



L'Crevisse, 2014 – ongoing

Artist – Rudy Ricciotti

Patrons – Houma community, Louisiana

Mediator – Sophie Claudel

Sketch of the desired building drawn by Chief Thomas during a meeting with mediator Sophie Claudel.

Branches from the Same Tree

Estelle Zhong Mengual

It all started with a crayfish. A crayfish drawn on a white board with a red felt-tip pen. “This is what we want,” Chief Thomas said to Sophie Claudel, mediator for the New Patrons, while pointing at the crayfish. “We” is the Houma native tribe from South-East Louisiana (17,500 people), who have been pushed back into the deep bayou over the centuries. The Houma have just started eating crayfish again. The oil spill resulting from the explosion of the BP Deepwater Horizon rig in 2010 deprived them of their traditional and main food resource for years. The crayfish is also the tribe’s emblem and can be seen at the center of their coat of arms that reads “United Houma Nation.”

However, the red crayfish on a white background that Chief Thomas drew is yet another thing. It is a sketch for an edifice that they wish to build. Or rather, a building that they decided to commission. This is their request: a bilingual school and a cultural center for the Houma Nation, shaped like a crayfish. The commission can seem wild; Sophie Claudel takes it very seriously. “They explained to me that if they lost their French, they would die. I thought to myself, ‘Is that possible? Can you really die from losing your language?’” The tribe speaks a rare language bearing a poetic name: French Mobilian Choctaw, a mix of native Choctaw dialect and French Mobilian Jargon (the lingua franca spoken in the lower Mississippi since the 18th century). This is not a written language and is only transmitted orally: it must be spoken in order to survive. In 1965, the state of Louisiana authorized the schooling of Houma children. Chief Thomas was one of the first to enter a school. Classes were only taught in English, a language they had never learned. He was forced to forget his French. Learning English was difficult, but it eventually became the language of the future, and parents stopped

teaching Choctaw Mobilian to their children. Today, some grandparents and their grandchildren cannot communicate: they don't speak the same language anymore. The crayfish-shaped school is aimed at reversing this trend—and also other things: “We would like to become visible,” Chief Thomas explains.

A New Patrons' project always starts this way: with a group of people somewhere who think that art could resolve an issue they are facing. One cannot help but feel incredulous when hearing about this phenomenon: why art and not a new decoration or a fresh coat of paint? Why, in this situation, does art appeal to them? The New Patrons' program allows for these somewhat vague requests, which are often deemed unrealistic by institutional decision-makers, to become operational: The New Patrons' program gives people like you and me the opportunity to become commissioners of an artwork. What's more, with conditions that are often never available to collectors or patrons: the commissioners can actually shape the *raison d'être* of the artwork. In other words, the commissioners not only say “We want an artwork”; but they say “We want an art work that does this, impacts that.” The New Patrons program is reminding us that we can *ask things of art*, or rather, that *art can do things*.

Within this commission by the Houma Natives, Sophie Claudel serves as a mediator: as an experienced curator, she works with Chief Thomas and the tribal council to help them shape their demand, to convert it into a coherent proposal which can then be submitted to an artist. In charge of finding and suggesting an artist to the commissioners, she must contact him and convince him of the soundness of the project. She is also responsible for raising funds for the commission. Now she had to sell the idea of a “crayfish school” in the middle of the bayou: “It had to be a brilliant and somewhat crazy architect.” She called Rudy Ricciotti. She described the situation over the phone; he needed documents, something to study. This is how architects usually work: from a program, a detailed call for projects. Sophie Claudel didn't have any of this. She could have sent him the crayfish drawing, of course, but she hadn't had the guts to tell him about this little detail yet. It

is just as odd for artists to think that other people than them could be the departure point of their work, as it is for architects to think that commissioners could choose the shape of a building they will design. Especially a crayfish... She sent him the drawing and held her breath. "Fuck! This is the best commission I've ever had!", he cried out over the phone. The commission could begin.

However, the artist accepting the commission is only the beginning. Artist and commissioners then have to get along if anything is to materialize. This relation can take the shape of an immediate harmony or a slow taming. In this commission from the Houma Nation, everything was decided over a plate of crayfish. At first glance, Rudy Ricciotti, a Frenchman from the south of France, has nothing in common with a native tribe from Louisiana; he doesn't seem to belong there. And yet, here he was, peeling a crayfish with a confounding ease, in front of Chief Thomas and astounded Houmas, who are usually accustomed to helping strangers often overwhelmed by the task. He told them that he fishes for them in the Mediterranean Sea whenever he can. A renowned architect, who has come to Louisiana for them, and who knows about crayfish... The commission process, comprised of encounters, discussions and negotiations, was well underway.

