

Food Politics

Danae Theodoridou in conversation with Christophe Meierhans on *Verein zur Aufhebung des Notwendigen* - A Hundred Wars to World Peace

Swiss artist Christophe Meierhans (b.1977) is a composer, video director and performance artist. His latest work *Verein zur Aufhebung des Notwendigen* (2015) is a dinner about democracy not as institutional engineering for mass organisation but as something we internalise as individuals at the level of our day to day existence. For the duration of the performance a meal brings people together who have to cook it and eat it on stage.



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DT: The first questions are the 'expected' ones, the title for example. You use a double title. Its first part is the German phrase *Verein zur Aufhebung des Notwendigen*. And the second one A Hundred Wars to World Peace. What lies behind this choice?

CM: The first one is actually the real title and it is not translatable.

DT: Why do you say that?

CM: Because of the word 'Aufhebung'. This was, in fact, the name of a restaurant I had in Berlin with a friend there. It was a chaotic restaurant and quite experimental. We opened only when we wanted, and we did quite some cooking experiments there. And then we also did here, six or seven years ago, a similar action for a festival of Constant. We organised a restaurant evening and did something similar to what this piece does. People would come to the restaurant, into that room, and they would get a menu with only one instruction, each one had a number and above the kitchen door there was a screen and they would be called one after the other. That was very strict, the recipe was fixed and people would have to perform only one act, which was for instance 'put that much salt in pot number two'. But they didn't

know what they were making and at the end they were serving the food they had cooked of which nobody knew what it was. I thought that there was a lot of potential in bringing this to the stage, which is why I wanted to do a kind of adaptation of it. At the beginning I thought it would be rather easy by changing a couple of things. I never thought it would turn out to be such a hassle.

DT: And in terms of the meaning of the phrase?

CM: 'Verein' means an association or a non-profit, in any case a group of people gathering around a certain cause or activity, from politics to sports, on a voluntary basis. And then 'Notwendigen' is the 'necessary', but 'Aufhebung' is a very strange word because it means a lot of different things that contradict each other. It means 'to pick up' something from the ground, and also 'to keep' something, for instance when you eat and keep something for later. But at the same time it means 'to abolish', 'to stop'. And then there's the Hegelian term also where it means 'to elevate'. Hegel used it as something which showed 'transcendence', to go beyond, to transcend something and define it anew as something else. So in the piece there is the idea that through eating you cancel out the necessary, i.e. hunger, and you also pick it up, you cultivate it, but at the same time you transcend it. The subtitle came after some complaints we received from venues that the first title cannot be translated and understood. Many places have communication departments that have somehow become very strong and they were telling us that the piece is not sellable this way. Some even suggested that we should change the title, but this didn't really seem good enough as an argument to us. This subtitle can be translated in any language. At first it was *A Hundred Steps to World Peace* and then we changed it to 'Wars' because it appeared through the showings that audiences were strongly biased towards immediately seeking consensus when tensions would arise, and that's not what the piece is about. It's more about living out the conflicts that are inherent to food and community. And then of course 'World Peace' is exaggerated, but it also forces us to make a link between household politics and our global fate as mankind. It is ironical but at the same time it is not, depending on how you look at it. The bigger framework is there to allow us to relativize, to have a bit of reflexive distance, although the idea of the piece is to really be in action, to dive into this kitchen fire, and lose yourself in its acts.

DT: What was your starting point? And this also connects with another question: how does this piece relate to your previous work, *Some Use For Your Broken Clay Pots*, and to your work in general?

CM: I was thinking of continuing something that originated in *Some Use For Your Broken Clay Pots*. I wanted to approach the same questions - how do we live together, how do we decide, what kind of rules we create for ourselves - from another angle. *Clay Pots* is pure speculation, everything happens in the head, we are talking about something that does not exist and will never exist. In this sense the work is political theory more than anything else. Even if there is a debate going on, the politics we are talking about are fictional. So I wanted to try to create a situation in which something really is at stake, where people are actually debating about something that exists and that is much less negotiable. Because you are in it and you cannot reflect, you cannot take a distance. If something is burning on the fire and nobody does something about it, we will all have lost something. Food is a very concrete thing, it's like air, it is something we need to live. If people grow hungry their behaviour changes, and you can feel this. Questions of waste, ethics, religion, all of these are inherent to food, to the meal. It is one of the few things that are truly universal. All traditions, religions, all customs and habits find their meeting point there. So in terms of politics it can act as a good catalyst.

There is a strong theoretical basis behind this, which is anarchy. Rethinking the relationship of the individual to the group and re-centring the interests of a group around those of the individuals. That of course can also be understood as a very neo-liberal way of thinking, if you just conceive it from the perspective of the individual. But here the exercise is to see the collective as a component of the individual's desires rather than as their limitation. It's not about the group collectively setting rules and individuals then having to conform their longings accordingly. It is about each individual integrating the group into the genesis of his own desires. It is about desiring the collective. If you love something, you are more likely to care about it aren't you?

