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SUPPORT STRUCTURES: DIRECTIONS FOR USE (2004)

CÉLINE CONDORELLI

The conditions of cultural practice have been dramatically questioned and transformed in the last decades. This implosion can be credited to the rethinking of representation in the late 1970s and to the practices coined as *institutional critique* and *relational aesthetics*—these moments or movements having been instrumental in reshaping critical discourse in contemporary art and architecture. The effects of this transformation of the cultural field were to shift the focus away from objects and products towards processes of labour and production, and towards the discursive—in some ways, from foreground to mid- and background. This was accomplished through a substantial re-politicisation of the cultural sphere, and was developed alongside considerable theoretical and philosophical work that is emblematic of this particular shift. For this turn, we must indebt ourselves first to Marxist and feminist discourses, and secondly to what they made possible, to the works of Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Andrea Fraser, Louise Lawler, Group Material, Artist Placement Group, and to the writings of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Félix Guattari, Hannah Arendt and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

And yet something still seems to be missing.

Some simple observations seem to be at odds with this apparently mature movement. For instance, as yet, architecture seems not to have addressed or created a discourse around its own making (Where is the history of the workers of architecture?). And the modes of exhibition and display are more conservative and homogeneous today than they have ever been in history (as the white cube—also in its black box guise—is, finally, all-prevailing). In the wealth of writings on space and politics, there appears to be a lack of critical literature on the means, relationships, and underlying ideologies in the making and representation of space. Can we refocus our attention to thinking through the lens of support? While this might reveal hidden relationships, foregrounding support also proposes to understand production through forms of mediation and interface towards the making of place, which does not produce objects but relationships to context.

[...]

Function: Necessity

The history of science and thought gives pride of place to mathematics, cosmology, and physics—noble sciences, rigorous sciences, sciences of the necessary, all close to philosophy: one can observe in their history the almost uninterrupted emergence of truth and pure reason. The other disciplines, however—those, for example, that concern living beings, languages, or economic facts—are considered too tinged with empirical thought, too exposed to the vagaries of chance or imagery, to age-old traditions and external events, for it to be supposed that their history could be anything other than irregular. At most, they are expected to provide evidence of a state of mind, an intellectual fashion, a mixture of archaism and bold conjecture, of intuition and blindness. —The Order of Things, Michel Foucault¹

This is true: a critical and systematic and typological history of framing seems possible and necessary. But the angle in general, the quadrangle in particular will not be just one of its objects amongst others. Everything that is written here is valid for the logic of parergonal bordering in general, but the privilege of cadre (frame), though it seems more fortunate in the Latin than in the Germanic languages, is not fortuitous. —The Truth in Painting, Jacques Derrida²

While support seems to encompass the most ordinary of activities, its discourse appears to be lacking; this project arose from the resulting solitude of this practice, and forms the necessity for the creation of a bibliography of support.

Cities filled with scaffoldings and building sites own no books about them in their libraries. The history of framing is impossible to find, and when we find mention of it, it is only in fragments, few and far between, in out-of-print catalogues and forgotten essays. Exhibitions of anything imaginable are made while the apparatus of exhibition-making remain largely unchallenged. Classification systems impose categories ordering and curbing our thinking while the containers for knowledge, glaring at us in the face, are so integrated they have become invisible. During the rise and fall of the welfare state and its all-encompassing state supports, we did witness political subjects being flattened into standard categories of needs to be managed, and while applying for grants we forget to ask how funding systems, subsidies, and copyrights change the production of culture. Then, turning to our friends we ask, how can there be no philosophy of friendship that includes women? And everybody knows you can't see the wood for the trees.

While there is apparently no lack of evidence for instances of support, applications of it, resources devoted to it, and expertise in it, its discourse is still largely unaccounted for: nobody to qualify it, legitimize it, inspire us through it. Absent from libraries as a subject, it is not discussed in theory or philosophy; it is neglected as a practice and ignored as a subject. In other words, those engaged in it (and there are many of us) do not have support to guide them in their practice. There is a technical and a physical vocabulary that may belong to the natural sciences, but the deeper voice of support is marginalised to afterthoughts and details, technicalities, exceptional moments of weakness and embarrassing situations. It is shunned and obscured by surrounding disciplines, their dominating concerns and their authorized and exclusive categories of thought—economy, law, art, architecture ... Support is derided and discarded by authority, and depoliticized by the mechanisms of it. With no territory fit for inhabitation, the practice of support is coerced into appropriating the gaps and interstices in others, and thus is driven to fragmentation, to intractability, to the borders of the scientific and the shores of the political; support is banished into the shadows of a background that it articulates ... and disappears into.

