyond the drudge of banality and the quotidian and the everyday. I think that's what futurism promises also. It mixes the utopian with the teleological in a beautiful naive way almost.

OMC: Yes. I always think it is harmless.

NM: When did we lose that? Even in the Eighties, you had Buck Rogers and all those type of stars, which is also melancholic because he tried to get normal. [Laughter] And *Star Trek* is about that as well. So it also deals with home and location and being grounded. This idea of futurism releases you from being grounded and that's extremely liberating. But maybe now things have changed.

EV: Don't you think it's also the fact that we ...

NM: Are you allowed to interfere by the way? [Laughter]

EV: When I hear you talk, I also think of that my youth was so much better. It's also when you're removed and how you remember things filter the situation. Often when you look back doesn't it then just become more ...

NM: But that's nostalgia, that's different. The word nostalgia means 'pain' and 'returning home'. It's a movement towards the past tense, feeling a desire and longing for that. While with futurism I think, of course there is a situatedness within a past and present, but there is definitely a projection forward. I think there is a different move involved.

EV: Do you believe that at the moment there is no group or thoughts circulating that are in the same way optimistic about the future?

OMC: No, they are there. This week they launched a new rocket which will eventually put an American on the moon again. So it's there.

NM: But also in the Nineties you had those weird extropians. Then it almost becomes like a cult tech ...

OMC: Yeah, they were a bit ... I don't know, too ...

NM: Strange?

OMC: Yeah, but too ...

NM: Very Californian?

OMC: Yeah, Californian, very into body culture.

NM: They were into cryogenics, so you can freeze yourself when you die and be resurrect-

ed after death. It's very much about a body cult as well.

OMC: Yes, indeed.

NM: So all of them were like beefcake. [Laughter] It's very strange. Definitely in the Nineties when you would have people like Marvin Minsky and Hans Moravec talking about that you can do away with the body and this idea of cyberpunk. The body is excess luggage, you don't need it anymore, it's all about the mind and the information and data that's stored there. This was almost like a counter movement to cryogenics.

OMC: But then they got sort of side tracked. They got woken up to the fact that it's very difficult to take the mind out of the body. Also virtual reality was for some time ...

NM: That was a big liberation.

OMC: Yeah, and that's also proven to be far more difficult than people thought. We've got second life now.

NM: The thing is, that it will always be second. It will never be first, which already tells you ...

OMC: Well, some people ... [Laughter] No, but I think there is a futurism transition period. Also the complexity of things is far greater, everything is proven to be more complex than we thought. Things like, what you said: "We'll just take the mind out of the body."

NM: Actually, it's such a regression because it's going back to Cartesian divides; the mind/body divide.

OMC: I already commented when Esmé and I talked, this sort of futurist idea of technology becoming so complex where there is this break off point where we can't imagine what it would look like.

NM: I wonder though, of course there's this technological component, if it's not even more connected to peoples' desires?

OMC: People tend to overrate technological growth.

NM: I think, probably in the Seventies or the Eighties when we were growing up, if there was still then a hope projected onto technology. The Nineties with the internet ... that has really suffered a backlash. Because now you're dealing with all these realities of ecological systems collapsing; basically the gravity of nature and climate hitting back at you. You can project all the technological advancement as you want but if you get something like the Tsunami or a hurricane like Katrina, it brings it back to the very visceral core of existence. And I wonder,

whether also that causes a shift in the possibility of futurism. Or maybe that is futurism, it is very much situated in the down to basics.

OMC: One of the most sympathetic strains of futurism is people working in green technology. Which is sort of boring because it involves making solar panels and stuff, but that's futurism. That's something that's practiced today, finally I would say. It's disappointing that it has taken that long to think about green technology.

NM: But it brings us back to the present.

OMC: Which is good, also.

NM: If you look at futurism of decades past, there's much more of a time leap involved in that.

OMC: Yeah, also because ...

NM: ... because we have a retrospective view.

OMC: The year 2000 was looming, which was symbolically a big thing; what will society look like? What will we look like? Of course, we now lived past that and ... big deal.

NM: We survived.

OMC: We're still wearing sweaters and drinking wine.

NM: Still wearing jeans. [Silence] But that still doesn't explain your melancholia.

OMC: Yeah. I think, the melancholia is about that the dark side was absent in futurism of the Sixties or the Twenties, maybe through to the Nineteenth century. I mean you can be even more melancholic for a futurism in the Nineteenth century when you didn't know that the First World War was possible. And now we've wised up, I mean, you can't be that naive anymore.

NM: So, it's really about the loss of innocence in the end?

OMC: Yes. I think so. But again I wasn't alive in the Sixties, so I'm projecting anyway. Maybe people weren't that naive, I don't know. To put it in Dutch: "Ik heb wel een beetje een tik van de molen uit de jaren zestig gekregen." (I do have a screw loose for the Sixties.) [Laughter] How do you view that moment, the Sixties? I mean, I always come back to it in some sort of strange way.

NM: I don't know. It's a hard question.

OMC: You can even pass the question.

NM: I don't know whether the Sixties are a conscious reference point for me. [Silence] I'm extremely cynical. [Laughs] So I can appreciate naiveté and innocence and this sort of carefree longing, or wish for something, but then this thing always gets me of: "Come on, get real!"

OMC: Yes.

NM: And I think that is something unfortunately that is so typical of our generation.

OMC: True. Skepticism and cynicism are no strangers to me either. I always think that there was a sort of strange energy where ...

NM: ... things were possible.

OMC: Yeah, possibility and rules were to be broken or at least explored. If you compare philosophy then with now, I'm always shocked by a lack of exploring ...

NM: ... imagination.

OMC: It wasn't only then.

NM: It's really seizing that possibility and not being afraid of the consequences, even if it's completely non conformist. I think this has been an issue especially in the Nineties and definitely in the 'Noughties'. They're not naughty at all. It's so conformist. There's little leeway in between these constraints and there's almost no space for critical thinking. And definitely if we look at the arts I want to smack my head against the wall, because it has to be politically correct or it needs to have a certain functionality. Artists becoming diplomats, conflict resolution that the government can't solve all of a sudden, or social institutions can't solve. It's up to the artists who make a work about it. It somehow produces a mentality or a climate that's very politically correct, very conducive to protocol and does not break out of boundaries. Which I hope, this is what critical thinking and production of art – if it has to have a function – then that should be its primary function. What I see more and more, maybe that's also the after effect of relational aesthetics – which we're participating in now, which is fine – is conformism. And to me consensus and conformism is the death of politics, of creativity, it's the death of everything. [Laughs]

OMC: Well, yes indeed. It's a sort of feeling of all these scenarios that have been thought out that have to be lived through everything.