L'Crevisse (the project's name in French Mobilian Choctaw) is the first demonstration of the New Patrons' commission in the United States. This protocol, designed by French artist François Hers in 1989, led to the creation of over three hundred art works, in France, but also in Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and, more recently, Cameroun. These works originated from the demands of farmers, doctors, butchers, fishermen, teenagers, teachers, scooter enthusiasts, unionists, dockers, monks, bankers, university professors, etc. This protocol was created in a country where participatory and socially engaged art, as we know it in the United States or United Kingdom, seldom exists. This first American commission could have been the opportunity to measure, and even posit, an existing gap between two different artistic and political histories, leading to distinct modes of action. For the political framework

is indeed different: in France, the transformation that is aimed at has less to do with social justice (something very dear to American artists such as Rick Lowe or Tania Bruguera), but more with the renewal of the ways we can exercise our democratic participation at the local level. This explains why it is so important for the New Patrons' program that the project be initiated by the community of commissioners, rather than through an artist's initiative, as is the case with participatory art. The relation to art history is also different: the New Patrons' action is inscribed in a very clear filiation with the avant-gardes, viewed as an emancipation of forms which paved the way for the invention of this protocol. In the Anglo-Saxon world, the relation towards this liberation is more ambivalent. Some artists and curators only see it as a crystallization of a definition of art as self-referencing and uncommunicable. This partly explains the different forms taken by the artworks found in the New Patrons' projects which often adopt traditional artistic media (painting, sculpture, photography, installation), whereas socially-engaged artworks usually adopt social forms.

However, these French and Anglo-Saxon initiatives are like branches from the same tree: they are both makeshift solutions to similar situations. In other words, socially engaged art like Nato Thompson's, useful art like Alistair Hudson's, or the New Patrons invented by François Hers, all emerged as answers to common problems that artists (and sometimes curators) come across. We can mention for instance the dissatisfaction towards the traditional ways of creating, the only ones deemed legitimate. A feeling of isolation as the artist is only in contact with professionals and "left with this abstract interlocutor that is the viewer."¹ A frustration towards the form of effectiveness available to an art work, and determined by their being potentially selected by a collector, a museum, a gallery, etc.; and, for some, a profound disagreement with the evolution of art into a "leisure activity," and the feeling that a certain historical project for art is failing. Despite the different solutions adopted

1/ François Hers, *Lettre à un ami au sujet des Nouveaux commanditaires*, Dijon : Les presses du réel, 2016.

to resolve these issues, artists have a common faith, one which is difficult to voice out loud without blushing, without feeling candid, or foolishly lyrical, without this fear of taking part in this neoliberal game which glorifies creativity as capital's new godsend: art can change life. Or, if you find this formulation too hackneyed, art has the capacity to transform the world. The articles in this publication all show that even if everyone understands "art," "transform" and "life" differently, the rallying cry remains the same. It is this cry that some artists decided to challenge, curators decided to promote, and academics to understand. This cry gathers and characterizes all the initiatives mentioned in this publication. This first North-American New Patrons' experience is an opportunity for us to gather around the table (a table of contents, as it happens here) the different ways of making this conviction—that art is the means of a possible metamorphosis—a reality.

The first part of this collection of essays strives to present the common challenges faced by the New Patrons and "participatory art"—mostly Anglo-Saxon—as well as the different solutions both practices envisioned to break with this seeming harmlessness of art: inventing protocols to give the creation initiative back to the citizens, building sustainable artistic structures, reasserting the use and utility values of art, etc.

Among the different solutions they found, participation seems to be a privileged means to these ends. Which is why the second part of this book is dedicated to putting participation in perspective by looking at how it has been used throughout the recent art history, in particular with Fluxus, the GRAV (Groupement de Recherche d'Art Visuel) and conceptual art. This choice does not intend to equate the current use of participation in art with a *déjà-vu*. It intends to make visible the polysemy inherent to this term and the different uses that can be made of it. It will strive to show how any general analysis of participation in art (and consequently any general condemnation of it) runs the risk of being irrelevant, as it cannot fail to obliterate the diversity of this process throughout art history. This chapter will also strive to deepen our

understanding of the specific modalities of implementing participation in current projects. Do we mean something different when we talk about participation in socially engaged art or when we talk about participation within the New Patrons' protocol?

The third chapter is more specifically dedicated to this novel form of artistic participation suggested by the New Patrons' action: the commission of an artwork bringing about a process of dialogue with an artist. This participation in the shape of a commission is interesting as it occurs prior to the artist's arrival within the process. To some extent, the commissioners are the ones asking the artist to participate in their project, and not the other way around. This particularity transforms the usual issues of participation: it is not about the artist's social commitment anymore, but about the involvement of members of society within the art field. What is it that pushes farmers, social workers, doctors, pigeon fanciers to feel like they should turn to art and become commissioners? What specific relation to art is being created through this kind of participation?

In the fourth and final section of the book are gathered essays showing how art succeeds in transforming the political, in a technical and not a lyrical sense. The initiatives presented in this book, whatever their degree of proximity to the avant-gardes, have in common their distancing from "politics of good will" which characterized numerous artists from these movements: they were interested in criticising contemporary society and creating visions for a tomorrow that never came. Instead of making the "end of all State capitalism and totalitarianism" depend on the interpretation of a monochrome, these new initiatives act as local operatory apparatuses which increase the possibilities of collective action in the public sphere, which function as political individuation and which reinvent art as an experience of political forms.

Translated from the French by Anaïs Lasvigne.