

In Conversation, Surrounded by the Uninhabitable: Céline Condorelli, Vasif Kortun, Özge Ersoy

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Özge Ersoy: *Surrounded by the Uninhabitable* is an intervention into the Forum at SALT Beyoğlu that invites visitors and passersby to sit, rest, chat and study on and around the furniture/architecture structures that, at first glance, almost act as props. We can start off by talking about what these structures testify to. The objects in the installation present the material traces of your work in ‘Scramble for the Past’^[1] at SALT Galata. They thus reference to two specific histories—the path in your artistic research and the course of programs at SALT. Let’s first tease out questions around continuity and accumulation in relation to your practice. How does the idea of recycling feed into the continuity in your work?

Céline Condorelli: *Surrounded by the Uninhabitable* has continuity within itself as a series of objects or structures developed over a period of time, that began before ‘Scramble for the Past’. It started with a project I did with Vasif and November (Paynter) in New York in 2009— a revision of the study of St Jerome, as it appears in Antonello da Messina 1475 painting— in which we created a book collection point at Artists Space^[2]. This started feeding the library that is now at SALT Galata—which was only an idea at the time. So that I engaged with a set of issues over a series of projects taking place in different geographical points around the world, and in different contexts; this is a way to develop more substantial forms of research in practice. I think about continuity in relationship to this—a line of thought that may persist for 4 or 5 years over different works.

ÖE: Your work at Artists Space and SALT Galata was installed as part of an exhibition context, whereas the work at the Forum functions in a different way. This time, the installation is not situated in an exhibition, it stands by itself and occupies a semi-public space located between the street and the galleries upstairs. It therefore does not have to be contextualized in relation to other artworks or archival material. Also, this is the first time you intend to expose snapshots of your artistic research, using drawings, models, and so on. Is this going to reveal the line of thought you are talking about?

CC: The fragments included also relate to the publication. But I like thinking about this endless argument in art: being didactic versus being obscure, offering over-interpretation versus allowing people to approach things through their own perception. I tend to use saturation as a strategy to deal with this. For example, Vasif and I had a really interesting conversation about a year ago, about the Forum opening up and it somehow not working. At which point, I think you can do different things: you can change the fabric of the building, adjust it. And I would always go toward the over-programmatic and over-filling of space. I would take things to excess in order to be able

to understand what can be done with a space. Specifically for the Forum installation, I was interested in taking ideas of artworks/exhibitions as cumulative to a further step, to push them to an extreme, by reconfiguring, and recycling my own work into a further work. This is something I have been experimenting with both through *Support Structure*[3] and Eastside Projects[4]. So the cumulative is very important to me. It is an operation, a strategy.

Vasif Kortun: Within that continuity, how do you define the different working relationships? The collecting point as St Jerome's study at Artists Space in 2009 was quite different. It's not "in collaboration with" or a "corollary." It was literally a cardboard structure that could be folded up, to box and ship to Istanbul the books that were accumulated in the installation during the exhibition. The same outfit of St Jerome's study took stage once more as one of the moments this time in 'Scramble for the Past'. Only the color of the cardboard and the MDF are similar. With this final edition of *Surrounded by the Uninhabitable* in the Forum, I see a completely different story. In each mode of working, although the object in question is more or less continuous, the structure of the relationship is fundamentally different.

CC: That's true. I think there's a formal and physical continuity a lot more than, let's say, a continuous organizational structure. *Surrounded by the Uninhabitable* is part of a line of thought that began with the installation that formed a library at Artists Space in 2009. It developed with an exhibition that was not related to SALT—an exhibition as art school, titled *Revision part 2* which took place at Cell Projects Space[5] (London) in 2010, and continued with the opening up of the study, in 'Scramble for the Past', to be finally restituted to a quasi-public space in the Forum. The organizational structures of these relationships are completely different to one another. What is continuous is the development of an idea, thinking through overlaps and conflicts between art and education, and addressing the interpretative and the didactic, in short thinking about 'learning'. I first did this through the library, then the school, and finally the study. That's the clear line of thought between these four projects.

ÖE: I'm thinking about the moment the project shifts into public space. What role does the institution play in the process of domesticating the furniture pieces so that people can inhabit them? Here we can go back to Messina's painting, *St Jerome in his Study*. I believe George Perec's book, *Species of Spaces*[6], is crucial to your research for *Surrounded by the Uninhabitable*. In the book, Perec describes Messina's painting: "The whole space is organized around the piece of furniture (and the whole of the piece of furniture is organized around the book). The glacial architecture of the church (the bareness of the tiling, the hostility of the piers) has been cancelled out. Its perspectives and its vertical lines have ceased to delimit the site simply of an ineffable faith; they are there solely to lend scale to the piece of furniture, to enable it to be inscribed." Here the architecture is only an enabler. In your case, how does the institution enable your work to be inscribed?

CC: The title of the piece comes from that Perec text. The last sentence reads: “Surrounded by the uninhabitable, the study defines a domestic space inhabited with serenity by cats, books and men.” The domestication of space happens through its inscription—both the inscription of the book and of the furniture. And this allows the space to be habitable, which is not communicated as knowledge, but as the possibility for life. The space outside the book cannot be read, which is why it’s incomprehensible, and therefore uninhabitable. This is how I read this piece of text, it might be completely different to what it actually says—but this is my interpretation of it.