NM: I understand it on one hand because it's this run-away world, it's this risk society. We know all the epithets they've put on them and the more run-away it becomes the more risky it gets. Of course the natural reaction would be to go back. What we thought was over after post-modernism; the big narratives and the big truths. You see a complete backlash and you see a moral backlash. And it's really a regression almost and I wonder is it really such a run-away world is it really such a risk society? Of course, from an economic view point, yes per

haps. Things are becoming much more precarious and complete neo-liberal and no security and whatever. But it can't be only that, there must be more to it. What is it?

OMC: Those things are disappointing. Even things like risks. I as a kid I could do things that I'd be really worried about if my daughters did them. And it's always a strange thing to think about, I shouldn't be worried about that. [Silence] It's difficult to break away from scenarios and rules. That worries me. It makes a culture in an overarching way. It makes it feel very conformist and safe. In that sense I can be really melancholic about loss of energy. And then there is lots of energy, because people don't have time for anything because they do all these things that they have to do. So that's pretty weird. But maybe all those aesthetic rules that were broken, were to be broken once. Godard could only do those films once. Same thing for Antonioni, same thing for Berio in music.

NM: But there will always be new things to break, because the environment keeps changing all the time. And that environment will always place its constraints, there will always be boundaries to cross.

OMC: Yeah, one hopes that is the case and maybe we're doing that.

NM: Maybe it's not so much the crossing of boundaries as laying them bare, which maybe is more of a necessity nowadays.

OMC: Maybe these processes happen so quickly that we're almost blasé about these things. I'm not sure about it.

NM: I think it's also a lot about the commodification of certain concepts. What does it mean if everything is radical, groundbreaking or innovative or new? It doesn't mean anything, it's a complete loss of meaning. *That* is the crisis we find ourselves in. On the one hand it's a semantic crisis but on the larger scale it's also a crisis of representation. Nothing can mean anything anymore because it's all so meaningful.

OMC: Where did it go wrong?

NM: I don't know.

OMC: When you say things like 'radical' and 'groundbreaking', it's easy to point the finger to advertising. And of course it's a Sixties commodification, advertisement is blown out of proportion. But is it enough to blame them?

NM: No, I'm not blaming. I'm just wondering what happens once these concepts have been co-opted and there's no new vocabulary to

counter it? If you don't have another grammar to accompany that, then you're in trouble. It's really coming back to this wonderful essay by Tom Wolfe 'Radical Chic'. It's a complete commodification of the chic. But there's still a political layer in there – not the layer you would like – but it actually completely explodes the power dynamics truly at work. I have the impression that when we say that a show or an artist is radical, the radicality is actually laying bare the banality of the power structures. But somehow that is also not enough. It lays something bare, but I'm not sure if it changes something. It makes things visible. But I'm not sure if making things visible is enough.

OMC: Well, that's going to be difficult because most people don't care.

[Laughter]

NM: I think that's the most thing; no one gives a shit.

OMC: If you could lay down demographics and you wouldn't be shocked by how many people will care. You care, I care, Esmé probably cares. I don't know the number of people who will care about those things, but probably if you see a number you would say: "That's pretty good." But then you see the number of people who don't care and that would be depressing big.

NM: But I wonder whether that has ever been different, that ratio.

OMC: Of course, if you look back at the Sixties; the white wash, I immediately do it. All those people who thought those changes were bogus. "Godard can't film this!", the music ... Hendrix makes a lot of noise! Warhol ..."

NM: Fluxus.

OMC: "My kid can do that!" Even so, probably there are always a number of people who oppose or who aren't interested.

EV: This morning I was talking about, if there is a rhizomic structure, if society would be organised in a different way to how it is now, do you think it would function? Because some people might not be willing to because they're not caring? Or do you think, that wouldn't be the case because in such a structure people would automatically care, because then each individual has more agency over their life. And the question whether they care or not would not be an issue because it takes their autonomy as a starting point.

NM: She really believes in human beings.

OMC: Well, also I guess in freedom. I think

one of the main problems is that a lot of people don't desire to be free. They want to be lead.

EV: Yeah, because choice gives responsibility.

NM: Absolutely.

OMC: And there is a whole spectrum of how they want to be lead. Some people can't function without their day being programmed, others desperately need a boss.

NM: But I also think, that now there is such an erosion of civil society that people's understanding of agency is also completely eroded. Even if you place them in an environment where agency is required. I don't think you can force that, it will have to come out in an organic way.

OMC: But it should, and that's the problem, be a choice for the people who want to live in a more rhizomatic way.

NM: But I don't think that comes naturally. In the end it's still a structure.

EV: I was interested in what you wrote in the email in which you said that now we're living in a time where we are in a transitional phase. This is how I understood it, where the politics is having problems with that people are moving more towards different forms of organising themselves that aren't as hierarchical and that fear for this is the reason that now we have a lot of security measurements taken as a way of still gripping the loose and run away citizens.

OMC: Yeah. Well, you always have to be careful to say 'we're now living in a transitional phase'. The nation state is in trouble I think the internet is very important in this. Lots of people ally themselves with other people through interests, which don't have to do anything with people in your own street or people in your city or in your nation. I can truly say that thanks to the internet there's a sort of invisible nation which I belong to. Through whatever interest create "little nations", which can be lived in with people in Japan or wherever. The nation state can't really give anything back which has the same meaning; a community. All these obsessions with security, with bureaucracy and with rules; they must be a reaction to that. Not only the internet, but the drive that people have for something different. And I guarantee you that it's impossible, for instance in the Netherlands, to build something of an alternative community in what ever way you want in – let's call it reality – where you say: "Well, we don't want to pay taxes. In our community we have our own rules." Within a few weeks you'll have

all sorts of institutions on your doorstep who destroy whatever you've build. And that for me is pretty evil. There's room for certain alternatives but you have to be quiet about it. I have this sort of futurist hope that the nation state will pass away and we'll find new ways of living together and the rhizomic model is quite good for that.

EV: Yeah. I was thinking if there are any downsides to it, that we're not aware of yet, what could they be?

OMC: There will always be downsides. [Laughter] That I can guarantee.

NM: But even in a rhizomic model it's still about governance. And how power is distributed, although it will be in a completely different way or in a shared way.

OMC: There will always be power.

NM: So there trouble already seeps in somehow. But I don't think we have any models to actually imagine at this moment. Are there any models to imagine?

EV: Are you finished with the food?

NM: No! [Laughter] It really is so good, the fondue. I would love to have the recipe, it's very good.

EV: Then I'll join you at the table for a while.



