The Countryside, the Future: Art and Rurality in Times of Crisis

Camille Azaïs

Translator: Phoebe Hadjimarkos Clarke

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The Countryside, the Future: Art and Rurality in Times of Crisis

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Camille Azaïs is the fifth recipient of the grant for the writing and publication of a critical essay, which was created in 2016 as part of a collaboration between the Institut français, the Institut national d'histoire de l'art and *Critique d'art*. The grant is allocated following a yearly call for applications and enables its recipients to travel to one or more art events and to critically analyse them in an article. It is part of a wider programme that supports writing on contemporary art and its international dissemination, which was initiated by the Institut Français in the field of visual arts, in partnership with the Ministry of Culture's Direction générale de la création artistique. This programme has allowed the Institut français, together with the INHA, to set up various measures promoting the mobility of scholars and art critics, the dissemination of their ideas and the translation of their writings.

Camille Azaïs's article focuses on the growing interest contemporary art and its actors – be they famous or not as widely recognised – have displayed for the countryside. Because her essay was laid out before the current health crisis, which made the failures and oversights of large-scale urban planning obvious, it is all the more topical. But its originality is not just occasional: Camille Azaïs shows that the countryside attracts artists not so much as a *place* of creation (different from the city, revitalising, idealised) than as a *condition*, a way of working that has a lasting effect on artistic practices, right down to the definition of their objects. The artists and artistic structures from various countries discussed in this article practice art and ecology on a daily basis, heartily call for “useful art”, redefine the concept of autonomy, and question our habits of artistic consumption. Camille Azaïs gives them a singularly strong critical voice, which can be

controversial but is never neutral or complacent, thus opening up a rich field for thought and discussion.

We hope you enjoy it!

Elitza Dulguerova, Research adviser in the field of 18th to 21st Century Art History, INHA

Adeline Blanchard, Visual Arts Policy Officer, Artistic Development and Cooperation Department, Institut Français

« Libre » © Camille Azaïs, 2020

- 1 This will come as no surprise: Covid-19 has made the countryside a hot topic. During lockdown, articles on “going back to the land” flourished, and real estate sales in rural areas skyrocketed¹, sometimes based solely on photographs. But has any thought really been given to the reasons behind this renewed interest? Various explanations have been volunteered: the need to go outside, the largely irrational fear of food shortages, widespread remote work, and the rejection of big cities – especially Paris, where strikes, demonstrations, Vigipirate measures and exorbitant rents had already begun to irk city dwellers. For my part, I have wondered whether there might be a psychological cause to the need for “taking refuge” somewhere when one feels deprived of freedom. Andrei Tarkovski, for instance, was oppressed by the Soviet regime, frustrated and riddled with debts, but he devoted whole pages of his diary to daydreaming about his little house in Miasnoy Bor². I began my research on rurality in the context of the current ecological crisis before the beginning of this Spring’s lockdown, and my approach of “the countryside” mostly focused on recent science fiction, such as *Les Furtifs* by Alain Damasio, *The Parable of the Talents* by Octavia Butler, and *The Dispossessed* by Ursula Le Guin. In each one of these futuristic and apocalyptic novels, the same pattern recurs: the vital importance of owning or conquering a piece of land. This is where new communities can form and prosper by producing their own food, far away

from large urban centres where population control is easier. In short, this is where they can reclaim a form of autonomy.

