

MIREN ERASO

## **Work in Progress, Work in Transit. Interview with Catherine David**

*This conversation took place in Barcelona on 15 September, when the Fundació Antoni Tàpies was setting up “Contemporary Arab Representations, Cairo”. Catherine David analyses some of the keys to production and communication in her projects in the Work in Transition programme; spaces of action and visibility, dynamic interventions, consolidation of platforms, specific speeds and scale, and flexible and mobile platforms.*

**ME.-** You’ve been working in the Witte de With in Rotterdam for a year and a half now; during this time you’ve created programmes that seek to analyse different contexts, and you’ve presented them in different spaces and formats. What relationship are you trying to establish between the building, the institution, and its programme?

**CD.-** We are trying to deconstruct the systematic relationship—which is not strictly necessary—that exists between the programme, the institution and the building. Witte de With has created an experimental platform called *Work in Transit* to make the programme as accessible to the public as possible. At the same time, it is also a curatorial effort in that it formulates contemporary projects that need a multidisciplinary and specific approach. There are still people, though, who see a project linked to Witte de With in another space and it annoys them. And at the other extreme you get people from Rotterdam who hear “Witte de With” and don’t associate it directly with our building. These are always complex issues, but they can be resolved with good communication of the project, and by explaining and naming what it is you’re doing. For example, with a logo identifying activities and presences that are necessarily ubiquitous.

**ME.-** How would you define Witte de With?

**CD.-** Witte de With’s mission is to identify, comment on, contribute to producing, disseminate and polemicise contemporary aesthetic practice within the broad area of visual culture and culture in general—and if possible, a culture viewed not as pure consumerism, or as pure recreation. With the *Work in Transit* programme we want to make the information easier to understand. So we’ve publicised the documents and the elements related to the projects and exhibitions. This is material that would be impossible to exhibit in a traditional exhibition space.

**ME.-** This way of looking at culture seems interesting but how do you design this programme in the present homogenous neo-liberal economic and cultural landscape of Europe?

**CD.-** It’s a matter of going for a non neo-liberal option. The proposals vary greatly: disseminating and transmitting programmes to heterogeneous audiences: not to one audience, but to audiences, who you have to attract and convince, not through advertising, but by coming up with specific invitations, putting images and ideas about, establishing debates at a certain level. Coming back to the idea of the container, I don’t think everything is connected to the building, perhaps more to an institution, or a project, at least. Though there’s been a lot of debate about this, not much thought has gone into it or else it’s been treated in a very populist way, and sometimes even authoritarian, way. Rotterdam is in the grips of this debate: much of the population is not Dutch and the potential public is very

heterogeneous. I don't think it's a question of giving each community what it deserves or wants; we should be working so that any subject can associate the Witte de With notion with a series of images, ideas, discourses which serve it at the present time, in its moment as a subject, in its social moment, in its political moment. I think that is where our role would be, and this has nothing to do with having large numbers of visitors.

**ME.-** It's an enormous challenge for such a small centre as the Witte de With, breaking with the synergies of the institutions, which generally associate the programme with its political profitability.

**CD.-** We know there are people who for various cultural or other reasons don't come to the Witte de With but I don't think the number of visits is that important; I think certain ideas, certain images, can circulate in other ways, not just through an exhibition. If there isn't much to exhibit, why invite the people who always go to the same place, to a place that has been designed as an exhibition space. We have to think this one through carefully. I believe in the function as an agency, the agency as a dynamic for the conception of ideas and events. Audiences make much more sense in this multiple context. It's also true that it's much more difficult to quantify, but this could be achieved using more scientific tools, which we'd have to define and discuss. If you think about it, you realise that the overall audience of the Witte de With goes far beyond the number of people who visit the centre.

**ME.-** What potential public are you thinking about?

**CD.-** When we talk about a virtual public, it sounds as if we're talking about the public who are drawn in through the website and the activities on the Internet. I think we have to contest the vocabulary sometimes, and change it in the dictionary. The word "virtual" means indicating, considering, people who not only react, but also interact with images, programmes, ideas and debates. And the Witte's audience in this case, is not virtual but real. The question is what type of communication do we have to devise to disseminate the work of the Witte de With in order to have a greater influence? It's not a question of hierarchy; this isn't some competitive event here, it's a question of extending the action and the possible interactions, making them go further. This is much more than you get with the building/programme/visitors equation.

**ME.-** Everything you're saying is very closely related to your way of approaching the projects, of working with the context in a complex way, and of examining how to disseminate them.