The table setting with the bread, vegetables, onion butter, marinated mushrooms, lime and coriander.

OMC: Maybe there are models, I don't know. That's also part of futurism. There has always been a lot of attempts to model ways of living together.

NM: But they can also unpack in a very dystopic way, if you read Margaret Atwood for example in her novel 'The Handmaid's Tale'. These are the techno disasters when power completely goes awry. But I wonder whether this idea of futurism is always combined with this idea of the utopic. It is somehow.

OMC: Well, because you want to probably

make everybody happy.

NM: And imagine a best world.

OMC: Of course through cynicism and skepticism you probably know that everybody can't be happy all the time for ever. So you have to take that in account. Huxley did it cleverly in 'Brave New World'.

NM: I was just thinking about Huxley ...

OMC: ... Soma which will eradicate every unhappiness, whatever that means. Like you wake up in a bad mood or your relationship breaks up, a sort of drug solution.

NM: Well yeah, I mean, we do have a Prozac generation.

OMC: Yeah, we're already living in that.

NM: But that's not a solution in the end, it's a suppression of symptoms.

OMC: Well he worked to, I think, a very clever point where he said: "The choice is between happiness or Shakespeare." Because the drug makes everybody happy but then there can't be roses, there can't be art.

NM: Can you then imagine a scenario where you could have this content, which is some kind of generator for critical thinking and combine that with this futurism, which also has innocence embedded in it. Not necessarily utopic, because I think we can't imagine the utopic any more with our degree of cynicism. [Laughter] Can these elements actually coexist together? It's very difficult to imagine.

OMC: There is always this thing of, well you should make a society then which allows for certain safety valves, for aggression or whatever. Problems can arise. That would be one way to imagine it. But it's difficult. Sometimes I think: "Anarchy, rhizomic structures, how can it work? It never worked. Maybe it was a dream." On the other hand, at the moment I'm reading a book called "The Discovery of France" by Graham Robb. It contradicts what I've been taught, especially in history and also in sociology. He writes about the history of France, that France till far into the Nineteenth century was a broken down country which wasn't centralised at all except in this idea of Paris, which at one point centralised the whole country and created France. He says it is a total myth. Up until the Twentieth century there was an enormous collection of languages people spoke in France. The French language is even now not accepted in most parts of France.

NM: You mean the Parisian dialect?

OMC: Yeah. Geographically in France, with

the woods and mountains, it was very easy to have an enormous amount of communities that were very small and had their own rules and functioned in a way. It was a very anarchic whole in a sense.

NM: On a micro level of communities being self-organised and self-governed?

OMC: Right.

EV: But can we ever go back to such a system? I was reading about Ireland, when the Celts were in Ireland it was an anarchistic society for a thousand years, from 600 to 1600 until the English came and took over. It was very successful, they were trading with other nations and they were doing really well. That might also have been the case due to the geographic location, but also with how their society was structured.

NM: Were they living peacefully with the other tribes?

EV: No, I don't think so.

NM: Well, there you go already.

EV: I think they did have forms of slavery. I don't know how barbaric they were, but they probably were to some degree. Then I thought to myself; what if such a society would still exist in this day and age where we are so dependent on each other for economic relations? Could there be a situation that functions very well on a local level, without a hierarchic structure, but that could also function on a global level? Or do you think that we can't imagine that because now we're living in a capitalistic society and if this society would change that maybe another way of structuring the society could also be possible?

NM: She's asking difficult questions, huh? [Laughs]

OMC: I think it's very difficult to imagine that. I mean, even if the Celts would still be around, they would be turned into some sort of tourist attraction.

NM: But I think it works on a micro level that they can work as their tribe together and engage with other places and trade with them. But if you look into their closer environment they probably would have had turf wars and a more violent relationship with the other tribes. So I'm wondering if you could transit that to nowadays. Probably on a micro level you could have these communities being self-organised and running. But then you're living in an age of connectivity, so what happens if you transcend that?

EV: Well, they did have a national organ. There were these groups that came together, these were land owners and they formed a group. There were multiple groups and individuals making up those groups would also often switch from one group to another. Their relationship and group dynamic constantly changed. There was a king, but he didn't have any say. He was powerless, basically.

OMC: A symbolic king. Sounds pretty good. The difference with the situation in France is that there actually loads of people didn't know who lived beyond a certain hill. Just because of how the country looks. And that's of course very difficult for us to imagine nowadays. You can't retreat to somewhere where we really, really, really can't be found. Maybe if we go to the Arctic circle or certain places in Norway, Sweden or Finland.

NM: But it's interesting to see, because we're actually asking what is the alternative to the nation state? And the most bleak view would be what Noreena Herz is saying in 'The Silent Takeover' that actually all the alternatives to the nation state basically are a complete corporate takeover.

OMC: Yes.

NM: And that's the downside or the opposite, the very black, bleak side of an alternative. And sometimes you do have the impression that it's heading that way.

OMC: That's a sort of cyberpunk also; corporate, mega corporations will take over.

NM: In order to have that condition of self-organisation and self-governance, you would need to lay out conditions that are not yet in place nowadays. I can not really speculate which conditions would have to be there, really to make things work, but I think that now they're really quite absent. You can see it really functioning on smaller levels of engaged citizens and communities being active and governing a part of their existence but maybe not everything.

EV: Maybe that is the only way that it's possible.

NM: Fragmentary.

EV: Yeah, and on a very local, micro level. Although I think, internet allows – maybe these are small communities too, but it's not geographically located anymore – for communities to come together.

OMC: There are possibilities. In the neighbourhood where I live in Amsterdam; the

Oostelijke Eilanden, I was really blown away by the idea, that it's a neighbourhood that doesn't have a church and it doesn't have a police station. It felt as a total relief that it was possible, because it breaks with two-thousand years of Christianity. And also with this sort of surveillance that worries me. I mean, obviously there is once in a while a police car who comes through the neighbourhood. So we don't run the neighbourhood, [Laughter] we still pay taxes. As a small sign, I think it's pretty encouraging. There should be more of that. It's almost as if they've forgotten us. In a way it's because of geographic location because a train runs at the edge of the neighbourhood which forms a natural border. Really strange. People accept it like that. This border makes it a little community, although it's part of Amsterdam but you can leave it coming under the train tracks.

EV: As a living area it's relatively new, right? Because it was an industrial area.

OMC: It's new. In the planning they forgot something.

NM: No police station. [Laughter]

OMC: Or an architect who thought: "What if I rub this out?" At the end it's about the geography and a small amount of people. If you want a rhizomic structure, an anarchic way of living you have to do it in a small way. And it's very difficult in our world. The population is rising.