- 2 Why dwell on the concept of autonomy, rather than freedom? Probably because the concept of “freedom” is connected, in today’s imagination, to the city. Freedom is all over the city’s billboards: freedom to jump into a cab, to sublet one’s apartment, not to shop, not to clean, to have food delivered at any time of the day, etc. In comparison, rural life is seen through the lens of constraint and paucity, as being isolated from everything: services, opportunities, cultural offerings. However, in recent months and in the face of future threats, the idea of “autonomy” has taken hold of social media and opens up a new imaginary horizon. “Resilience”, “food autonomy”, and “living off the grid” have all become desirable goals. They can include individual or collective projects, in relation to food, water, energy, health, even the education of children and self-defence.
- 3 I’ll admit it straight off: I myself am not unmoved by this “autonomist” ideal, and I have spent many hours watching Youtube videos on kitchen gardens, straw and earth construction, and vegetable preserves, convinced that the renewed interest in these activities, which we may well consider trivial, is part of a wider cultural and even aesthetic movement that is crucial for understanding the times. Observing the art world through the prism of its members who moved to the countryside leads to a few astonishing discoveries. Did you know that Sarah Lucas had settled in Suffolk to flee London’s excessiveness? That the Hauser & Wirth Gallery had opened a branch in the English countryside? That Rirkrit Tiravanija and other artists purchased a piece of land in Thailand together, in order to create an agricultural and experimental space? The art world is also experiencing this desire for change, as demonstrated by issue 61 of the magazine *Spyke* (Autumn 2019), entitled “ESCAPE”, which reports on the widespread desire to “leave everything behind” experienced by many players of the art world. Recently, several authors have wondered whether “the future of art lies in rural areas”³. Although we still see artists settling in the countryside as a form of renunciation (in Zola’s novel *L’Œuvre*, the main character Claude Lantier, a painter, gradually loses all desire to work in the comfort of his rural home) or as the privilege of a recognised artist (Claude Monet and his home in Giverny), it is critical to assess whether, in the current context, this may represent a movement towards a new form of autonomy, both vital and artistic. Might it not be a way of escaping art as it exists in cities, riddled with hierarchies, compromises, ludicrousness, and even false promises of safe spaces where progressivism and freedom of expression are the norm, while the most violent and reactionary ideas are unleashed everywhere else? Can artistic autonomy, which for a long time only pertained to artworks (particularly according to Clement Greenberg), become the autonomy of the artist, an embodied, almost organic autonomy, that faces the world head on? And what role does rurality play in this search?
- 4 Current events in the art world are particularly opportune for trying to find answers to these questions. In 2019, for instance, the Whitechapel Gallery in London organised a series of conferences entitled *The Rural*, which led to an exhibition, *Setting the Table: Village Politics* curated by the collective Myvillages (7 May-18 August 2019). On February 20, 2020, the New York Guggenheim Museum inaugurated *Countryside: The Future* by AMO/Rem Koolhaas.⁴ This Autumn 2020, the 39th Eva International, Ireland’s Biennial, which had been postponed until September 18th due to the health crisis, focuses on the

themes of sharing and valuing the land. I also took an interest in Grizedale Arts in Northern England, a pioneering farm/art institution located in a rural area. The ongoing pandemic has unfortunately made travel impossible and forced me to write this article based on the interviews I was able to conduct with the various players of what had become missed opportunities, as well as on a specific bibliography devoted to the subject, in order to ask: will the countryside be the future of art?

View of the exhibition *Countryside: the Future*, AMO/Rem Koolhaas, New York: Guggenheim Museum © Laurian Ghinitoiu, with courtesy of AMO

5 The remaining 98% of the world

- 6 The exhibition *Countryside: The Future* was launched by Rem Koolhaas, the internationally renowned architect and author of the famous manifesto *Delirious New York* in 1978, with support from his agency OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture) and Guggenheim curator Troy Conrad Therrien – assisted by an army of collaborators and students. It is the result of an extensive data collection on the recent transformations of the countryside. The 75-year-old architect, who became a specialist and advocate of “a mutant form of urban planning” inspired by the madness of New York, admits that for a long time, he was only interested in the city. However, approximately ten years ago, he noticed that the cows were disappearing from the outskirts of the small Swiss village where he spent his holidays, replaced by minimalist holiday homes and their domestic staff.⁵ This proved to be an eye-opener, and he became one of the most significant thinkers investigating the countryside today. The statistical prophecy the United Nations made in 2014 that by 2050, 70% of the world’s population would be living in cities was also at the starting point of *Countryside: The Future*. Yet cities represent only 2% of the planet’s total surface. What goes on in the remaining 98%? How does the countryside cope with this dramatic change? How does “the influence of global warming, the market economy, American tech companies, African and European initiatives, Chinese politics, and other forces”⁶ manifest outside of cities?

