

Controlled chaos

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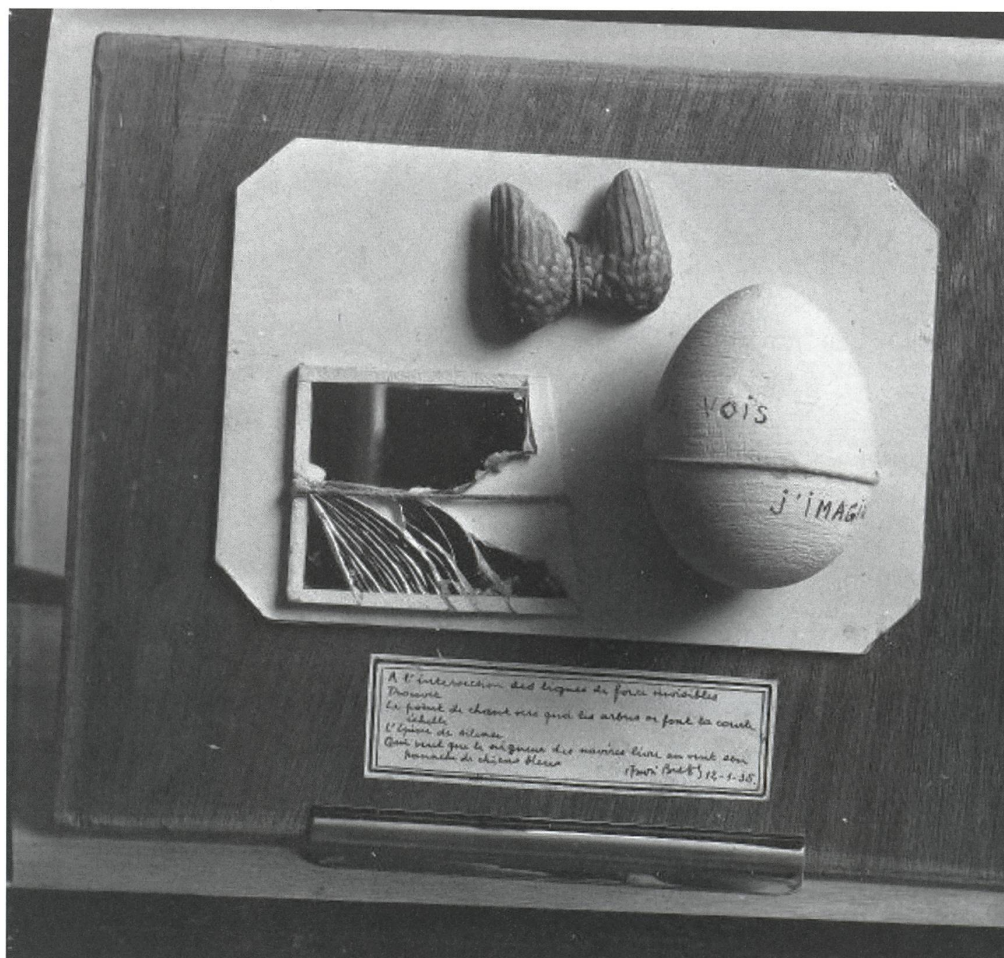
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CONTROLLED CHAOS

Jeremy Ratib

À l'intersection de lignes de force invisibles
Trouver
Le point de chant vers quoi les arbres se font la courte
échelle
L'épine de silence
Qui veut que le seigneur des navires livre au vent son
panache de chiens bleus