NM: And what is small nowadays? The way communities are organised are also not so straightforward anymore. You can't group them together on a site; geographically or on a place. Communities organise in different ways that is not necessarily bound to place or territory. This is the idea of 'issue politics', as developed by for example Noortje Marres.

EV: And each individual is not part of one community but part of many.

NM: Exactly. Then the question becomes: how are you acting as a node within that particular community, if it all? What is your responsibility? Responsibilities and agencies become also either multiple or fragmented so that organisation on a very basic political level becomes quite complex.

EV: But don't you believe that organisation also comes naturally about through acting in a certain way and someone else acting in a certain way.

NM: That's already not natural: if you act in a certain way.

EV: Well, you know. We just determined be

fore that we are the ones that care. [Laughter] So that automatically means a certain way of acting, I think.

NM: Yeah, but that is a choice, that is agency. I don't think that's something that happens naturally, it is an effort. Decision making and indeed that conscious way of being and being responsible for the choices you make.

EV: Sometimes I wished I cared less [Laughter] because it's also tiring sometimes. But I can't help it, I can't care less. It's simply not in my nature. So don't you think that the way you act is then also a part of who you are?

NM: Definitely.

EV: Doesn't organisation come through that?

NM: But there are so many people who don't care.

EV: Yeah, but their function is not to care. [Laughter] I think that has a function too.

NM: Sure. But then you get into the very, very thorny question: who is to determine who cares and who doesn't care?

EV: Well, no one determines that. I think you determine also what you care for, because there are things that I can't care less about. [Laughter] People care for certain things and I care for how I live my life.

NM: But there are different ways of caring. Some people show that they care by not acting but by protesting, by objecting. That's also a way of caring. Is that productive? I don't know. [A pause] Of course I think once certain mechanisms are starting by whichever power forces and constellations, things have a way of developing and running but maybe I'm just too cynical and pessimistic, and don't believe in that things just happen naturally.

OMC: Yeah, I'm also sort of curious. If you could make a clean slate and someone comes from one side and the other one comes from the other side and they don't know each other. Four people come together, of course out of this meeting something will arise. People say: "Tonight we will sleep. How are we going to sleep? Maybe we should build something so we'll be dry when it rains." Through human interaction things will be created automatically. That's what makes us human. We can't be alone all the time. Through that comes language, everything we make. That's just the way it is, that's what makes us human.

EV: Yeah. And I think that organisation shapes itself through this interaction between people.

OMC: Then the question becomes, of course:

how much weight can we put in to change things? When the complexity of things we make becomes greater, we feel more powerless because we can't influence things. That's sort of the point where we're at. People feel powerless to change things.

NM and EV: Yeah.

OMC: Of course it's easier if you're with less people and you have a meeting, let's say, with a hundred people. "How are we going to do this and that?" And you shout: "Well, I want it this way. We're going to use manure this way. I have a field across the hill where we can grow seeds." Other people say: "That's a good idea." Others say: "No, it's not such a good idea." So that is easier. But of course the interdependence of people becomes so great and everything ...

NM: It's like a domino effect almost.

OMC: Yes. We have to use oil to get our cars running and the oil isn't here, etcetera, etcetera. In Italy they have great taste so we get suits from Italy. [Laughter]

NM: It's really interesting as a thought experiment. I think the only way you can think of a model is when you strip the context out of it. But once you try to think how to practically implement it, it just goes everywhere. And then it becomes extremely difficult to think about how it could work on a larger political scale. Again, on a micro level, of course it could work for certain things. If you put two or more people together something will come out of it, whether it's meaningful is not always the case. I also believe that's the same for art production and curating. You can put people together but if it's merely the act of putting people together and the expectation ...

[There're some sounds on the corridor. Esmé get's up of her chair.]

EV: I just think I might have forgotten to close the door.

NM: Oh, oh, thieves.

[People with a key to the building had entered. All is okay. Esmé returns to the table.]

EV: Shall I bring desert?

NM: Yeah, that sounds good.

EV: Shall I take your plate?

OMC: Yeah. The food has been lovely. [Silence] But now we'll have a change of course.

NM: [Laughs] We can change the subject again.

OMC: Maybe now it is the turn to have a go at the crisis of representation.

NM: I think that has been somehow already

part of the whole conversation in an indirect way.

OMC: You think so?

NM: Yeah. In impossibilities and the other things we're talking about I think there's a similar sort of semiotic collapse as well.

OMC: Representation is in a sense a very loaded term. Somehow you wrestle with it, or you think there is a problem there.

NM: Yeah, I do wonder what is still meaningful and how you can represent that. Because I think within an artistic realm so many things that are communicated or conveyed mean a particular thing but do not transcend that somehow. Because it's really about symbolic transformation and it's about opening up different registers of meaning and when that becomes a non-option, then you have a problem. Perhaps that's somehow also connected with art becoming instrumentalised or turned and twisted into performing certain functions.

OMC: But when did it go wrong? Was art becoming conscious of itself?

NM: I don't know. My background is in media art. I wonder whether in artistic production if the production can not do better then reproducing the images that we see on mass media. What does that represent? What does that say then? It doesn't transcend anything, it doesn't construct anything, it doesn't critique anything it just gives us the same thing we're already getting. And that is definitely a problem.

OMC: I did once see, talking about mass media, an artwork that was a video composed of video game images and over that there was a monologue; a very American monologue about self-improvement and 'this is the new day'. I thought it was amazingly powerful, even if it didn't transcend any image that I didn't know.

NM: But I think within the combination of putting things together you can transcend that and you can have a powerful and effective impact.

OMC: This work went two ways; it did critique all these things that are placed into video games and it did also critique American positivity, which can be nice but it's also pretty ... well, the Californian thing also. It was a very simple idea that did work.

NM: Yeah, there's a difference between documentary work and artistic practice and that has at this moment become very convoluted. Especially when we think of art that has a social or political message somehow, or is critiquing that and it doesn't go beyond just mere register-

ing matters then it becomes pure registration. Registration has value – to use a certain word again – but I'm not sure whether registration in itself and by itself alone has enough value on the level of representation to work within an artistic sense. It's this one-to-one communication of images and ideas we know so well from the media that are being reproduced in a very unilateral manner. There is almost one way of understanding them and often they're on the ethical right side, which also makes them attractive for us to understand and to perceive. But in the end, do they produce different meanings? Often they do not. If you have a given, like a war or conflict, what means would you use to represent that in a way that is not completely reductive but also that works on different registers and on a poetic, aesthetic and artistic level? Maybe it's not so much a crisis of representation as it is a crisis of method in representation. I know you don't like the word 'method' ... [Laughs]

OMC: Mwa, 'method' in art is a completely different thing.