Support Structures represents an effort to draft and construct a supporting structure for the creation of support's discourse, to house other forms of support structures, and to revive, not a subject in the taxonomic sense, but a particular way of engaging in and with subjects in a desire towards emancipation. The proposition is for a territory to be supportive in, to, with,

and through. But in order to do so, we must rid ourselves of a few notions: for example, that what forms a valid subject must be constituted by an object of concern, belong to a specific discipline or reside in a distinct set of entities; support is not a formal knowledge in this sense, but a type of relationship between things, and therefore needs to be read comparatively, rather than symptomatically, across disciplines and regardless of their singular frontiers. Support, with other forms of relationships (like participation, for instance), does not correspond to how knowledge is classified nor does it fit into any of its subdivisions, especially seen that, after all, subjects like literature and politics are recent categories; yet it designates something specifically, that should be allowed to create and own a type of knowledge on its own terms.³ For the purposes of this project, this means abandoning some the great divisions that are now familiar to us all (and being able to speak of physical, quantifiable forces in parallel to emotional ones), and gathering successions of seemingly dispersed events according to one of their specific qualities, rather than their nature. This is a necessary undertaking in order to focus on a form of relation, itself an activity—that of supporting—yet traditionally considered both part and subsequent to, the objects it is concerned with. This shift allows us to address what seems to be a disregarded aspect of how and why things appear as they do: what supports, or doesn't support them, and what they in turn support or allow, and through these questions to privilege how support forms political imaginations.

While support might designate the most diverse things, there are, however, similarities in how it appears and works, which are fundamental to relationships between things and objects, knowledge and politics. Furthermore, the fact that support appears as subsequent yet transforms the perception of things, and is so unlikely to offer a subject of research, are exactly the reasons why it has been neglected and needs to be uncovered. What constitutes support is always specific and equalising, and cannot work productively, in the ways described in this book, through a top-down approach; top-down support attempts to flatten difference and corresponds more appropriately to the work of management. There are, however, different things that may be called support, that do not operate as described: these might function as forms of marketing, self-promotion, or welfare in disguise, and are, therefore, not included here.

Initiating a research project from the position of support makes the question of methodology key to its development. Would it be possible to follow this simple premise of support, as one would follow Ariadne's thread, one that would lead the way through questions of strategy and structure, as an operational process? Could this open an appropriate format for such a project, that could both be implicated in its subject and implicate a public in a productive way, as a participant, or even as a supporter?

What are, then, the iterations and gestures of support, the methods, positions, tactics, and the techniques suggested by supporting, that could be both relevant and useable towards cultural production and spatial practice today? And what might possibly be the consequences of such an endeavour; critical collaborative positionings, equalizing processes, collective action, re-inventions of models of articulation, organisation and display, actively politicised subjects, re-appropriation of labour processes, re-evaluated means over ends and ... supportive subjects?

Can one possibly argue that these models of renewed engagement in the environment aren’t both important and relevant, and able to act as enormous carriers of enthusiasm? This is not an offer, however, for a complete guide or all-encompassing methodology for how to act and work together towards change. Far from it, the potential here might be for renewed vocabularies and possibilities for critically intervening in cultural and spatial environments, foregrounding relationships, and through this maybe find a way to stimulate the politics of our relationship to political, cultural, economical, and spatial context.

Support invites us to rethink our relative positions in the world, to reveal their latent or possible political alliances and resistances to people, concepts, ideas or projects, institutions and organisations, with our full critical faculties, but through the conditions of active participation and intervention in an affirmative politics. Support cannot be understood outside its positively active connotation: not positive in terms of a greater good and ethics, but in terms of articulating explicitly what one is for, and positioning oneself as such in the world and in work.

To think through support calls for opening up and reconsidering systems of production and their unspoken rules and ideologies, and provoking their reformulation to happen anew through an ongoing obligation or requirement to address in relationships what is being supported, through what means, and by whom. The complex ramifications of support structures and systems, when exposed, undo simple binary oppositions and work on the inherent relational level between forces. Or to quote Hannah Arendt: “*What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.*”⁴

...