André Breton

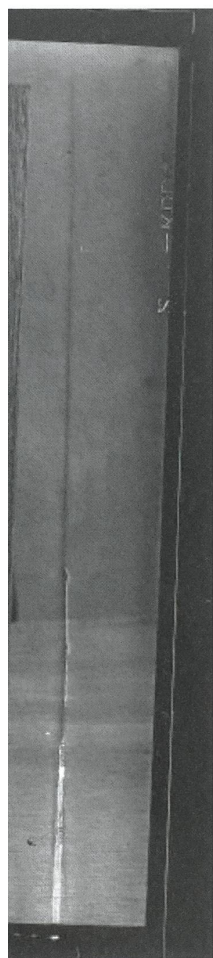


The words «collaboration» and «design», when placed in sufficient proximity to each other, can have unsuspected diplomatic appeal. On paper, it is always pleasing to read about a collective effort resulting in a project of any kind, especially if different minds have been at work in the design process. Some part of us secretly rejoices in the idea of equity and cooperation, as it is reassuring to think that we share the responsibility for our decisions, that strength lies in numbers. Others might argue that these two words are rather antithetical, that design is a too personal business. Convictions aside, let us think of the reality of what associating these two words actually implies. If you were to hand a collaborative project to thirty architects, without suggesting a hierarchy or structure of any kind, the issue might become political, sociological and, I would argue, anthropological. Suddenly, there is a natural balance of forces at play, a constant search for an equilibrium within the tribe, slowly but surely resulting in a dynamic. Different characters are revealed at specific moments and the balance is constantly in flux during the process in an attempt to maintain the «integrity» of the project. There is no method as to how this is achieved, yet one crucial element transcends the specific; It is what we could call a «framework». In order to collectively design, it is essential to establish a series of constraints and parameters to work with, a universe within which to operate. I was recently faced with such a task during a semester design studio with Professor Tom Emerson for the «Pavillion of Reflections» of the Manifesta Art Biennale.

To better understand what it means to work collectively, I intend to share my doubts and a newfound understanding of what I choose to call a carefully «Controlled Chaos».

It all started last year in August with a week-long competition among thirty students in which we were asked to present our vision for the «Pavilion of Reflections», a 400 square meter ephemeral, floating wooden structure. It is to serve as a «Badi» during the day, as a cinema and bar in the evenings for the projection of short documentaries on the artworks conceived for the Biennale. The Biennale would last hundred days, and the pavilion would remain on the lake during that time. In the end, the competition would be a means to generate a spectrum of ideas from which to choose from, a tool set that would grow until the end of the design phase. As far as I can remember from my studies, the idea of the «design method» has always been fundamental. In fact, I would say that the whole of the pedagogy here at ETH is based on the principle of introducing the students to various methods, encouraging them to adopt and understand them. Furthermore, the question of developing a strong «idea», which brings coherence and integrity to a project, is anchored in every student's mind, including my own. I can't help thinking that we have been successfully molded into design-machines, and any alternative method momentarily fails to compute. I must admit I was surprised at how stubborn and conceptually rigid I could be when faced with a process that does not fit into a familiar theoretical framework. Look-

fig. a. Man Ray, *Je vois l'imaginaire*, (Poème-objet d'André Breton, 1935).



ing back at these first weeks of turmoil, I recall unprecedented skepticism from my part and a strong sense of having betrayed the core values that had been drilled into my subconscious over the years.

Working in the manner of the architect-bricoleur is at the foundation of Emerson pedagogy. We are taught to heighten our senses and develop our curiosity in order to recognize the clues in front of us, but more importantly to be flexible and opportunistic. Frankly, I am afraid of this loss of control, of facing the unknown in a process that relies on experimentation, on the virtues of the empirical—in other words, the method of the «non method» in which design decisions are grounded in what André Breton calls «Objective Coincidences»,¹ a world in which we speak of «signs» rather than «concepts».² Throughout the development of the project we would continually introduce unexpected parameters, where even a purely coincidental detail was susceptible to a redefinition of the project and change of meaning. Curiously enough, I simultaneously felt a great sense of relief and profound anxiety. Reluctant at first to leave room for the «ad hoc»³ that Charles Jencks would advocate, I quickly understood that it is a necessary condition to collective design, and that it has the potential to greatly enrich the project.

