



Reflections

A Conversation Between Céline Condorelli and Kathrin Böhm

with
afterthoughts
by Céline

Céline

I'm coming into this conversation with the request to swap a nose with you, but what with? Swapping for me is part of a position about artists' work, about getting each other's work. I was thinking we should swap ceramics since we ended up making some more or less at the same time, which was odd since neither of us have a ceramic practice. It is most definitely not my medium.

Kathrin

It's not my medium either, but it is interesting. You came to the International Clay Workshop I organized in my home village years ago. We spent five days with all those really clever people thinking about what to do with clay; we came up with a million ideas ... and in the end I just tinned it.

Clay is a great material, but I don't know what to do with it. It makes you try to shape it into something, it's so weird not trying with it. With screen printing you just put some color on the screen and pull it through. But clay forces you to want something specific, and if you do not want anything ... it's confusing. I enjoyed the glazing But I have no opinion about whether I like the ceramic noses. I find them funny, but mostly for their name, *Vasen mit Nasen*.

Céline

Making ceramics is slow work, I find it hard to think with it. It takes place through very small actions followed by waiting; for two days for something to dry, and then doing another small thing for ten minutes, and waiting for a week. And then something cracks, and you have to start all over. I just could not think like that, through this really long-winded, broken-up process over excessive lengths of time. But the difficulty and unfamiliarity with that process are even more reasons for me to like the noses: what will you swap with?

Céline

It is slightly ironic, and not by chance that the beginning of this conversation was so rooted in a material process; one neither of us were familiar with, and that didn't result in especially important shifts in either of our practices, but nevertheless was present in our conversations then and now. Its main role was to take us away from the computer, from the management and admin that dominated our time in the studio: both wanting to learn something new and longing to spend time making stuff rather typing.

Kathrin

I think this conversation is enough, you are giving me your time.

Céline

It's not exclusive: you can have time *and* objects. The noses have been looking down at me in the studio for years—they were on a really high shelf in the back room. I also think they are really funny. I once asked about them and you answered they weren't artworks ... that made it difficult for me to know how to keep them. If you don't know what they are, I don't know on what grounds I can ask for them.

Céline

Ironically, I am still in the studio—not for much longer though—with the noses but you are not here anymore. The conversation continues, but so rarely in presence, in our presences. There is something to be said about always being too busy, and the timescale expanding beyond what can easily be considered as continuous, with months passing between one question and an answer. The long game.

Kathrin

We had the ceramics doorstep I made I was trying to see whether I really cared about it or not.

Céline

The doorstep was holding our front door open. It was a daily confrontation with this elaborate, beautifully glazed object on the floor being kicked around. I remember thinking most days "should we really push this with our feet every day?" It was an experiment you did in the ceramics studio, at about the same time as the noses.

Céline

I now realize the experiment was about finding out what the status of those things was, both emotionally and epistemologically. The ceramics were being observed and tested, as it is only over time that it is possible to find out what something is—when it wasn't created into any category—which is a process that takes place in relationships. The finding out was done through this daily forced use, the doorstep slightly resisting its uncomfortable role, until it finally broke.

I've formed an idea of your practice over the years, which is of its gradual dematerialization; I'd say this is something I have been witness to for the last fifteen years. It took place through the slow but willful labor of removing value and attention to objects by and of themselves, to objects as conclusions, to objects that are more directly linked to the artist's labor. I can see this process is critical—not least as a rejection of notions of exclusivity and property, and a certain art world—and that strong politics underpin it. The way that this happened I think was through the gradual disappearance of the processes of your making. Things do occasionally get produced and made, like drinks, but it is less and less you fabricating them directly. We've talked about this before. It only becomes obvious when looking at the breadth of your journey, when comparing a moment from, say, 2008 and 2020, that the work has become gradually more immaterial, less tangible or object-based. The structures and systems and forms of collectivity are a lot more at the forefront.

**Céline**

I find it interesting and rather uncomfortable to take the position outlined here as it represents in many ways a total contradiction. I spend most of my (working) time arguing for the value of relationships, for the unseen and unheard to be considered, to be recognized as labor and as art ... and for the necessity to expand our understanding of artworks beyond the material, beyond objects' inherent capacity to be commodified. And yet it is precisely the confrontation with how objects are here being disregarded, not made precious or magical and indispensable but malleable and mobile as relationships that I feel perplexed. Not perplexed for not understanding—I empathize and understand perhaps too well your refusal of a certain art-worldliness and exit from its dead-endness—but by a little longing and sadness. I realize that it is a contradiction, but I do inherently feel (not think) that something gets lost when you stop making artworks in the object sense; I miss the installations, the posters, the overwhelming immersiveness of the maximal fluo-color installations, always casually but hyper-precisely produced, inherently upbeat and optimistic in nature.