- 7 In order to carry out this investigation, Rem Koolhaas starts with a very broad definition of “the countryside” – namely everything that is not urban. The realities he addresses are therefore very diverse: deserts, tropical forests, coral reefs, Siberian permafrost, post-industrial zones, forsaken villages, etc. Under these conditions, the project’s organisers admit it is impossible to claim to have an exhaustive view. Instead, they speak of “pointillism” and “sampling”. In any case, the team’s attention is focused on everything that proves the countryside is a space for experimentation. Experimentation can be a test area for robots on plots devastated by the tsunami in Japan, abandoned villages brought back to life by refugees, super-dense vegetable farming areas in China, where “farmers” live in high-rise buildings just like the ones in the Paris suburbs; it can be spa resorts or the experiments carried out in Uganda to protect mountain gorillas that have been accustomed to human presence and transformed into tourist attractions in order to save them from extinction. Rem Koolhaas likes it when things are hybridised and mixed, when traditional definitions and oppositions no longer hold.
- 8 *Countryside: The Future* is divided into several thematic sections that outline a progression as visitors gradually move upwards in the museum, seemingly acquiring the persuasive force of a narrative construction in the process.⁷ The first section displays the development of the welfare industry in rural areas, connecting this expansion to the pervasiveness of idyllic representations of the countryside in (urban) culture. As is often the case, “love of the countryside” is treated ironically, which, I believe, can be problematic. Why shouldn’t the aesthetic dimension of a landscape have any value per se? Without condemning the countryside to being nothing more than an eternal copy of a 19th century painting, doesn’t this criterion (is a landscape beautiful – that is, varied, lively, hospitable?) deserve to be taken into account when the future of rural development is being examined? The rest of the exhibition proves that this is not the preferred means of approach. The following sections are devoted to grand political projects mostly conducted by totalitarian (Maoist, Stalinist) regimes in order to profoundly redesign the countryside; to the rehabilitation of deserted places by new populations, such as Mannheim in Germany, Tarnac in France, and the Kenyan countryside; as well as to the already mentioned question of the conservation of natural areas and the innovative human-animal-plant interaction that these efforts give rise to. As for the last section entitled “Cartesianism”, it is, in my opinion, the most problematic of all. Its contents are signalled at the entrance of the museum by a huge iPad- controlled tractor and a high-tech greenhouse where tomatoes grow. In this section, many technological agricultural innovations are displayed. Their duality is highlighted: they are exciting because they allow for a much more accurate control of growing conditions, thus reducing the use of chemical inputs. But these technologies often encourage the concentration of farms, thus contributing to the depopulation of the countryside and soil depletion, as well as encouraging monoculture. Despite knowing all this, Rem Koolhaas is still touchingly enthusiastic when it comes to the Dutch farm Koppert Cress, of which he repeatedly reproduces a photograph throughout the exhibition’s communication materials. In a huge greenhouse bathed in bright pink light, three strangely frozen figures are lost in the middle of an ocean of young watercress and perilla sprouts and other innocent-looking greens (faced with the same picture taken in a chicken plant, how would viewers react?). How can we fail to notice that on the ground, the farm’s endless expanses are covered in concrete? What is the environmental impact of this artificialisation, of the production of fertilisers, energy

(including solar energy), structures, packaging and transport (the sprouts are sold internationally, in plastic containers weighing just a few grams)? Even if the company's public relations insist on how much water and pesticides are saved, one may wonder whether this way of regarding the relationship with living things, based on restraint, control and monoculture, is a good path for the future.