I need to understand the work a bit more before drawing too many conclusions, but in the performance many people seem to easily just go down the paved way of social democracy without much questioning on this basis. There seems to be a kind of general agreement about what is good for the community or not. That is what I'd love to challenge. So far it has happened each time that a group of women between forty and sixty would stand up and invade the stage, sacrificing themselves, in a way, to make sure there will be enough food and that this food will also be a 'proper one'. I love that kind of engagement but at the same time it is disturbing. Their willingness to do what is best for everybody, going on stage and taking over, also shows how little they trust others, by which I mean the collective, to be able to find a way to a good end. The performance is an exercise in trust. What seems to be the hardest thing to do in the performance is to make space for others so that they can all contribute, and then have enough trust to sit through the whole thing and see where it all leads to. It's not about making something forcefully nice; it is about experiencing a meal that will taste of the community which has produced it, as it were, for better or worse. And to do this, it is required that everyone, to a certain extent, resists one's own automatism, one's own habits and preconceptions and dares to try other paths. I see the theatre as the ideal place for such attempts.



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DT: What did you want to do with this piece? What is your role in it? What is your relationship to what is going on in it?

CM: My ideal scenario would be to once arrive at the end of the show and to have produced something clearly uneatable but still having the audience sitting around it and giving it a try, just out of curiosity. Eating here is

a pretext, it is the carrier for a reflection that I hope can transcend the meal itself and makes use of it as a tool to experience community differently. In the premiere something happened which was exactly what I had in mind when making this piece. At one point a guy went on stage with the instruction to 'brown something'. He put a lot of chopped onions on the griddle, turned it on at full power and went back to his seat. Then the next person came on stage and had to do something else. During that time the onions were still going on and someone in the audience yelled: "it's burning!" So after having done her thing, the person on stage fumbled a bit with the onions before going back to sit, so that they wouldn't get burned. You contribute something and you trust the others to cope with it. It's not about *my* onions, it's about *everybody's* onions. It's an attitude of full involvement, on the one hand, and of detachment, on the other, a kind of 'let's see', 'let's leave space for others to act'. That's what the work is looking for. And even though the piece had its premiere and touring has started, I am still missing some clarity about this aim. I don't know how I will formulate it exactly... I need to find a way; the work will still evolve a lot in the coming months. Something else which fires up the piece are acts of trespassing. People do it to different extents. In the premiere for instance, someone covered a whole lamb with cocoa powder in order to change its colour - which was what the recipe instructed him to do - and that shocked some people. It was completely 'legal', in the sense that he totally respected the recipe, but it was also obviously very performative and a bit weird. It transcended the cooking act and pushed it to another level, both in terms of cooking - we had sweet lamb that evening - and of reflection on community.



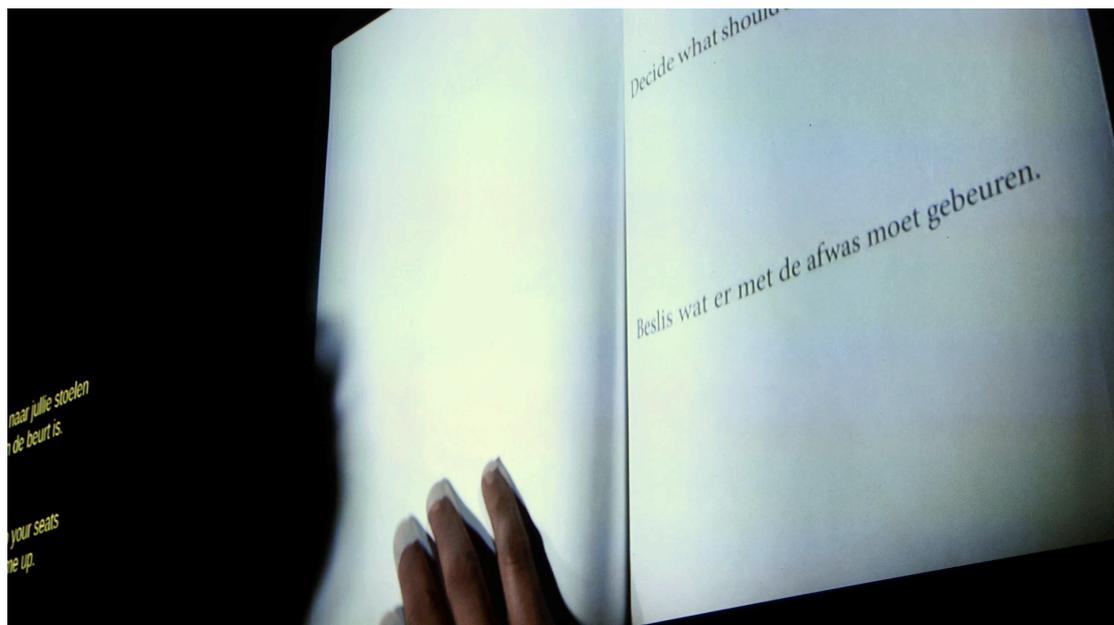
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DT: So then your own role in the show is that of challenging? Where do you stand between manipulation and really letting the community do what they decide? Also, in connection to this, what is the function of the different 'acts' projected on wall?