NM: Or strategy, or tactic or what ever. Maybe it has to with that? So ... [Esmé comes to the table with desert] Ooh!

IV Jasmin Tea Sorbet

[The desert Esmé brings is a Jasmin tea flavoured sorbet served with Muscat infused pears topped with roasted almond flakes.]

EV: There you go. It's a Jasmin sorbet with poached pears with Muscat wine, honey and almonds.

NM: Wow.

OMC: Heerlijk, denk ik. (Delicious, I think.)



Jasmin tea sorbet with pears and almond flakes.

NM: Yum. [Laughs] Wow, it's very good. It has a strong perfume flavour. Lovely. Is it tea, Jasmin tea?

EV: Yeah, with sugar.

OMC: Hmm. [Silence] But the thing that came into my head when you were saying these things was: Goya's sketches of the horrors of war. I thought: "Well, how where they received in his time?" Maybe there were complaints about that. It breaks with rules of representation I can't imagine the outrage if an updated version of that work was made. I mean, the Chapman brothers tried but they don't count. Right? I mean that it really, really hurts like those sketches do. You see what I'm getting at?

NM: Yeah, but Goya, even if you take Picasso's *Guernica*. It's representing horror, in such a horrible way, let's say, that the format is completely conducive to its content. I wonder when I see a picture from Getty photography or I see a picture on a monitor by an artist more or less the same image, let's say, it's both conveying horror but should it be doing exactly the same thing? There's a flatness. I find it difficult to pinpoint what it is exactly, maybe it's ease, maybe it's a flatness that visual imagery is being reduced to within certain artistic practices.

OMC: But isn't it also the whole art practice then? I mean not the practice of producing art but of presenting art.

NM: You mean in the sense that it's presented as something meaningful but it not necessarily is?

OMC: No. For instance in the sociology of art there's this common understanding of 'art is whatever you find in a museum'.

NM: It's like Schwitters who said: "Whatever the artist spits is art."

[Laughter]

OMC: But that hasn't always been the case. If that is true then there should be possibilities of changing art practice.

NM: Well, I mean I find it interesting to look at the art practices of artists in the Middle East who've obviously dealt a lot with crisis, catastrophe and conflict. Some of them have, actually very consciously, resorted to strategies which refuse representation of some sort when talking about disaster, conflict or crisis. "Whatever we're going to show you cannot in any sense convey the complexity of horror or the experience of the event." And they resort to either latent images or making films about the war where you never see any scene of war, because whatever you will see will not teach you anything. I think that's very poignant in dealing with images that have become so generic, somehow, that they become stripped of specificity, be that either geographic, historic or whatever. A strategy of making these things specific is actually to refuse that particular representation. This is definitely at play in the Middle East. Is it Baghdad, is it Damascus, is it Beirut, is it Ramallah?

OMC: But also art in a sense has this almost unfair competition nowadays with the images of television and the news. Goya didn't have that competition.

NM: No, but this is the thing. If all these events are so televised, mediated and these types of visual media are of course also the tools that artists use, then how do you get beyond that, if at all? Should you? But you do feel that there's a struggle, can an image still be meaningful if it has been reproduced on our retinas – on tv-screens, newspapers, internet – so many times? Then you see that same image in an art

gallery and you wonder: "Okay, what does it mean to me now? Does it still mean anything to me now?" If art is still about evoking an experience in some way or other, should that be the same experience as you get when you sit in front of your tv? And is that the role of the artist then to ... well, I don't know, become like a bricoleur of media images and channeling them back to you in concentrated form. I don't know what to do with it.

OMC: Yeah, but sometimes I see museums as the big problem here. As a meaning giving institution it is too constrictive. You know what to expect when you go to the museum. Art as an idea overflows the walls of a museum. Also it has lost its meaning there then, all those classics of art can be bought as a poster.

NM: I don't think these practices are restrictive to the museum, you see them happening on the internet as well or at festivals. You can also call festivals, biennials, or even more ad-hoc practices of collectives, institutions in their own right. I don't know whether that's a depletion of meaning or whether it's a depletion of imagery, but there is a depletion somewhere.

OMC: I think that's very interesting.

NM: And it's very difficult to pinpoint exactly what is it. It's like: "Okay, there is a crisis." [Laughs] I don't know where it's located.

OMC: And where did it begin?

NM: Yeah. Well, some people would say ...

OMC: Warhol. Or the first television.

NM: I don't know. But I do have a feeling that the Documenta of 2003, the one that Okwui Enwezor curated – which really was more documentary than anything else – was very influential in this respect. It really makes you wonder. I do see that artists somehow feel the pressure that they have to conform themselves to produce certain images or sensibilities.

OMC: But isn't it also the rate of speeding up; there are more artists and more means of communication. The computer becomes some kind of tool in all kinds of art. I think it gets appropriated quicker than for instance painting, which took thousands of years. The computer has in thirty years been appropriated as an art tool and already we think of this computer generated object in the museum: "How boring. What's next?"

NM: In that sense, with a lot of stuff today, I actually miss that moment of symbolic transformation. And then you can of course ask yourself the question: "Have we been stripped

of symbology nowadays?" [Omar laughs] Eric Kluitenberg, very recently during a conference, used this very poignant example of 9/11, where you had the very material destruction of the twin towers but also of course of symbols. When does that transformative act actually take place? How do you nowadays deal with symbols and iconography? How does that feed into representation and how do you transform that? Can you at all still do that in a meaningful way?

OMC: Yeah, but symbols and iconography make me immediately think of electronic media. We know what we see on television. There's a sort of wave that has engulfed us. In that way we can't get out of it. On the way here, I was thinking of our email exchange, of a sort of Baudrillard kind of analysis; something we can't just get out, it sticks on us. In that sense it's a bit worrying, we can't get out of all these images that surround us. I won't say meaningless, but they don't have a weight. They are throw-away, but there's an aesthetic.

NM: But very exchangeable and disposable.

OMC: Right.

NM: You see, it all goes back to value. [Laughter] Somehow it always does. I think 'weight' is absolutely the right term.



Nat Muller

[Esmé comes to the table.]

EV: Do you want coffee or tea?

NM and OMC: Coffee. [Laughter]

OMC: In a sense it's a far more complex layering then the social issues we were talking about.

NM: Because here I wouldn't even know where to start.

OMC: Right. The sort of thing I said; the stickiness, it's strange but it feels like that.