View of the exhibition *Countryside: the Future*, AMO/Rem Koolhaas, New York: Guggenheim Museum © Laurian Ghinitoiu, with courtesy of AMO

- 9 By concentrating on “new ways of producing and living in the countryside”, Rem Koolhaas ultimately only focuses on its empty spaces. In doing so, he seems to convey the idea that the countryside is a neutral space to be conquered (thus contributing, probably unintentionally, to perpetuating a masculinist vision of the Earth): the countryside becomes a vacant space where new types of architecture are introduced. These buildings fascinate him because they are not designed for human beings: huge warehouses, gigantic greenhouses, robot parks or fields ploughed by satellites. But how can one purport to imagine a more ethical future for agriculture and nature if the latter is reduced to a productive space, shaped by robots, devoid of human inhabitants? When I put the question to researcher Xavier Poux⁸, he answered that “agriculture has a territorial function”. That is, it creates a living space. He added that this kind technology is very expensive and that due to its complexity, it necessarily leads to a loss of autonomy for the farmers who use it, because, in the long term, they depend on the technology's manufacturers⁹. “Autonomy”, again.

10 **Manifesto of Useful Art**

- 11 What about artistic collectives who deal with people who work and live in the countryside? On the subject of art and rurality, one cannot but mention the Grizedale Arts institution in the Lake District (North West England). Founded in 1977, it was initially a rather classically operated sculpture garden. Adam Sutherland, the current director, who has been in office since 1999, has been gradually transforming the institution's mission. It no longer welcomes the public – except for a few days a year – and functions as a space for residencies and artistic production. In 2009, Adam

Sutherland chose to move to a former farmhouse, Lawson Park, near the village of Coniston, where he set up his main residence there and found a way of combining art and agriculture. As part of their stay, guest artists and volunteers participate in ongoing construction work, gardening and the preparation of collective meals cooked from seasonal vegetables (although a large part of the vegetables are produced by the farm, food self-sufficiency is not the project's aim).

- ¹² Grizedale Arts operates in a fragmented, adaptable, “unbureaucratic” fashion and responsive to opportunities as they arise. For twenty years now, Adam Sutherland and his partner Karen Guthrie, together with a collective of correspondents and associated artists, have been experimenting with different ways of integrating art into the specific context of the village and the surrounding valley. Adam Sutherland – who had grown weary of the patrimonial functioning of the sculpture garden, which was founded during the great era of institutionalised Land art – explained that, gradually, just hosting artists in residence no longer suited Grizedale Arts. Despite the spirit in which artists were welcomed – actively participating in the institution's daily life over a long period of time, meeting local groups, responding to the social and economic complexity of local life – the implemented projects were still imposed from the outside on a population that did not particularly need them, was not interested in them, or “was [even] frankly hostile to them”. In 2005, for example, the English artist Olivia Plender re-enacted a march through the village which had been organised by the utopian community Kibbo Kift in the 1920s. Despite the exuberance of the costumes, the performance did not spark any kind of reaction on the part of the village's inhabitants.
- ¹⁰ Taking the experiment further, Adam Sutherland started fully appreciating the significance of thinker, poet, artist and educator John Ruskin for the understanding of English rural culture in general, and the Lake District in particular¹¹, since the latter lived and died there. According to Ruskin, who advocated an early form of Christian socialism, the emancipation of the working class could be achieved through the learning of arts, crafts and nature-friendly agriculture. In Coniston, the Village Institute bears witness to the legacy of his *ethos*. Created by John Ruskin, the building, originally intended as a school for adult learners, combined a library, an educational museum, a kitchen, and courses in wood- and metal-work, which at the time were very popular with local miners and farmers. In 2011, Grizedale Arts was entrusted with managing the deserted institute, and undertook recreating its original function: a place of exchange, life, shared knowledge and collective creativity. At each stage of the project, artists and volunteers were called upon to contribute. It was Liam Gillick, for instance, who redesigned the library. One of the place's most emblematic aspects is the Honest Shop, where local residents can bring all sorts of home-made products, vegetables, jams, knitwear or small objects. Sales are based on trust, with customers depositing the price of their purchases in a box. After a rocky start, the shop is now a financially independent business.

