

The Outsiders, La ville en jeux.

A sandbox#1 exhibition at 19, Crac in Montbéliard

From 3rd of June to 27th of August 2023

Txell Blanco (TB) and Asia Komarova (AK) are two members of Utrecht-based arts collective The Outsiders. In the run up to their exhibition City in Play they were interviewed by Colin Sterling, Assistant Professor at the University of Amsterdam, and specialist in heritage, museums, and artistic research.

The exhibition traces 13 years of The Outsider's work across four cities – Utrecht, Maastricht, Rio de Janeiro and now Montbéliard. How do you bring these together in the context of CRAC 19? What common stories emerge across these very different urban spaces?

AK. For me, it doesn't matter where we go in the world, the question is always how to feel rooted to a place at a particular moment. There used to be an idea that when you travelled for work or for study you would go home, but this is no longer the case, people now stay where they studied or worked. This was the case for both me and Txell. But we still want to feel rooted. Because of the big Peugeot factory in Montbéliard there are a lot of people in the city who are not originally from here. How do such workers feel rooted? How do they find friends and build communities?

TB. I always cry when I think about this because although I didn't end up living in the same place as my parents, I always want to feel rooted wherever I end up. When I arrived in the area of Utrecht I now live in nobody knew one other, but there were many active neighbours who wanted to create communities. What we sought to do as The Outsiders was to give a voice to people who were maybe less active in such community building processes – migrants or refugees who did not speak Dutch, for example. Those are the people we tried to work with, and because of that people are more connected now. We try to do the same thing wherever we work.

AK. Because there was no place to meet in our new neighbourhood, we would just take a bike out and offer chairs and coffee, stopping in ran-

dom places and saying to people, "hey, how are you doing?" A lot of people don't follow what happens in their local area. We go out into the street and just ask people: "what would you like to see here?" Suddenly you have a whole group of people talking about their neighbourhood. In this exhibition there is a room in the back with lots of cardboard. We call it The Carton Ville. There kids can imagine their own city with cardboard, and by the end of the exhibition there will be a huge maquette. We did this previously in Rio de Janeiro, to get the kids point of view. Most of the time kids want places to play. One said they wanted a free swimming pool – kids already understand economics!

TB. We don't really have a strict method, although we do usually create mobile installations and invite people to join us on tours, but really we just want to start conversations and see where they might go.

This exhibition is organised around the four cities we have worked in, but the first thing visitors will see is Montbéliard itself. We want visitors to recognise what is on display and interact with it. You are not just visiting the exhibition, you are also part of it. We started the whole exhibition process with a workshop collecting stories and memories from local people. They told us there used to be water where now there is a road. They described it as a legend, a monster. It's memories and stories like this that we want to add to a big map of the city.

AK. We always design maps to look at and build with neighbours. In Montbéliard we asked people to show us the secret places. It's another way to feel rooted, walking and getting to know a place.

For each city we show a mobile installation designed for that place. For Maastricht we have a cart that female farmers used to use to go to the market, pulled by a dog. For Utrecht we have three mobile installations because it is where we are based. These are the *Travelling Farm Museum of Forgotten Skills*, *The Meadow*

Birds, and *Trusting the Water* – an installation where you can collect water from the city filter and make it drinkable. Finally, there are two videos showing how we worked with people to design new playgrounds in public squares, one in Utrecht and one in Rio.

There is a word for it in art – site-specific art – but we also go beyond this. Two of the installations are tackling food systems that are very site specific. If we were to do something food related for Montbéliard it would definitely be about cheese and fruit juices!

To go back a bit, can you say how The Outsiders started. What brought you together in the first place?

TB. I was born in Barcelona, Spain, and this is where I met Asia when we were both studying. We both came to the Netherlands, where I studied architecture, and we ended up living in the same area in Utrecht – a new neighbourhood called Leidsche Rijn. It was at this point that we started the collective to find ways of applying architecture and art to build communities. We both come from outside the Netherlands, and so we called ourselves The Outsiders. We wanted to find people in a similar situation and connect with them, other outsiders in this new place.

AK. I was born in Russia and came to the Netherlands to study art, but I was always cooking, especially vegan and vegetarian food. At the time it was still quite a new thing, but nowadays it is more common. And food is really where The Outsiders started. We wanted to occupy a piece of land in Leidsche Rijn to cultivate food, because we only had one supermarket in the area serving 25,000 people. We found this piece of empty land and asked for soil from the local government, but they said we had to form an association to obtain the soil, so that's what we did: we formed The Outsiders.