CM: I went through different phases of thinking whether I should be present in the work or not. In some shows I was there at the beginning to give an introduction, even serving at the bar at one point. And this was a problem because then I became a reference. People were actually asking me if it was ok to do something, etc. Now the agreement with the technical team is that we don't intervene unless someone gets hurt or the building is seriously endangered. I think this is more correct. As for the text, originally the

idea was to have no text at all. But then it became clear that many things were not explicit enough. Only the recipe is not able to hold everything together because people's pre-existing relations to food are much stronger. So now we have added some text moments to help out. The acts are there to give an orientation so that people know better where they are in the process and also to reinforce the theatrical character of the situation - it's crazy how fast people forget that they have come to a theatre show!. The different phases of the process needed to become more explicit: the shopping, the preparation of the ingredients, then the cooking, the serving, etc. But we also fell into the other extreme at one point, making the instructions too explicit or precise. It became a kind of work colony where people were just struggling to execute their tasks as well as they could. It kind of became more about efficiency than anything else. The cookbook took the role of some abstract authority rather than that of an anarchist agitator, which is obviously the one it should have if the whole thing is about people taking decisions and carrying responsibility. The cookbook should not impose social order, it should challenge the relations between individuals and an existing social order as well as the understanding of what social order could mean. To me that is a very important issue, how some kind of overarching moral prevails in terms of what is supposed to be good for the community. At present, we are predominantly trained - we train ourselves - to be as successful as possible as individualists.

Yet, we also know that we 'need' the community, we need to think about that level of things too, but I think that this happens too often through the lens of a moral obligation. Community is a kind of duty rather than a beauty to long for. And if community is seen as a restriction of the individual, it is obvious that sooner or later we'll start to dislike it because it is understood as something which stands in the way of our self-realisation. Look at politics in Belgium now, for example, the government considers any state expense as a waste that should rather be fixed. It is as if, in their eyes, state expenses are ugly. But *fuck*: public services are quite an achievement, aren't they? This line of thought more and more results in not thinking of the community but submitting to it - because it is indispensable, right? Really putting the individual in the centre and at the same time conceiving him as a fundamentally social being, that's a different thing, though.



DT: How easily can we apply observations of a theatrical experiment on society? There are fundamental differences between the two. The social groups we are part of involve specific decisions, aims and something that is really at stake. When I cook with my friends, for example, I have chosen that community. I was also thinking of Claire Bishop who refers to artworks which in the USA are called 'social practices'. She criticizes them because they consider artistic choices and the alternatives they offer less significant but, most importantly, because she finds them dangerous to democracy. They imply distrust towards democracy itself suggesting that it is unable to do its job, therefore art should take its place. In your case, what is the role of the investment involved in social contexts in the semi-random community of *Verein zur Aufhebung des Notwendigen*?

CM: I see an artistic framework as a place where you put things between brackets. You can suspend something - that's where 'Aufhebung' comes in again -, in this case hunger, to be able to see beyond it. With *Some Use For Your Broken Clay Pots* it was about suspending your scepticism towards the possibility of changing our given constitutional basis, so that you actually look into it. You suspend reality to some extent, which means you don't apply anything to reality, but to a suspended framework, which is part of reality as such. The idea is to create conditions that are slightly different, where you might look at things differently. If you don't have this suspension anymore, then you do creative social work and you don't create the brackets or the conditions that create a different reality.

DT: In what way does the piece create brackets for you?

CM: In the sense that outside of the piece you would not forcefully approach your extremely intimate relations to food from a different angle. I think the relations of the individual to the community become extremely strong in the piece because of the theatre, because of the people looking at you with a specific gaze. My responsibility as an artist is to create those brackets. Then whatever happens in it is fair to me. I create brackets for one evening only. I think it is useful to limit things so that people can actually take risks. I want people to break through and try some stuff that might be wrong. I agree, the whole thing exists only within a very limited framework. But what does this mean in relationship to society? Politics start in the household, in the way you relate to dishwashing with the person you live with. It is very futile but if you are not able to deal with that, how can you pretend dealing with bigger issues? If you think about social justice but are not able to deal with the dishes at home, I think there is a problem. In the piece, you have this chain of 100 people taking over responsibility from each other. Some will do something very 'correct', or 'mainstream' which is also ok. I don't suggest that everybody has to go crazy. But the idea is to consider all the different options one has. Only then can a free choice be free. I am not sure that our female commandos over forty running on stage to invade the kitchen make such a free choice, but who does, really? I just imagine that the theatrical bracket allows you to reconsider your options even though you are emotionally involved in what is taking place. This is where its complexity lies. As for the randomness: people coming to a show like this are not so random at all, although the cooking may attract people who would otherwise not come to the theatre. You said earlier that when you invite people to cook at home you choose them. That's your little niche, but you don't choose who you live with in your building or in your city and it's up to you to deal with that. This is where politics actually start.