View of the exhibition *Against Landscape* curated by Grizedale Arts and Dan Sturgis, Coniston Institute, 2017 © Grizedale Arts

- 13 It is difficult to summarise all the facets of this institution. Its local ties are as important as its international influence. Grizedale Arts is in close contact with other rural communities facing similar problems, such as an ageing population, the loss of specific skills, conflicts and the increased dependence on the tourist industry. It supports them and offers solutions. The institution has started a ten-year collaboration with the small village of Kiwanosato in Japan. When asked about the common value of all these projects, Adam Sutherland answered that what was most important was to foster creative energy in people, the ability to act, and above all the ability to “change all the time”. “We reinvent things constantly, it’s a lot about change. A lot of people find it uncomfortable. Through diversity you generate creative ideas and energy, you make things happen.”¹² The theory behind the concept of “creativity” over art in its most traditional sense is clearly stated on the home page of their website: Grizedale Arts is committed to useful art.¹³ Everyone is familiar with the debate about the usefulness or futility of art, but what does useful art mean in this case? In 2012, the artist Tania Bruguera founded the Asociación de Arte Útil in partnership with Grizedale Arts. Eight criteria¹⁴ were set out by Arte Útil, connecting useful art with a form of political activism: the artist is replaced by an “initiator” who brings a tangible and practical benefit to the “users” targeted by his or her action. Far from claiming that this is a new idea, the authors of the manifesto update a conception of art which was very much present in the past, that is, “before the autonomous orientations of modern art in the 19th and 20th centuries”.¹⁵
- 14 Among the many questions that this theoretical position raised in me (how can one measure the “result” of art? Do Adam Sutherland’s willingly conceded failures effectively exclude his projects from the sphere of useful art? Are Liam Gillick’s orange shelves still a work of art, or are they simply shelves which might have been painted a

nicer colour? Are young artists and curators, attracted by the reputation of the place, to be put to work for free in the name of useful art?), one of them particularly stands out. Art must certainly be useful, but useful to whom? Within the framework of what agreement? In the specific context of small rural communities such as Coniston, where, according to my interlocutor, conflicts do exist, one may wonder who can legitimately decide what is “useful” and what is not. Adam Sutherland mentioned that the village now wants to recover the use of the Village Institute, which would put an end to an experimentation started ten years ago.¹⁶ Have the demands of tourism succeeded in imposing their law?

Myvillages, *Eco Nomadic School*, Höfen, Germany, 2015. Fermentation workshop organised by Kathrin Böhm, Caroline Zeevat and women of Höfen © Wapke Feenstra, with courtesy of Myvillages

15 Emancipation Rather Than Autonomy

- 16 I would like to conclude this overview with the work of the Myvillages collective, which was founded in 2003 by three female artists: Kathrin Böhm, Antje Schiffers and Wapke Feenstra. For the past 17 years, they have been working on issues connected to rurality that are in many ways similar to Grizedale Arts’ approach. But these three artists, who all grew up in the countryside and have kept strong ties to their hometowns, chose to live in the city and to reach out, through their projects, to a wide variety of rural contexts on an international scale (in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Macedonia, Hungary, the United States, Ghana...). Each of these contexts has its own specificities and unique human, environmental, economic and cultural challenges. They embody a logic that Myvillages defined as “trans-local”. The projects often take place over a long period of time, during which the artists listen, encounter, discover and offer original ways of creating new relationships within and beyond rural communities, challenging a fixed vision of the “local” and its resources.
- 17 In 2019, Myvillages was invited by curator Jane Scarth to participate in the lecture series on “the rural” at the Whitechapel Gallery. As a result of this joint undertaking, they were offered an exhibition displaying a few of the many projects carried out within the very flexible structure of their collective. The numerous films, texts,

photographs and, above all, objects, produced during these meetings show how their work succeeds in maintaining a fragile balance, as what they produce has its place in the art world as well as in villages. In 2016, for example, Wapke Feenstra returned to her native region of Opsterland in the Netherlands in order to produce *Wild Treasure*: a small silver bean-shaped box surrounded by a mole fur pouch. This object interweaves the various histories of the area: the opposition between large landowners who were fond of luxury arts and crafts and a very poor population; a landscape undergoing industrialisation, the cultivation of a local variety of bean and mole hunting which is traditional in the Netherlands, a country located below sea level. The piece is the outcome of the collaboration of a dozen very different people brought together by the artist. The resulting “treasure” should be regarded from the perspective of another local tradition, whereby a silver artefact is offered when a child is born. Over twenty-five copies of the multiple work were sold when it was locally launched. The object is also exhibited off-site (in particular at the International Village Shop, where the group’s various productions are sold), where its rich history makes it a “conversation piece”, according to Wapke Feenstra.

