

One of the reasons “you” and “we”, Ethel, Nina, Jamie, Bernhard and I, are here is “Body of Us”, the Swiss contribution to London Design Biennale 2018. It was the occasion on which Claire Hoffmann, the curator for visual arts here at the centre culturel suisse, invited us to be here with you tonight.

“Body of Us” was a spatial and audio installation at Somerset House in London, it was a publication, a website and of course somehow also a representation of Switzerland. There’d be a lot to say about it, but I want to keep it really short: “Body of Us” was first and foremost a reflection on, an exercise in and a commitment to approach a notion of friendship as political activity. It was trying to live by some of the texts, of which we in a minute will start to read some. You can not fail nor succeed in such an undertaking. We also don’t know if we’ve been working on friendship really – resp. if friendship is an appropriate term for what we’ve been doing. And still we’re here to do so.

“Body of Us” was a collaboration of – I checked it again this afternoon – 21 people (and actually even more, if you also count in the contributors to our publication, the people at the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Embassy in London and the teams of the Biennale and the Somerset House, where it took place). A reason that not 21 people, but “we” are here, is that we have been discussing and pursuing friendship as some sort of an institutionalizing practice – as a way of working, dealing with and orienting in the world – since quite a while. “We” are Ethel Baraona Pohl, a critic, writer and curator; and a part of dpr-barcelona, an architectural research practice, dealing with publishing, criticism and curating; Nina Jäger, an artist, editor, Jamie Allen, an artist-researcher, and Bernhard Garnicig, an artist and PhD researcher. Nina, Jamie and Bernhard are a part of continent, a platform for thinking through media, text, image, video, sound and new forms of publishing online. Here with us is also Ross Exo Adams – a friend, an architect, urbanist and historian, currently based at the College of Design at Iowa State University. You’ll meet him in a bit.

How is pursuing friendship as institutionalizing practice different from self-contained and instrumental networking, you might ask. This is a question that bothers us too, but I think it might have to do with on one hand a specific moment of critique underlining our bonding, and on the other hand with embracing some sort of relational contamination while going on – trying to be mushy. To explain this, I’ll let Anna Tsing speak, who in her 2015 book *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the possibilities of Life in Capitalist Ruins* writes: “We are contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are as we make way for others. As contamination changes world-making projects ...; mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge. Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option (...). Collaboration is work across difference, yet this is not the innocent diversity of self-contained evolutionary tracks. The evolution of our “selves” is already polluted by histories of encounter; we are mixed up with others before we even begin any new collaboration. Worse yet, we are mixed up in the projects that do us the most harm. The diversity that allows us to enter collaborations emerges from histories of extermination, imperialism, and all the rest. Contamination makes diversity. Thinking through self-containment and thus the self-interest of individuals made it possible to ignore contamination, that is, transformation through encounter. Self-contained individuals are not transformed by encounter. Maximizing their interests, they use encounters—but remain unchanged in them”.

This is why we’d like to perform the “we” we’re representing here as a “mushy” one. It is not meant to be an exclusionary, even though it is based on exclusions that have not only

happened now but throughout history, as we'll hear from Ross later on. Working in friendship thus cannot be about standing against something and for something else as a monolithic group – even though questioning and confronting the essentially modernist, historically sedimented and continuously affirmed exclusionary patterns, power relations and social hierarchies underlining the environments in which we work and live in is an inherent part of political friendship. But friendship does not lead to a stand-off between affirmation and critique, in form of an identity politics where notions of class, gender, ethnicity and (hetero)sexuality, subjectivity and difference are reduced to mere categorical representations and are accepted as given. Identities within political friendship maybe rather take a Deleuzian or Anna-Tsing-ian form, as a movement of becoming and change, a matter of ongoing negotiation or contamination, transformative encounters, as Anna Tsing puts it.

Working in friendship as a political activity is a form of “making as critique”. This means doing while un-doing: not only questioning and confronting modernist exclusions, power relations and social hierarchies, but also the own pre-set ideas and convictions. Constantly undoing and renewing oneself not without but also not for the other. Constantly loosing orientation and trying to find it again. Being infinitely lost while going on.

I get asked a lot what London meant for me, what was the worst and what the best of this experience. I can't even say if joy or struggle prevailed. Binary categories as good and bad, burdensome or joyful, reward or punishment, distance and closeness in a way completely have lost their relevance in these regards. And I think that is exactly what political friendship is about: Loosing the belief in a common language, universal terminologies and metrics, explicit feelings, orientation grids and easily applicable recipes. Political friendship is not a state of comfort, it's not about reaching a goal. It is not an established reality nor is it a mere ideal; it is rather a permanent struggle, a continuous critical self-reflection with and within the other in contamination, and a practice of being in and with the world. A struggle for which friends can give strength and be a source of capacity for going on.