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), ix.
2. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 77–78.
3. “...which can be applied to medieval culture, or even classical culture, only by a retrospective hypothesis, and by an interplay of formal analogies or semantic resemblances; but neither literature, not politics, nor philosophy and the sciences articulated the field of discourse in the seventeenth or eighteenth century as they did in the nineteenth century,” Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 22.
4. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 5.

Interlude: On Practice
Jeff O'Brien

In May 2002 – just shy of twenty years as I write – then-NBA superstar Allen Iverson was asked in a press conference about *practice*: specifically, why he sometimes missed practice, why he appeared to not take practice seriously, and how his lack of practice might impact not just his *game*, but also his teammates’ game. Keep in mind that he was a star, and the questions posed to him were underwritten by coded racist undertones. Iverson, rightfully furious, replied at length, repeatedly mentioning *practice*.

...listen, we're talking about practice. Not a game! Not a game! Not a game! We're talking about practice. Not a game; not the game that I go out there and die for and play every game like it's my last, not the game, we're talking about practice, man. I mean, how silly is that? We're talking about practice. [...] We're talking about practice! We're talking about practice... We ain't talking about the game! We're talking about practice, man! When you come to the arena, and you see me play... You see me play, don't you?'

I think about this press conference often, in relation to artistic practice, as delineated from that of a game. Or, in other words, what is the relationship between artistic practice and art as performed or enacted out in the world, not as practice, but as a game, a form of play, an intervention within a public commons?

These artists and writers of *What Are Our Supports?* locate a thread that subsequently interweaves and brings closer the separation between engaging in practice and game: a form of being out-in-the-world. As site, Cathedral Square Park presented an arena for exploration within a declining, fading commons due to gentrification and its many facets and forces; *practice*, out in the open, was one way of intervention at a time of pre-pandemic loss and precarity. The ebb and flows of the public, free to come and go as one pleases – a public possibly, at times, surprised by their discovery of these projects at the otherwise uninspiring square – witnessed the blurring of practice and the game; a game which, surely, we all now realize is rigged, constructed as such for most to lose. So, we are left with the presentation of artistic practice in the square as offering a small, but generous, intervention into the game we all find ourselves in, struggling to stay afloat – or, even at times, struggling to play.

I would like us to think about what this thread looks and feels like – an aesthetics of the thread – that interweaves these artistic *practices* with the *game*. I also do not know what it ‘looks’ like, however the form it takes is a form underscored by a collective, thoughtful creativity that brings people together when so many of us are drifting further apart; a form that, inquisitive as a starting point, made possible an emergent collectivity upon the Expo-era ruins of the square. At times, I think about the possibility of continuing *What Are Our Supports?* through other iterative interrogatives: *how* are our supports? *who* are our supports? *when* are our supports?, and my favourite, *where* are our supports? These interrogatives ask us to think relationally and enable us to better locate the thread that links practice with the everyday, providing a blueprint for (inter)action amidst our ongoing pandemic.

Notes

1. See ESPN, “Allen Iverson’s legendary practice rant,” YouTube video, 30:30, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9ZQhyOZCNE>.

1. We will design and create a universally adaptive Support Structure in support of artefacts, information and human activities.
2. To achieve this we will put Support Structure through a learning process.
3. Support Structure will manifest a process of adaptation and development in relation to a series of different activities and sites.
4. Support Structure is universal but never generic, each application is specific to a particular situation. Each output will generate a different result and, through a cumulative process, will also contain a process of translation. Support Structure is not an exhibition, but can be used as a tool to translate and facilitate the idea of exhibiting.
5. Support Structure embodies the temporary through an aesthetic positioned between ad hoc and permanence.
6. Existing support systems such as scaffolding and stud walls will be combined with examples of radical exhibition design from the early twentieth century such as Frederick Kiesler's L-Type and T-Type Display Systems (1924, Vienna); El Lissitzky's Room For Constructive Art (1926, Dresden) and Lilly Reich's The Velvet and Silk Café (1927, Berlin).
7. Support Structure questions the potential of a place by focussing on the interface between user and system. This is the starting point for Support Structure to establish new infrastructures for individuals within the site.
8. Support Structure generates an impulse to change through reconsideration and adjustment of space both physically and conceptually.