Myvillages, *I Like Being A Farmer...*, Solms-Delta estate, Cape Town, South Africa, 2016. Exchange project organised by Antje Schiffers and Thomas Sprenger © Thomas Sprenger, with courtesy of Myvillages

- 18 The members of Myvillages claim their art is conceptual and conducive to questioning stereotypical narratives by the questions it raises. While discovering the scope of their work, however, I noted the very strong presence of objects and the particular attention paid to their production, development, distribution, uses, and the narratives they are supposed to embody. This is the case with the ongoing project *I Like Being a Farmer and I Would Like to Stay One*. Since 2000, Antje Schiffers has been visiting farms in various countries where she offers the owners a deal. While she paints a picture of their farm, they make a film in which they present their work. At the end, she donates the painting to the farm and the collective exhibits the film, thus perpetuating a popular tradition

whereby painters and farmers exchange goods. The selected estates range from large monoculture operations to small organic farmers. “What is interesting,” says Schiffers, “is that if I don’t make time to be there over the course of a week, if the farmers don’t see me working at the same time as they are, the film is not as good, or as good as it could be.”¹⁷ The creation of objects relies on remarkably subtle human relationships, and most of Myvillages’ projects precisely highlight the depth of human and non-human relationships that underpin the objects and food that most of us absentmindedly consume. *Vorratskammer* (2011)¹⁸ bears witness to this. For this project, all three artists decided to fully supply the Über Lebenskunst Festival at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt [HKW] in Berlin with local products. For over a year, they inventoried what could be bought, salvaged or produced locally (such as salads grown using aquaponics), while trying to anticipate what quantities would be needed, as well as the vagaries of agricultural production. Over the course of two days, the museum’s rooftop terrace became a meeting point where festival-goers and eighty producers could convene around the always unique narratives of shared food.¹⁹

- ¹⁹ The comparison between this work and a project I recently discovered by the young Polish artist Diana Lelonek, *Seaberry Slagheap* (2018), may seem obvious at first glance. In 2018, Diana Lelonek travelled to the Konin region in Poland, which has been devastated by the mining industry. Together with the inhabitants, she devised a new way of using sea buckthorn to try and make the best of the environmental disaster. The thorny shrub, well known to permacultivators, thrives on this type of soil and produces excellent berries that are rich in vitamin C. The juices and jams produced from the fruits are at once part of the work designed by Diana Lelonek and of a small, locally developed economy. In doing so, the artist condemns, in bittersweet tones, the way in which capitalism recuperates environmental issues, transforming environmental disaster into marketing arguments, and consumption into a means of saving the world. This bitterness is entirely absent from the work of the collective Myvillages, no doubt because their approach to the countryside is not mediated only by ecological activism. The relationship to the history of production differs in both cases: for Myvillages, it is first and foremost a conveyor of emancipation. When I asked her about the importance of the search for autonomy in their approach, Antje Schiffers specified that Myvillages did not try and spread the idea that it is necessary to withdraw into a form of autonomy. “What we want is to prove that it is possible, as individuals, to do a lot.” However, just like autonomists, they pay particular attention to fermented preserves, home-made bread and other countryside traditions. But the *ethos* of emancipation allows them to focus on the rejection of fatality and hierarchies – the feminist dimension of their work would also be worth addressing – and on a strongly utopian strand of “commoning”.²⁰

Myvillages, Vorratskammer, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, *Überlebenskunst* festival, Berlin, Germany, 2011
© Sebastian Bolesch, with courtesy of Myvillages