While I am interested in and understand the politics of this position, there is in me a certain sadness at the fact that all these great things that you make are not around anymore, or are not being made. For example, we talked for a long time of doing a collaborative exhibition together, with your silk screen (fridge) magnet paintings on one of my wall-based yellow metal support structures. It would have been quite beautiful! But totally irrelevant by now.

Céline

As you mentioned before, just the possibility for someone like you (or I) to exist as artists and continue (or survive) is already of public interest, if it means that others are allowed to imagine ways of doing otherwise (from the canon, from what they are told, from what is being taught, etc.). But there need to be reasons for exhibitions to exist, for installations to be made, in a world saturated by images and stuff. Can an exhibition find its *raison d'être* in joy alone? Probably for some people, but within both our practices it is hard to imagine.

Kathrin

I do REALLY like the aesthetics around certain things, that's why I make them. But I am not sure about how this gets processed into art I think that's why "Compost" is really good, because I'm watching whether I get upset about things; for instance, when someone takes something really good that I like and am attached to ... but I actually want that, I am happy about it.

And to come back to swapping, when we worked with Nicoline van Harskamp at Mobile Porch, and she had previously run the Swap Shop on Brick Lane, it was about emotional swaps, balancing things emotionally, and it really worked. So that's why I'm a little bit hesitant about what I want from you, because an object has to match another emotionally and I am not so fast when it comes to objects. I know what you're describing emotionally very well—something with an equal value in different registers. This emotional value is interesting, because obviously you and I are very close.

Céline

We have shared a big chunk of life. We started sharing a studio in 2005. We met when Andreas was doing his final-year project, under the West Way, in dialogue with you. I was also doing my architecture diploma at the time. Then you started doing Public Works together, and got the RSA Art for Architecture grant, which was a really great scheme, and you were instrumental in me and Gavin [Wade] starting to work together and applying for the same grant. We did seminars, workshops, some teaching together

I remember painting the Scrutton street studio together, I was pregnant. There was Andreas, who I knew well, had worked with, and then started Public Works. It could also be that I don't want something because it almost feels like I've already received it.

Céline
How?

Kathrin
You pay attention to things. You know me ... you pay more attention to the details of my practice. What you said earlier, about the dematerializing of my practice, is a very clear and long-term observation. If I now had to give something back, I wouldn't be able to. I might have an idea, but it's not at the tip of my tongue. This thing you said is of real value, that could also be in return for the pot.

Céline
It is interesting that I really started making objects in the years of us working next to each other, because I really didn't make objects before at all. I didn't study art, don't come from that understanding: I went about it the other way. There is a crossing over in our journeys.

Kathrin
A crossing of you making more objects, and me less, coinciding with discontinuing Public Works, and you starting to play more with exhibitions. But it was arbitrary, there wasn't a point at which I decided not to make objects anymore. Not working with Public Works influenced this, as the practice was organized around designing things and making them. I still have the same kind of practice, but the object is not at the center, it's not so visible.

Céline
Wendelien [van Oldenburgh] said something interesting about when she entered the London art community. She realized that there were hierarchies here between art and design that she could not relate to. The most important museum where she studied in Holland had been the Stedelijk [Museum, Amsterdam], where the collection contains art and design, mixed up without hierarchies. Of course, that says a lot about the history of art in Holland, as opposed to the UK. There was something really exciting about going against disciplinary boundaries when we both had art and architecture collaborative practices, but the cultural landscape has changed much since then and there is something very formulaic about this recipe now. More often than not it is still a question of art decorating architecture, with the main issue being that this isn't being questioned.

So, I am wondering how much these classifications and hierarchies actually have to do with the contexts in which we choose to live and work. One chooses to switch in or out of a more conventional art practice in the place where one lives, which implies existing within a different system of production in a particular place, different funding networks, different workspaces, different travel, and a different type of life. In another place those choices would mean something entirely different, but it's impossible to detect these

differences between two artists exhibiting in a biennial or laid out side by side in a book. Maybe the objects get in the way of us recognizing the systems that support them.

Céline
I often wonder about how one encounters someone's work, and it is in many ways becoming harder to encounter your work Kathrin, while it is at the same time reaching more people. What I mean by that is there are fewer opportunities to encounter your work if one isn't directly engaging with it. Which is a way of talking to a specific audience, that of course mostly is not an art audience. From the perspective of someone in the art community, this is paradoxically more removed, less accessible. I would consider this part of its extended display—the **work** of placing the work, deciding where and how it should be encountered, in what way, and up to a certain point also by whom.