SUPPORT STRUCTURE MANIFESTO (2004)

The main things which seem to me important on their own account, and not merely as means to other things, are knowledge, art, instinctive happiness, and relations of friendship or affection.¹

I have selected different types of fragments for reprint, that I am putting in relationship with each other, as is often the case in my practice. So that the cumulative sum of these things, words, ideas, somehow proposes something that each part alone could not; through this I speak, not so much through an individual authorial voice, but also through a multiplicity of voices. To try to say something, I try to think, and find my position through collecting and navigating through material; I also try and make work that speaks in the same way, that works by articulating a complexity of material, explicitly in both form and content. Perhaps this is a way of doing things that creates close ties and connections between things, people, and myself, and that is something that more often than not has the feel of a friendship of sorts. I work by spending time with things I have collected, the references that I carry along, like friendly voices in my head, the numerous voices that are part of the process of thinking through and developing work – of friends, acquaintances and peers – but which also include the essential voices of inspirational thinkers from the past, that populate our thoughts and conversations and are in this way, also present. Friendship then, is perhaps a condition of work in my practice – even though it may never be the actual subject of the work, however close it is to a long term object of my practice, support – but a formative, operational condition that works on multiple, simultaneous levels. With this peculiar awareness in mind, I collected here material that exposes what it may mean to consider friendship as a condition for thinking, and does so through the specific friendship of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy. Much of the following thoughts and observations have developed in conversations with philosopher Johan Hartle, who very generously offered his knowledge and time to think with me. Also, a note: age 37, I decided to stop apologizing for being an intellectual *and* an artist.

Friendship is a fundamental aspect of personal support, a condition for doing things together; I'd like to address it as a specific model of relationship in the large question of how to live and work together –and autonomously – towards change, as a way to act in the world. Friendship, like support, is considered here as an essentially political relationship, one of allegiance and responsibility. Being a friend entails a commitment, a decision, and encompasses the implied positionings that any activity in culture entails. In relationship to my practice, friendship is at its most relevant in relation to a labour process: as a way of working together. The line of thought that threads through the following material therefore, is that of friendship as a form of solidarity: friends in action. Also, as we know, working together can both start from and create forms of solidarity and/or friendship, which are therefore pursued as both condition and intent, motivating actions taken and allowing work undertaken.

There is in Hannah Arendt a concept of culture that is, to my view, close to what I would call friendship as outlined above: she defines it as “the company that one chooses to keep, in the present as well as in the past.”² She quotes Cicero saying he'd rather go astray with Plato, than hold the truth with Pythagoras; what he means by this, I imagine, is that he prefers the company of Plato than a so-called truth, especially if proclaimed by a bore like Pythagoras. The politics of such a judgement are of an alliance, of whom one would rather be with. The

NOTES ON FRIENDSHIP (2012)

word friendship does not actually appear in her text, and the company one keeps as I understand it is neither the exclusive group of friends nor the production of life, but *cultura animi*, a kind of humanism. In this way the choices and alliances that we make all the time, (like which books to read and refer to, or whom to work and think with) are instrumental in the formation of culture. I find this notion of friendship and/or culture quite empowering, perhaps even liberating, and I was interested in not just understanding it in general, abstract terms, but through the specific situation of Arendt’s friendship with McCarthy, taking place and speaking to me through twenty-five years of letters they exchanged, and numerous books and publications that they helped each other with.

The ancient tradition defines friendship as an exercise in freedom, which needs to be exercised in freedom, meaning exclusively by and with free and equal subjects. As usual, such a freedom is defined negatively: freedom from oppression, coercion, from unreasonable external constraints on action, but also from affects and inclination, from the slavery of desires etc. However, jurisdictional equality is what counts – so that in a world in which women and slaves are not considered part of the polis, of the democratic space of the city, but just occupy the physical space of it, then friendship can only take place amongst men. Which means that according to that tradition, freedoms like friendship can only be exercised by free men, and that in a world in which women are subaltern, they cannot be addressed in friendship, and are therefore also excluded from its discourse. As the discourse around friendship is born and develops in ancient Greece, where women and slaves are excluded from democracy, this rather heavy footnote is bizarrely carried through the history of philosophy all the way – but only sometimes consciously so – until it reaches us; so that this discourse, like many things, replicates the same exclusions it was born in. Hannah Arendt – the only woman on the philosophers shelf – revives the polis-model of freedom and places politics in the realm of action (what she calls *vita activa*, active life), but in her terms separates it from labour (the production of humanity’s own survival) and work (the construction of the material world). She doesn’t explicitly exclude slaves or women from the space of democracy, but neither does she include them; and she continues to disqualify what has traditionally been attributed to women and slaves: sensuousness and materiality.