**CD.-** We could talk about projects like *Contemporary Arab Representations. Lebanon*. In this case we did need a lot of communication. I think we needed it not to defend ourselves for not getting involved in advertising-communication, but to impose a space of action and visibility and also so that in the moment the project was devised we could have the team in place, and the most immediate public could get to know it. In the case of *Contemporary Arab Representations*, what is very clear is that the specific role of the small institutions can be not to develop neo-colonial, paternalistic or politically correct methodologies, but to develop dynamic interventions that authorise the consolidation of existing platforms. And in this case, options like *Contemporary Arab Representations* represent a formula that denounces or rebels against views that seem to have failed to some extent. These are views that arise out of the idea that when a society, for a series of reasons, reaches a certain point of visibility or development, it needs its contemporary art. We can see this in the case of

China and in the case of Asia... in many different cases, even in Africa (though perhaps for other reasons because, to be honest, I think Africa still has a lot of problems...). These ways of thinking ignore and almost deny the existence of modernity as something complex and specific; modernity was chaotic and we're still in it. Because of that I think that the different contemporaneities are not all the same; there are similarities between them but that doesn't mean that they're not modern. I was going to say that I think that that notion of spontaneous generation or the emergence of the contemporary nothing is problematic and I think that with *Contemporary Arab Representations* we are trying to consolidate some existing platforms, which have many problems, instead of coming up with a kind of Guggenheim-type proposal, or, I don't know.... something like: "Well, let's show them what we can do to be modern". That's what you have to do to get to the biennials. The projects we're working on, on the other hand, need a lot of time, they need specific speeds, they are not projects that have an immediate impact, an overwhelming visibility and because of that there are problems, because since you can't impose once and for all, you have to negotiate with premature or premeditated interpretations, and this is quite thankless work.

**ME.-** And coming back to the institution...?

**CD.-** In this sense, I don't have much problem with the idea of the institution. An institution is a working utensil, a platform for working; it's not a thing, it's not a building, it's not something eternal, so we need debates about what the institution is, because the institution cannot be a permanent excuse. I believe in the institutions, just as much as in groups or human initiatives and, like everything, there are good ones and bad ones.

**ME.-** We are immersed in a culture of brand promotion and sponsorship of contents, and I think it's interesting that you're looking at changes that question existing exhibition events and museum structures, and this is certainly, much more interesting than a representation of that change. But, at the same time, it seems difficult to get support for these ideas.

**CD.-** It's a question of identifying and associating willingness and interest, though it's difficult because it's much easier and more rewarding to get money for doing Dan Graham or Andy Warhol. I don't think that's our area of work and it seems to me, then, that we have to associate with patrons and sponsors who are especially open and who have a project for the future. We also need to look for associations, cultural funds, to establish platforms that are a bit different. There are European funds, or national funds—from arts ministries—available for this purpose. But it's still much easier to arrange, for example, a national pavilion in Venice than to get the equivalent in euro for a long-term project with less visibility and less immediate impact. If we can manage to set up a type of communication to articulate visibility and publications and which allows information to be circulated, even if it involves much more detailed, almost hand-made, work, it will be possible—and certainly much more interesting. And if it isn't, I think again, that we have to look at the theme of production and productions and the different scales. What we're really debating now is the coexistence of different formats of different scales. When people say the public doesn't like experimental film, they're exaggerating, because it's not true, but that cuts off the budgets. What I want to know is: if there's no exhibition, how can people like it or dislike it? For people to like or dislike a book or a play or a speech or whatever, they have to come into contact with it. This is a topical subject, and it's not confined to a

single scale or a single speed. If you think about it for a moment, in the world of capitalism or post-capitalism, as one would like to call it, there is a chance of different spaces existing. The thing is that they aren't all as profitable.

**ME.-** You're talking about a type of medium-term programme, and therefore it seems as if the public institution is the only candidate to provide the backing. Do you think it's possible to get financial support from private institutions that might be interested in these new ways of working?

**CD.-** Well, most of the funds I get are primarily public, but being pragmatic, we see that now in the Netherlands there are different funds for literature and for promoting translation from Arabic. I don't know how long these funds will last. The important thing would be to keep looking for new sources of finance. But we have to study this all very carefully; it can't be passive or neutral: you have to be sure of what you're doing; you have to target the right people and draw up the budget as effectively as possible.

**ME.-** In everything you're saying we can see what you said in the *Resistance and Creation* debate; on the one hand, the non-complacent reflection on the present and, on the other, promoting changes from within the system itself. It looks as if you're managing to do just that in the organisations you're working in. Is that because the projects are grounded on very sound ideas?

**CD.-** That's the difficult part: the cultural agencies, the special funds, each one has its own role and a new project can never quite fit into the project of an official or semi-official or private cultural agency. That's why I believe in the work of the producer, in his or her position and function. When I say "producer" people always think of film, because that's been the predominant model in the twentieth century. It doesn't bother me much, but in this case you have to think of the producers from the golden years of Hollywood, of the early film industry. Even if it's very paradoxical, it guides us towards models that have degenerated quite considerably. I think if you examine that complexity a bit, the number of actions, everything the producer of that time stood for... I don't think it's backward-looking, because history never repeats itself and we aren't in the 1920s now, but it's similar in that the function of the producer is the interface between the poetic idea and the reality. CATHERINE DAVID is the director of the Witte de With centre in Rotterdam.