NM: Because it envelops you; you live it, you breath it and you're complicit in it in whatever

you do. To start tackling it makes it of course very murky. And I have to say, the more I started working in the Middle East, the more I started thinking about it and I got very much confronted by the problematics of representation. How can you not feed into a stereotype or generic image, or the expected? Because it's always also about these projections and expectations, somehow. And how do you undo that? Either by using a similar strategy or by doing something completely different. And it's very difficult.

OMC: That's what I find interesting. If you look from the Middle East towards the West, is there another regime of signs? It sort of sounds like orientalism, I've never been to the Middle East, so for me it's still a strange other thing.

NM: Well, you know, of course it's also extremely televised. If you walk in downtown Cairo you see one ad after the other. The same you get in Beirut. If you drive through Lebanon, there's billboard after billboard, after billboard. So you're always confronted with symbols but very much symbols of consumption. Of course there are all these satellite tv-channels and then everyone is watching the same. So I'm not sure if there's a different way of considering signs in that respect. [Esmé brings the coffee to the table.] It's very much part of a global condition, which is reigned by consumer capitalism. Buy stuff! And also on the internet, I really discovered I had to be part of Facebook while I was in the Middle East, because it's the only way you can actually participate in some communities. People don't send out emails anymore, it's all Facebook. Whether it's for activism or for cultural announcements. In that respect it's just as much complicit and implicated as we are. But of course, I guess there's a different relation and that's something artists have to deal with because it's their place being represented. Maybe the relationship to media is different because there might be a history of censorship and propaganda; so there's always a suspicion towards certain media and you see that also somehow in the aesthetics that becomes deconstructed. Maybe mediation is different, not necessarily systems of signs or the symbols but the way things are mediated is at times different. It's all getting a bit too complicated. [Laughs]

V

Coffee with a Phyllo Pastry Sigar

EV: Would you like something to accompany the coffee? I also have phyllo pastry filled with nuts.

NM: Bring it on!

OMC: We don't want to miss that.

[Laughter]

NM: Will we also receive a doggy bag?

[Laughter]

EV: I have a few more of these phyllo pastry things.

[The coffee is being pored.]

NM: Well, maybe we should also ask Esmé a question because within tonight's setting the dynamics or representation are also quite interesting; in the sense that you go from a sort of loosely scripted environment to a recorded conversation and then you write out that transcript.

EV: Well, I think this project has many different forms in which it's represented and there is not one form that is *it*. It consists of all these different forms, so you have this moment, which is meaningful for us but I don't think for anyone else, in the sense that no one else is experiencing this moment, but I do think that the text that comes out of it can be meaningful to other people. They will of course have a totally different relationship to the project then we have and certainly I have. Like now I was in the kitchen so I missed some of your conversation but I will later type it out and that is almost like eating your words.

[Laughter]

OMC: But don't underestimate the meaningless, what you said; this is meaningless for everybody else, there are people who probably find that break very interesting.

EV: The moment that I was gone?

OMC: No, the moment when you came just now and said: "This is only interesting for the three of us."

EV: Maybe I didn't explain it right. Because I think this moment does transcend in some way to the people that will later read it, but not at all in the same way as we're experiencing it. Because they can only imagine what the food must have tasted like, or how this moment was that two people came together that hadn't really spoken to each other before and were placed in this somewhat artificial situation. I hope that

the food and me being there like a kind of buzzing in the background make the situation also comfortable, in a way that you can forget about the setting for some moments.



Esmé preparing the meal.

NM: The levels of translation are really interesting; that there is this particular moment now and then there will be the moment that you listen to the audio recordings, so there is that carrier and then it becomes reproduced in the text and then it becomes exhibited. So there's this sort of flipping happening all the time.

EV: Yeah. And during the exhibition this space [Meaning the dinner table and the mobile kitchen.] is here for people to see when most of the time nothing is happening. So yeah ... Is the coffee good or is it too strong?

OMC: Very good. It's almost that coffee can't be too strong. Immediately when I got your email I sensed ... the idea sounded simple enough to understand, but somehow I sensed that there were possibilities of all these layers of meaning that could be constructed. I think that's very intriguing. I still haven't figured out what it all means. Very weird in that sense.

EV: Yeah. [Laughs] This project started with me thinking about how I can expand my knowledge of issues that interest me through a method of working that involves me personally more than, for example, reading a book. My art practice is one that is research based. I was thinking of a way to learn in a non-institutional way. Maybe this is me being very idealistic again, but I really believe that there's so much knowledge that we could share. I was hoping that in these moments of people meet

ing who have a different background that some disagreement but also some agreement might happen, or that someone says something that makes you think outside of your usual path. I find these moments of exchange very interesting. I'm not this kind of artist who sits in the attic and is inspired, I don't need seclusion, I need busyness, I need people, I need interaction.

OMC: It sounds like completely contradicting what I said at the beginning about writing. [Laughter]

EV: But when I need to write I of course don't do that on a busy street corner. For me conversation is a tool that makes me think.

NM: Even when you're in the position of not fully participating all the time?

EV: [Thinks for a moment.] Yeah, but then afterwards. After I'm transcribing and experiencing the conversation more to its fullest. And also what's funny is that when you're in a conversation it goes by so quickly and sometimes you misunderstand the other person, but when you re-read it you all of a sudden think: "Oh yeah, that's what he was saying." It's quite a different way of being involved with the conversation. [Silence] Do you like this phyllo thing? Is it not too sweet?

NM: No. You really out did yourself.

EV: [From the kitchen.] Thank you.

NM: And she still didn't answer the representation question.

OMC: She talked herself a way out.

NM: Yeah, smart. Because it does become something different all the time. [Silence] When talking about representation the whole issue of authenticity, which is not a word that you're actually allowed to use nowadays, comes up. I do find it coming back more and more. Though it is a 'no no' word, but so many practices nowadays are so ingrained with it. But it somehow presupposes a truth value. There's always the ghost of the authentic hovering there. More and more. I think that is something that is quite recent actually.

OMC: It must be. Because indeed, what you said, it's an ultimate 'no no'. Which is strange.

NM: But don't you feel that in some things? Like the way that people talk about things, the type of work that's being made. It's never fully articulated, but there is some specter of authenticity hovering around.

OMC: I haven't noticed it that much. I'm going to look out for it. It should be interesting,

though.

NM: Especially if you look at the obsession with the documentary and documentarist work. I mean, authenticity or truth. Again back to big narratives.

OMC: Truth is pretty big.

NM: The representation of the real, you know, that type of thing. Definitely twenty years ago we were so not engaged in that conversation and it somehow is seeping back. Not the real in the sense of materiality, but again this conception of the real as a bigger organising principle.

OMC: That's pretty big what you now mention.

NM: Maybe.

[Laughter]

OMC: My head caved in.