The idea of inscription and reinscription is crucial here. St Jerome became a saint because he translated the Bible into Vulgate Latin, the common language of the time, that could be understood by ordinary people and not just by scholars. So first, his is a work of translation—and with it of interpretation, the rewriting of something in order to make it more present—and it’s also the work of bringing the book to people who would otherwise not have access to that knowledge. Bringing something into everyday life. I can see a direct correlation between the work St Jerome does in his study and my own attempt to try and domesticate furniture so that people might be able to inhabit a space in more ways than just as an art installation. In order to do this, I am translating, re-interpreting, reinscribing the installation with a new narrative, that can be overlaid on top of it as an additional layer of meaning. This is why I’m insisting so much on reconfiguring pre-existing works, as opposed to what I did in the last exhibition. And then, to finish the story, St Jerome is the patron saint of intellectuals. He is the one saint here to protect us, and he does that by bringing things into common life.

VK: And he’s the vulgarizer.

CC: Yes, he is. And his message might be that the act of bringing things into common life is what protects the work of the intellectual, or intellectual labour. Extracting intellectual labour to a higher, rarefied or protected field, will not help us, but the opposite will. The patron saint embodies an act of reinscribing things into daily life. The reason why I’m able to link this back to the Forum is that it opens the study into public space. I’m asking whether there is such a thing as research and study that can first of all happen in public, or rather in a space that is not in the didactic, overly rarified, edited space of the exhibition, nor is it the commercialised space of the street. It’s really the space in between these which we are trying to reappropriate.

VK: The status of the object shifts not only because of its context, because it’s between the Forum and the exhibition space, but also because of your registers. I’m thinking of this book I was reading over the weekend—*The Electric Information Age Book*, edited by Michael Adams and Jeffrey T. Schnapp from Inventory Books. It is absolutely brilliant. It revisits a series of books from the late 1960s and 1970s, and what comes out so clearly is that the moment the space between content and form production collapses and

research is not specific to one or the other, miracles happen. I wonder how that would apply to our practice. I'm thinking about the moment of visualization of a project, the moment it slowly starts shifting into public space, and how it registers there.

CC: This is infinitely more interesting than thinking about interdisciplinarity, because in this case, we have two people who work from their own position, researching together, creating an object of knowledge that belongs to neither discipline. And it's added on as further (intellectual) space to claim. I think this corresponds directly to the installation in the Forum. Its potential is to link together the space of the street and the traditional space of the exhibition. But we don't know how it is going to work. It might not work at all. This is an attempt to try to get some of the strategies that are happening in the street and those happening within the exhibition space to work together to create a new object. If there is a correspondence between research work and spatial work, I would say, this would be it.

ÖE: What do we see in the space after you recycle the display structures from 'Scramble for the Past'? Have you thought of using other materials or tools that would trigger the feeling of domesticity, or do you leave the structures as they are?

CC: I'm not going to try to overdetermine the structures, as they are already offering a lot of different ways in which they can be inhabited. There is, for instance, a lot of seating. There are also a few places where you can settle down with your computer and work, as there is free WIFI access. I was interested in developing other programming tools, for instance working with the bookshop or the café. That proved to be difficult on a logistical level but now I'm not even sure that there is a need for that.

I think people have tremendously creative ways of inhabiting space in general. We see this happening all the time in the streets of Istanbul. I'm trying to negotiate between creating conditions and yet not over-determining, which is something that can only be partly planned, and a lot of it needs to be improvised. This is the way we're now working downstairs. I start with an idea over what to do with the structures. For instance, I know that the piece that refers to Sir John Soane's Picture Room will become a pavilion, but then we start building it, and we sit on it, look at it, add something, and then something else happens.

VK: You're working in the way that anybody else would make space. You're not implying that the third parties can actually change the space.

CC: Well, *you* can. The institution can.

VK: Yes, but the institution is not a person.

CC: You commissioned me. If you think something is not working, then you should be allowed to make changes—add a table or a light, remove something that’s in the way, etc. This happens in real life, all the time. We move into a new house and we change it, we customize it. When I have a new studio, the first thing I do is to build shelves and tables, etc. One makes space work for the body inhabiting it. The thing that doesn’t happen very often is to do that on your own work, to further customize something that you’ve already done. What I’m trying to do with this project, and I haven’t done this before—which is why I was a bit apprehensive about how it was going to work—was not only to customize a space but to customize a space that is only made from the remains of my work. So I’m taking this operative policy, this strategy of cumulation quite seriously, to the point that even my work is inscribed in an adaption process. This is quite a difficult thing to do on two levels. The first is that I, of course, cannot be precious about any aspect of the work. I have to treat it as raw material. Also, secondly, as we know from building, or even just recycling, it’s much more labour intensive to start from something than to start from nothing.

[1] *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753-1914* (November 22, 2011 - March 11, <http://saltonline.org/en/83/>)

[2] *Revision, Part 1* (2009). During the exhibition *Revision* housed book donations for Platform’s public art library in Istanbul in its walls made of cardboard boxes, which were afterwards closed and shipped to Turkey. In *And The Columns Held Us Up*, Artists Space, New York, 2009, curated By Vasif Kortun and November Paynter.

See: <http://www.celinecondorelli.eu/selected-work/revision—part-1/>

[3] *Support Structure*, with artist-curator Gavin Wade, various sites, from 2003-2009. The evolving, collaborative project took place over 10 phases / exhibitions, and aimed to create spaces and situations that are available for continuous reinvention.

See: www.supportstructure.org

[4] Eastside Projects is an artist-run space, a public gallery for the city of Birmingham and the world. It is organised by a founding collective comprising Simon and Tom Bloor, Céline Condorelli, Ruth Claxton, James Langdon and Gavin Wade, who runs the space.

See: <http://www.eastsideprojects.org/www.eastsideprojects.org>

[5] See: <http://www.cellprojects.org/content/revision-part-ii-céline-condorelli>

[6] Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, ed. and trans. by John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1997)