Why did you have to ask the government for soil?

AK. That's a good question. When farmers left the Leidsche Rijn area, they also took the soil with them. The upper part of the soil, the humus, is worth a lot of money. The earth below this was very hard clay, so when we started to cultivate with the neighbours, we needed new soil. But individuals aren't allowed to get soil, only organisations, and so we formed The Outsiders to be given access to soil.

TB. Empty lots like the one we were occupying are usually prepared for future construction, which means they already remove the

top part of the soil. As a result, it's never easy to grow vegetables in such a place. But it's also normal when you start a community vegetable garden to ask for soil. At the time we didn't know where we would be going with The Outsiders, we just did it to get the soil, not for anything in the future!

AK. When we started, we did two things. On the one hand was this project with the vegetable garden, and on the other was a market to learn about the skills that people in our neighbourhood could share. This was a way to learn about someone through their skills rather than just talking.

TB. My dream as an architect was to build a square in the Leidsche Rijn neighbourhood. When we started living there, half of the neighbourhood was still under construction, but there were no public spaces or places for free expression. I thought, let's start by making this market and then slowly it can move into a Market Square. But the market ended up travelling from one place to the other, which was also nice because we would be in a different part of the neighbourhood, reaching more and more people.

Did that ever actually happen? Did you get to design and build a square in the neighbourhood?

TB. Not in the same way we thought at the beginning, but we kind of got involved in making a square. We always want to revolutionise our environment; we cannot just sit and look around, we're not made like that.

Most of your work takes place in the public realm, in streets, urban farms, squares and playgrounds. What challenges and opportunities have you experienced in bringing such projects into an exhibition space?

TB. This was one of the main ideas the people from CRAC had when they invited us, not only to talk about our work but to help them think about the exhibition space as a public space. That's something we have been working on in our practice in the past – bringing art outside the exhibition space and bringing the public, especially those who might not usually visit exhibitions, inside. Breaking these borders between what is public and what is art.

AK. It's a challenge for us, mostly working in public space, to suddenly have to design a whole exhibition, with static things. Most of our things are on wheels! So, true to form we decided to make more things on wheels. There is a structure you can assemble in a circle, but you

can also push outside. It will be an amphitheater that folds apart, every piece can be rearranged in a different position throughout the exhibition space, for different purposes.

The other installation we are developing for the exhibition is a barbecue. Because we are not there, we wanted to design something that people can borrow from the exhibition space, so we have this truck which we have turned into a barbecue with a table. Officially people can just walk in to CRAC 19 and borrow the barbecue and take it to the park.

TB. We also want to bring in some pieces from the city that are not used anymore – a slide, or a bicycle rack for example. We were wondering if they might have things like this in a depot somewhere that we can bring into the exhibition to help people understand more about where they live, what has been lost and what they might need.

AK. More generally, for us the fact we work in a collective is a daily struggle, because the art world is always thinking about the individual – their CV and their achievement. The construction we have as a group might seem fun, but it is not fun at all when it comes to operating in the art world – it is always a challenge to continue; the world is always trying to dismantle us.

TB. That's my whole problem – I can never make roots even though I want to! Back when we started The Outsiders my dream was to go deep and make the foundations for a new square, but that made everything very complicated. Once you go in the ground then it's very scary for a lot of people, because it means it will stay like that; things won't change. So, in the end we accept that we have to be mobile, we have to be moving. But it's still in my head – if you really want to make a change sometimes you must put a stick in the ground and say, this is going to be like this now. We are very gentle by moving, but I would like to be more...stubborn.

What are the lasting impacts that you want to have with your work?

TB. After many years I realised there are other impacts we are creating on a person-to-person basis, which is maybe more impactful than a building, but as an architect I am always thinking spaces should help social change, and the way the neighbourhood of Leidsche Rijn is made is not helping social change.

AK. I think in general you can say that our artworks have a long duration – they are not

happening in one moment. There is a beginning, then over four- or five-years people use them. This is something we are proud of – our works are used and modified by people. The first square we worked on – a parking lot in Leidsche Rijn – our first intervention was a slide for kids that we installed, and this was the beginning of the whole design of the square. The whole process took ages, now the square is complete, but it's a square that many people designed together. It is not a parking lot anymore. We want to do something similar in Montbéliard. If we are in front of a parking lot, and we start a discussion where everybody can say something – old, young, any colour – then you would hear whether the parking lot is really needed, or something else – a chocolate fountain maybe! And then nice things can come up. It's a long process but it leads to somewhere.