NM: I'm just speculating. [Laughs] Let's have some more coffee.

EV: Can I join you again?

OMC: Yeah, sure. [Esmé sits down] Well, the real ... I think the authenticity of this we have done now is questionable. As I said in the beginning with these queues of masks, the mask of the real.

NM: There is always something real.

OMC: Even if you put it: "I'm going to joke my way through this."

NM: Which maybe you did. [Laughs]

OMC: That's also a mask. But the communication, exchange of ideas are authentic. In that sense authenticity is always there.

NM: On some level, yeah.

OMC: Uh huh, on some level. There are other levels where authenticity is really problematic still.

NM: But it's often used within this very traditionalist, hermetic sense. Something that is completely impenetrable. That is what it's constituting. We use it more in a fragmentary sense, like: "Okay, there are elements that are authentic and they're real."

OMC: Yeah, it's a very loaded term. There's this sort of human, Californian sense of authenticity of finding your true self and all this different stages of authenticity. Which one do you want to bring back?

NM: [Addressing Esmé] But maybe that's a question for you, because there are so many translations from where this project begins and how it eventually ends up on display. How does the authenticity of things figure into that whole process?

EV: Yeah, well that is interesting, because I don't think either of us is the author of what

will come out. My name is in the booklet, but not really prominent and on the cover there will be your names and a title that is still to be determined. But I can't claim what you have said of course. No one is the author and it's also no one's product really. I couldn't do anything without your consent.

OMC: Make a movie?

EV: Yeah, I was thinking that these conversations can be re-enacted so you could make a play. [Laughs] But I think it would be really stiff.

NM: Depends on your actors.

EV: Yeah. It does depend on your actors, but somehow I'm not such a strong believer in plays that depend so heavily on text that has been produced by someone else. [Silence] I'm actually interested in this idea of Sinterklaas and other ritual performances where the roles are clear, but really anyone can be Sinterklaas and you don't have to study a text; you just know that you are from Spain and that you have Pieten (helpers of Sinterklaas) and that you ride a horse and that you come and bring presents. But what you say to the child who sits on your lap and starts crying or what you say after the mother told you: "He has been really naughty this year." [Laughter] is not a studied text that was pre-written.

NM: But at least you have the props.

EV: Yeah. I find this very interesting as a method for performances. I was in Switzerland and I came across many different customs. Every valley has it's own ritual and these rituals are kind of exotic looking, they remind me of African rituals. They have these wooden masks and some are quite violent. I'm very interested in studying these rituals and finding out what the rules are exactly. Maybe this can be used for the development of a new work. [Silence]

OMC: It's interesting. For a time I had this idea of doing the same thing for Spain, where every village has these weird rituals. Saints, throwing a pig from the church tower. [Laughter] And they have this famous tomato thing. [Laughter]

NM: And the bull runs.

OMC: But it's weird that the Netherlands don't really seem to have all these local things.

EV: There are. I did found some weird ones that are very local.

NM: You have 'paalzitten' [A traditional contest where people sit for hours on end high up a pole.] and these types of things.

EV: Yeah. [Laughter]

NM: Very weird.

EV: In the Netherlands there are also things with people dressing up. But then again in Switzerland, their costumes were amazing! Like there's one Egg man and he just wears shells, he's totally covered up with egg shells. It's just amazing how it looks. And there's also a pine man, he just looks like a pine tree.

NM: But for which ritual is that, for carnival or something?

EV: No, there's one in Urnäsch which is called Silvesterkläuse. Often Swiss rituals involve cow bells, very big cow bells. [Laughter]

OMC: Of course! [Laughter]

EV: I heard that in Switzerland women only got the right to vote in the Seventies. And in Urnäsch women can vote, but the social pressure is so enormous that they don't vote, so you can imagine how this village is still full with traditions. It's only the men who get to dress up. One character is a woman with red rosy cheeks, cow bells and she wears a theatre on her head that's made of wood in which a whole scenery has been carved. The second figure is this pine man and there's another one but I've forgotten how he looked.

OMC: It seems more intense than anything I can imagine here in the Netherlands

EV: Yeah, yeah, yeah. They walk a route through the mountains, when they come to the village they go into the bars, greet people and sing songs to them.

OMC: This also brings me back again to what I was talking about in France, about the geography, this sort of very localised, still communities. Okay, you have this country Switzerland, this federation, all these rules, but still beyond these structures all these local things are still going on, probably in France also. Probably in other countries too. You could imagine Serbia, Rumania will be sort of rife with all these rituals of which they don't have any clue in the country itself. In that sense I understood Holland is a fucking vanguard of de-ritualised, how to say it, modernity ... to use the correct sociological term. [Laughter] Maybe the Dutch are the most effective in disenchanting the world. [Laughter]

NM: I think that's a really nice way of putting it.

OMC: Because before there was this magical world and modernity slowly disenchanting the world. Maybe less than we sort of expect.

EV: Modernity isn't only about formal aspects. Oskar Schlemmer was full with ideas about the future, groups and being together.

OMC: Yeah, but you could argue, in modernity the follow up is where France and sociology come together. You have this, one of the great five sociologists; Durkheim. He was pretty experimental in creating this idea of one nation – France – and what it is you need to get everybody together behind this idea of a nation. So you have to have a flag, festivities to indeed get in a sort of almost ecstatic idea of coming together. Nobody cared about this idea of France at first. So it's a sort of a magical tool, but it's fake magic. Fire works, national holiday... [Laughter]

NM: An anthem. [Laughter]

OMC: Of course pine man is also fake but, there's an intensity to it.

NM: It also follows up to what we were saying in the beginning about this sort of opening where protocols can ease up. I really like what you said about disenchanting the world, because maybe it is indeed the lack of enough space for enchantment, on any level.

OMC: All these stories and rituals ... I'm a skeptic, but I'm also sort of jealous about the beauty and the intensity it represents. Darkness.

NM: And the imaginary at play there.

EV: I went to a New Years celebration and all the young people of the village took part in the ritual. There were boys dressed up with cow bladders and wooden masks. They used a broom to poke people who were standing in a circle around them. People followed them around, I think this was their regular route, probably doing the same every year. Young children were wearing cow bells and hats made of white sheets topped with coloured serpentine. They formed a circle around the broomed men and by ringing the cow bells they kind of chased the bad spirit away. I think probably all the children from the village were involved in performing this ritual. I think it is really nice that everybody ...

NM: ... is participating.

EV: Yeah, everybody has a part in it and knows their role.

OMC: But again it's in a village. It isn't like Bern or Zurich?

EV: Well, in Basel there's the biggest carnival of Europe, I think.

OMC: Really?