In John Cage's method of composition through chance operations, he chooses to work with the «I Ching», an ancient Chinese text also known as the «Book of changes», a set of constraints in which to work in. The «I Ching» pro-

duces random numbers that we associate with various hexagrams, or divination figures. Cage then uses these outcomes to determine all sorts of parameters in his compositions. He accepts chance as an integral part of his creative process, and for him the results are far from being random, since he is fully aware of the controlled framework he uses. Similarly, in order to function, a collectivity needs a framework in which to operate and make decisions. The very first instance revealing the importance of this was the moment when we as a design team had to make the first proposal a week after the initial competition. Here we were confronted with the question of how to present an idea to a group of students whose trust we had not yet earned. Eventually, after countless negotiations, we came to the conclusion that the essential task at hand was to first develop a shared perception before tackling the project as such. In other words, we would first introduce a common vision we all could relate to and work with, rather than focusing on the idea itself.⁴

The main intention of the project was to create a temporary urbanity on the lake, an extension of the city, or rather a public «piazza» on the floating platform. Instead of trying to compose an artificial urbanity, we introduced a reference that the majority of us could relate to, the central square of the Tuscan town of Pienza, which in a way became our «I Ching», or our universe. The fact that the choice of Pienza as such was not relevant, was difficult for most to accept. Conversely, the qualities and strengths of the chosen exam-

ple were easily agreed on and could be directly applied to the project. In fact, the first step in this process was to take Pienza, to scale it down to size and place it on the platform as a means to recreate these qualities and understand the scale of the project. Soon Pienza was to be forgotten, and the project would develop its own identity, but without a starting point, we could have debated on a design strategy forever.

A first impression of the studio might be that of a laboratory where experiments of all kinds are carried out in a chaotic storm of ideas. At least this is how I perceived it on some of the difficult days. Yet looking back on the pavilion at its very beginnings and its final state today, I can still identify its fundamental character traits, the ghost of Pienza peering up at us from underneath. I am reassured to find that even in the circumstances we found ourselves in, an initial vision is essential to the development of the project. However, I have to mention that it is far from being the only means of control. In such a concrete project, the reality of a client, constraints of program and budget, and more importantly, the notion that we will have to build it ourselves, are all tools with which to complete a project. More recently, this last point became the strongest argument for any decision. Through the construction of mock-ups with which we could test our ideas, the reality of constructing the project became ever more present until it was at the center of the discussion.

So in the end how does this pavilion stand against the expectations of Art Biennial visitors? What does this project represent, how is it meant to be perceived? Actually, these are the questions that were ultimately put aside with the intention of developing a pavilion that stands for itself without the pretension of making a statement. In this we find the notion of non-authorship and its contingency on the empirical nature of the design process. As Paul Van Caekenbergh would put it: «Bricolage cannot be theorized, only approached with stories».⁵ What I understand today is that the project is, in fact, not the pavilion itself as a built reality, but rather the complex process that has led to it, the experiment of a collaborative design and its intricate narrative. In this case, the built reality is less interesting than the story that led to its existence. Once built, the pavilion will take on a life of its own. To date, there has been no decision to attribute any formal significance to it, or even to take a firm position regarding its image. For this I have complete trust in the other forces at play which will not hesitate to brand the pavilion and give it a whole new meaning, in the same way that the media has already taken possession of the project, recently baptizing it «The cloud of Matchsticks». If I linger with it for too long myself, I tend to associate it to a Duchamp «ready-made», a composition of bits and pieces «as found» by thirty students, and I can't recall exactly how it has become the creature that it is now. It is interesting to think that this semester's true accomplishment was in fact a design of a design, a testimony to a learning process.

- 1 Irénée Scalbert and 6a Architects, «Never Modern», Zürich 2013, p. 131.
- 2 Claude Lévi Strauss, «The Savage Mind», Chapter 1: «The Science of Concrete», Chicago (Translated from the French), La Pensée sauvage, p. 12.
- 3 Charles Jencks, Nathan Silver, «Adhocism», Garden City, New York 1973.
- 4 Richard Kostelanetz, «Conversing with Cage», Routledge, 2 edition 2002, p. 225.
- 5 «Accattone», issue 2, september 2015, Liege, p. 71.

Jeremy Ratib, born 1989, studied architecture at EPFL from 2010–2012 and at the Academia di Mendrisio in 2013. He was an intern at Peter Zumthor's studio in Haldenstein, and will graduate at ETH in spring semester 2016.