Another thought: if I understand part of the point of your project "Compost," among others, as **being** finding a way of addressing the sedimentation of your work, what it left behind, this exposes in a strangely productive way the inherent contradiction of on the one hand taking objects away from their commodification in order to present them within the relationships that gave rise to them in the first place, and on the other hand how to do that within a gallery context, when they are removed from those same relationships. Of course, you are there to tell the story—but does that work across hundreds of visitors, does it work when you are no longer there—as surely you will not always be able to?

Kathrin
I don't think about dematerialization, I think of the objects as moving. I really enjoy watching things shift, like a toy toward a bar or to a vitrine. So, it's not about getting rid of possessions—I never knew what to do with those pots, how to offer them, there was no way they could be in an exhibition. "Compost" allows me for the first time to bring them into this fluidity of movement.

I'm watching myself here not getting upset, like it happened yesterday with the curator who came and just took a poster for free ... which could really be purchased as art. But I do value someone's choice, why they want it and the value they give to that: I never see it as against the value or the intention I gave it. I believe it's the use value of art that will actually bring it out of this dead-end it is in, especially in certain areas. This playfulness I see as a way forward, which is why I don't experience it as a kind of dematerialization.

Céline
I agree with everything you've said, but I think you're undestimating the amount of work it takes to have that fluidity. It's something you've worked on for years and years, to detach yourself from a certain relationship with art, from a certain preciousness. This playfulness is the outcome of twenty years of hard labor, a lot of it a practice of letting go.

Céline
Again, I am not sure this point was made clearly enough. The wrenching is part of the work, which is why I guess you need to observe yourself—a certain schizophrenia is at play here, or at the very least a certain acquired detachment, stepping out of one's own in order to see oneself. I think you often say, "I don't care," but I think that is not quite correct, because you care a lot about an idea of cultural value in which the apparently careless makes sense, is necessary. This I think is critical work, in the sense that it offers a critique while being a productive step forward, and it is exemplary in the sense that it provides an example, a reference, a possibility, a case study perhaps. Empirical research!

Kathrin

It's true it took a long time to put these things in motion. And it's nice to see some things coming together I could only dream that the posters would be treated like everything else on the table, and it's nice to recognize the dissolving that has taken over.

I'm really interested in aesthetics. When I was working on *Mansions of the Future* in 2017, the look of the building was so strong, every room looked distinct, there were quite impressive aesthetics to it. But it wasn't designed, it wasn't art. There was something very unassuming about its looks, yet its aesthetics weren't shy, they were super confident. Some were partly abstract, partly practical, partly painted ... it was an interesting moment for me, to step away from designing something, which is a completely different process to that of equipping something with a visual language. Ellen [Mara de Wachter] writes about it in her essay, how this equipping of our designing has an aesthetic that comes from someone who really cares about aesthetics.

Céline

I have a question. Do you get enough back? Is it enough fuel for you to continue?

Kathrin

I wouldn't focus too much on this transaction, what people take away from the space, as there are other transactions going on. The (gallery) space frames all of this as a possibility to make art, which for me is of enormous value. It gives it a public meaning. I think the cultural value that's added to my practice is enormous.

I don't know what the fertilizer is yet. But conversations like this one are pointing to composting not being enough; I will need fertilizer in the end, and it's still open-ended. Part of me thinks this may be a disaster and I may be really upset. But the conversations are really joyful.

Céline

I still wonder: What is the price? There is always a price, a set of consequences that one takes in work, but in life too. And is this price fair? Does everything that counts as labor get included? Aren't we forgetting some hard bits?

Céline

Doing an exhibition with your work is also about opening up possibilities for others, putting on display the potential for an art practice of the otherwise. If you manage to exist as an artist, outside the gallery system, outside all these dubious economies, on the margins of these problematic and polluted spaces, then others can too.

You have run a Company Drinks bar at the Frieze art fair many times, next to the "exhibition" that claims to be of all the art that's important, all that's being made, and it really isn't. But it takes a certain amount of courage to know that you can be excluded from that while making an incredibly fulfilling cultural contribution—even while giving that world something to drink.

I do find it essential to make this present, and yet sometimes it seems

nothing short of a miracle to be able to continue. Yes, it's still possible to be an artist full-time, to work and contribute, largely without that system, but at what price? There isn't one art world, there are many, which sometimes overlap but other times don't. And there are many choices to be made and re-made about what to take part in and what to relinquish. Tania Bruguera comes to mind; this is a personal view, and I am a big fan of her work, but at the end of the day the work is always about her. And I do think that with you, the work is never about you. You're almost at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of putting the artist as a person, with their own possibilities for life, either in or out of the frame. Is the artist the central question or is it the work?