So I started visiting the – small but rich – philosophical discourse on friendship, through Aristotle, Montaigne, Derrida, Agamben, and Blanchot, and found that it is a discourse of friendship amongst men. It is shocking how powerful these definitions still are in modern philosophy; Nietzsche argues like this: “Are you a slave? Then you cannot be a friend. Are you a tyrant? Then you cannot have friends. All-too-long have a slave and a tyrant been concealed in woman. Therefore woman is not yet capable of friendship: she knows only love.”³ Derrida does address this problem in one chapter of *The Politics of Friendship*, and yet the issue remains: no women philosophers have written about friendship, to the best of my knowledge, and more crucially, there seems to be something inherently patriarchal, perhaps fraternal about these constructions of friendship, that are based on the idea of a nation of brothers (and the terrifying notion that we can only live together because we are the same, we share the same land, the same birth, the same blood, the same language, etc). Simple, haunting questions emerge from this: can I use a discourse that excludes me, and how? Should I produce my own? And how would a discourse on friendship that includes women be structured?

So Nietzsche says: not yet. What is the yet to be reached? Which qualification does woman need to fulfil in order to graduate to the capacity for friendship? And how about the friendship that women and slaves could have together and with each other? Freedom from affects begs another question: I could never accept Socrates’ decision that women should not be present at his death because they would be over-emotional. Why should affect not be part of how to die? And why should the discourse of philosophy, that one imagines is what Socrates wanted to die surrounded by, be free from affects? I guess we know that this could never really be the case, but what kind of freedom does the exclusion of desires propose? Surely there is also a desire for freedom in freedom too?

So one question is concerned with the possibility of friendship between men and women, and of course between women themselves within philosophical discourse. But another question, which is perhaps more constructive, is to think less of the whys of exclusion, and instead focus on how to produce an inclusive discourse on friendship, or how to include women, as well as the territories historically attributed to them like affects and materiality, in a discourse on friendship. For this to happen I needed to think through how friendship, as a relationship, takes place.

Johan Hartle responded to this saying that “friendship is an affectionate relationship in and through which humans mutually increase their potentia agendi, their vital capacities.”⁴ Spinoza sees, in a classically philosophical way, friendship’s highest potential in the communal development of the intellect. But the intellect here just functions to differentiate and develop the body and its affects. Spinoza’s approach to friendship is to some extent exceptional, as he does not accept any ontological separation between mind and body. The formation of the common or the *res publica* is, in that sense, as much an agreement in terms of bodies as it is in terms of intellects. In this way, the construction of a people is the construction of shared affects.

“One must therefore also *con-sent* that his friend exists” I read, “and this happens by living together and by sharing acts and thoughts in common. In this sense, we say that humans live together, unlike cattle that share the pasture together...”⁵

I really like and am drawn to the idea of living together and sharing acts and thoughts in common, in a way that what is shared is not things, objects, property, qualities (being brothers, men, French, artists, or whatever) but an activity, a process of co-existence through doing and thinking. What this proposes is a process of association that remains open as to what or whom may partake in it. Furthermore, could a woman speak *in* friendship? And in that way overcome the structure of classical philosophical discourse by occupying it, and acting within it? If we were to engage in the work of friendship this could lead to what Arendt recalls in her friend Mary McCarthy: “It’s not that we think so much alike, but that we do this thinking-business for and with each other.” The *thinking-business* is work in friendship, and friendship in work.

Notes

1. Bertrand Russell, *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell: 1903–1959*, eds. Robert E. Egner and Lester E. Denonn (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.
2. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 226.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, 1883–1885.
4. See Céline Condorelli, “Too Close to See: Notes on Friendship, A Conversation with Johan Frederik Hartle,” in *Self Organised* (London: Open Editions, 2013), 68.
5. Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 33.