EV: Carnival is immense in Switzerland!

OMC: I didn't know that! I'm really amazed that this thing is going on!

EV: Yeah, I was also amazed because they act quite different when it's carnival.

NM: Because the Swiss are normally quite, you know.. [Laughter] very ... you know ... They allow themselves a few days a year to go completely berserk?

EV: Yeah, I was really quite baffled by the scenery. And also the costumes, which were again amazing.

OMC: Right. But still, in the Netherlands, it seems so ...

NM: it seems so contrary to Dutchness; ritual and...

OMC: I can imagine that in the Netherlands it would become sort of a media thing. Sort of: "How funny, in such-and-such town they always do that-and-that."

EV: But you do have funny things in the Achterhoek. [Laughter] They have tractor in the mud races.

NM: It sounds like passing time! Like 'paalzitten'. [Laughter] Now why would you? [Silence]

EV: Yeah, it's more silliness, it's not that there is ...

NM: ... a narrative or something

OMC: Yeah, it's a sort of struggle with evil. [Silence] And in this carnival you mentioned it seems really extreme indeed how they battle with those masks of being Swiss the whole year [Laughter] and dropping those masks for those three days and sort of going wild.

NM: Those are the exit valves. [Laughter] But, I mean again they are regulated.

OMC: Must be.

NM: Must be. [Laughter] Three days you know, from 8 am to 8 pm and then that's it, you put on the original Swiss mask again.

EV: Yeah, it's a bit like 'jeans day' on Friday, or something.

NM: Jeans day?

EV: Yeah, at the office.

NM: Oh, yeah, yeah.

EV: A casual day. [Silence]

OMC: But, maybe we have found our own modern rituals in Holland, we just don't have this distance to recognise them. But they don't go back to primitive ancestors for rituals. I wouldn't know what they are. [Silence]

EV: I'm thinking now what they could be.

NM: Getting up and checking your email! [Laughter]

EV: Yeah, but also Sinterklaas is of course a Dutch ritual.

OMC: And probably if someone has true distance, Sinterklaas is extremely weird.

EV: Yes, I have had many discussions about the weirdness of Sinterklaas. [Laughter] To foreign people it's very strange that we have the custom to celebrate this feast – you know this discussion – were the Dutch colonial past is visualised in the form of Black Pete.

NM: I grew up in Belgium and there Sinterklaas is just a kids party and I find it really interesting that here adults participate as well. In Belgium that's just not thinkable.

OMC: It should be the case in Holland too.

NM: But it's not true! [Laughter]

OMC: I know, it's sort of an evil ...

NM: ... evil development. [Laughter]

OMC: An evil development of commercial interest and a desire to not grow up that has shaken hands and turned into something different.

NM: All the writing of poems as people do in Holland is also something that is not done in Belgium. You wake up and you find something in your shoe and that's it. It's about the reception of gifts if you've been good. In Holland it's much more about this communal celebration. And it's on the sixth of December in Belgium, not on the fifth.

EV: Yeah, he first has to go through Holland.

NM: Ah, yeah and then he passes south. It's funny how these rituals change because when I was in the South of Lebanon which is Shi'a you have this ritual of Ashura, which is the commemoration of Imam Husayn which is this very well known ritual where you see men beating their chest, making incisions on their foreheads; it's very, very bloody. It's actually to commemorate the battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn. It's a complete spectacle. When I was in Iran I asked people there about Ashura, which in Nabatieh in Lebanon is about the spectacle of blood letting and the identification with pain of Husayn ibn Ali. You go to Iran and they're like: "No, we're Persians. No blood dude, I'm not sick!" [Laughter] It's completely different there. And there this ritualised space actually becomes a space where different genders can mingle and it becomes like a complete pick up space. So it's there were boys and girls actually meet, while in Nabatieh it's more of a men-only scenery with a clearly gendered space. In Iran

it becomes a social event which allows interaction that normally is much more difficult between boys and girls. So it's really interesting to see how these rituals completely change and take on a different social function also. While of course in Nabatieh in the disenfranchised south of Lebanon it's also about showing "I am Shi'a", in opposition to being Druze or Sunni. The south of Lebanon is predominantly Shi'a and completely impoverished and neglected by the government in Beirut. So it takes on this completely different role as well.

EV: And do you know how much time has past in which the ritual changed?

NM: I don't know, maybe they've always been doing it. Now it's very mediated, you always get big pictures with these guys with blood and everything and now you have also the Red Cross having little stands there, so they can actually make sterile cuts. [Laughter] Because they hit themselves with blades. [Silence] I'm not sure whether it was always that bloody, but you know I have also friends in Beirut who say: "Ah, let's go see Ashura." [Silence]

OMC: But I always find it reassuring that these things still exist. Now everything is put down to one level, the whole commercialisation and capitalism. We're watching the same thing and yet still those rituals live on.

NM: And they're also being substituted by many others ... to go back to the Californian take, touchy, feely, new age-y type of things. That sort of obsession with the metaphysical or yoga or spirituality where people are absolutely in need of new rituals and look for them elsewhere. So people do have a necessity for them somehow in the weirdest way. [Silence]

EV: Zal ik hem uitzetten, de recorder? (Shall I turn the recorder off?)

NM: Ja, ik ben helemaal aan het smelten! [Laughter] (Yeah, I'm totally melting!)

OMC: Ik vind het prima. (That's fine by me.)

EV: Want we zijn volgens mij allemaal een beetje moe aan het worden. (Because we're all getting tired, I think.)

NM: Uh huh.

Colophon

This conversation was recorded on 31 Oktober 2009 as part of the *Zicht op Zalmhaven* project. For more conversations please see: zichtopzalmhaven.esmevalk.com

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Zicht op Zalmhaven is a single-table restaurant to which guests are invited for a three course meal and an interdisciplinary conversation. The invitees are working in the fields of art, philosophy, social science, cultural theory and history.

I invite the guests on the basis of their work and research. The subjects of the conversations have come forth from questions I deal with in my own artistic practice. ‘Autonomy, Agency and Free Will’, ‘Gesture, Display and Body Language’, ‘Self-Organizing Structures’ and ‘Reading the City’ are amongst the topics that will be discussed. The idea for the project developed from a personal desire for conducting research that is driven by curiosity and sharing. The guests share their research, interests, and questions through conversation and I share by preparing a dedicated meal and its setting.

I think that conversation creates a space where new ideas can emerge through the exchange of thoughts and in the unexpected reply the other can give. With the meetings in *Zicht op Zalmhaven* I hope that new perspectives on a given subject can come to exist that feed back into the research of the participants and other interested parties.

Esmé Valk