Kathrin

Well, it's a big compliment, but it's also useful in terms of a spectrum of practices that exist, which is why it's of public interest to show them. If what you're saying is true, then it's also important to show this as a model of practice in a public gallery, just to say that you can still have this applied in public And that's about offering a differentiation of socially engaged practices.

There are so many different ways of thinking about painting, but within the type of practice I have, there is a relatively narrow range of possibilities. Tania has been the super activist, super present, also on a super monolog when it comes to it, and you also have Jeanne van Heeswijk, but there is still a relatively small spectrum of how a practice like this can sustain itself, which is why it is of public value to use the gallery space to show it.

I know from experience, from teaching and mentoring, that a lot of artists find it liberating to see what I'm doing—the fluidity between research, working with others, working in a gallery. It is good for others to see this as a mode of practice, which is not locked into the narrow view of existing between commercial galleries and art-making—have you noticed this either/or that the art system loves to do, because it's so flipping conservative?

Claiming this space and organizing it with others is of value, also to open up what you want art to be, as a possibility. Yes, it's hard and it's exhausting, but it's also interesting to look at what mechanisms make this possible, like collectivized studios, shared economies, co-production I'd like to be more explicit about this, as it doesn't just happen by itself. The budget of "Compost" should be published, also to show that this is expensive! It might look incredibly devoted, just sitting like this in The Showroom space, but it costs a lot of money. One has to read about those things, otherwise the economy of art becomes completely exclusive.

One of the reasons I survived is that at the three points when I had children, I worked in collectives that compensated me while not being around. And I had the arrangement that I would go back to work part-time after two months, but both those things were organized, none of it happened by magic. Collectivizing and sharing economies are really important, but there are mechanisms to generosity, such as paying everybody the same, having one pot, not fighting over money, there are rules that make it work. These things do not happen by chance, they are part of practices that share and care, are generous, and support.

Céline

It is curious how difficult and rare it is to get to this point of articulating the conditions of possibility for a practice, and for an artist to be able to do what they do. What you are saying with the use of the verb "surviving" is that it isn't so much a question of interest or opportunity: it is shared economies that make the difference between still being around or not. There are of course many different ways of placing oneself within collective economies, and in our case that meant very direct, often pragmatic considerations of the being-more-than-one. Sharing a studio, swapping things, using each other's space, ideas, time, connections, and materials. The crucial question about a manufacturer or the right book went hand in hand with sharing rent, making strategic introductions—most confusingly sometimes for curators who came for a studio visit with one, and would end up in a conversation with the other—and cooking lunch for each other.

Some of these aspects may look banal, but financial independence as a woman in the art world, for example, is key. There are so many artists' couples I know, in which he was a little bit more successful, so she stayed at home with the children And then she's gone.

Céline

It is quite shocking, to see that for many of the intelligent, committed, educated artists couples, it just so happened that, for different, even very good, rational reasons, when it came to having kids, the choice was made for the woman to stay at home.

Kathrin

I think it is important to make those mechanisms explicit to explain how life works—also as an artist, or as a curator—and the financial system sustaining it, whether it's through extended family or shared economies; they seem obvious to you once you've done them or are familiar with them. We also come from a time where it was much easier to split up resources.

I now know a little bit more what my abilities are, what the resources that have been created through my projects are, and how much of that will just come to an end if we don't care about it. How can it remain? I don't think it is about legacy. It is about just thinking of those things in terms of a certain richness. For example, it would be such a shame if Myvillages came to an end, if we stopped practicing. That's when it comes to thinking of them as commons, or common goods, and to keep them accessible, or shareable, to keep them alive. This is not to make myself replaceable, or to think of protection, but of the value created as something to maintain. If you were a farmer, would you rather have someone put a car park on your field or have someone growing on that field? I think one wants to leave something.

Céline

There is a fundamental difference between an institution and you, Kathrin. An institution is not any of the individuals that are forming it, shaping it, or contributing to it. They may all be dedicated to it as individuals, but there will be someone else after them, and there was someone else before. Whereas in your

case, there wasn't anyone before; all of the spaces created were done so by you personally. Can they continue afterward, after you are gone?

Kathrin

I think it's still a matter of organizing, one has to let go of a lot. Some things are just set up temporarily, and are never meant to continue, and that's also fine. But if I want Company Drinks to continue as it is now, I can't step out. I can prepare it for change, and it will change if I am no longer there. Is it then a continuation of my practice or does it just become something else entirely? I am not sure. But if you'd want to maintain such a project as an ongoing organization, you have to think about sustaining it. Whereas if I want to think of it as part of my practice, I want to think myself as an artist among others.