20 The Boomerang Effect

- 21 Is the countryside ultimately fertile ground for the future? It seems to me that this essay leads, above all, to the idea that it is important to overcome the opposition between urban and rural. While all the people I spoke to insisted on the need to renounce a certain idealisation of the countryside, they also denounced a form of contempt that maintains it in a frozen conception. The countryside is not limited, for example, to agricultural production alone. Today, it is of the essence to put an end to the model of rural development we inherited from World War II, which considers the countryside solely as land to be exploited at full capacity in order to “feed the world”, of which the robotisation and the development of hydroponics celebrated by Rem Koolhaas are perhaps the latest instances. In *La Ville agricole*²¹ [The Agricultural City], landscape architect, farmer and architecture teacher Rémi Janin outlines what he calls the “current agricultural revolution”. The city, which has grown into a majority phenomenon, is becoming aware it is dependent on agriculture, and aspires to a more ethical and more protective form of food production. As for the countryside, it is becoming more and more urban: its inhabitants are employed in the city or in “neo-rural” jobs made possible by the development of the Internet. In other words, society understands that agriculture is undeniably urban and that the city is agricultural.²² This “agricultural city” will make it possible to recreate spaces that respect biodiversity and the landscape, in the very heart of cities.

Myvillages, *Wild Treasure*, 2016 © Wapke Feenstra, with courtesy of Myvillages

- 22 And what role will art play in this new world? In 2021, the performance *SPIN, SPIN, SCHEHERAZADE* by the artist Orla Barry will take place during the 39th EVA International – Biennial of Ireland.²³ As I was unable to see it due to the postponement of the event, I gained access to the script. It is a surprising, vivid account of a return to the land by an artist who lived and worked in Brussels during sixteen years, before taking over a Lleyn sheep farm in her native Irish countryside. Far from *clichés* about isolation, frugality and contemplation, the work reveals situations of extreme tension (a sheep drowns in a pond; two threatening farmers try to scare the artist; her favourite ram is taken to the slaughterhouse). These situations sometimes verge on explosive eroticism, such as the breeding ram auction, which resembles the hysteria of contemporary art fairs. The most interesting things that were produced around the issue of art and the countryside, says Adam Sutherland, were thought up by people who had left the countryside and then came back – those who are sometimes colloquially referred to as “boomerangs”. Adam Sutherland, Orla Barry, the members of Myvillages, as well as Rémi Janin and many others are the boomerangs of a new era: individuals who are paving the way for creating a new countryside. An artistic countryside where roles and categories merge. Countryside that is not spatially limited, where one can free oneself from the harmful forces of a dying social model. Countryside where it is possible to be both an artist and a shepherd, as well as practicing, in one’s spare time, the delicate art of fermentation.

NOTES

1. www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2020/04/27/immobilier-le-confinement-renforce-l-appel-du-vert-et-le-desir-de-maison_6037839_3224.html
2. "Oh, how urgent it is to tidy the house in Miasnoy, to have a car, a garden, a vegetable patch, everything one might need... All of these things, put together, offer a solution to the physical lack of work..." [My translation. T.N.]. Tarkovski, Andreï. *Journal : 1970-1986*, Paris: Philippe Rey, 2017, p. 43.
3. See the articles by: Morais, Pedro. "Le futur de l'art est-il dans la ruralité ?", *Le Quotidien de l'Art*, n.1991, 17 July 2020 (www.lequotidiendelart.com/articles/18095-le-futur-de-l-art-est-il-dans-la-ruralite.html); and Jeffreys, Tom. "Is the Countryside the Future of the Art World ?", *Frieze Magazine*, 13 November 2019 (<https://www.frieze.com/article/countryside-future-art-world>)
4. Closed due to lockdown as I write, the exhibition will reopen on 3 October 2020.
5. See Koolhaas, Rem. "Countryside", *032c*, 13 February 2020 (<https://032c.com/countryside-rem-koolhaas>)
6. "The countryside has changed dramatically under the influence of global warming, the market economy, American tech companies, African and European initiatives, Chinese politics, and other forces." Koolhaas, Rem. *Countryside: The Future*, press release.
7. As I was unable to visit the exhibition myself, I am relying on what friends who could, have told me.
8. Excerpt from an e-mail exchange on 28 April 2020 with Xavier Poux, consultant researcher at Applications des Sciences de l'Action [AScA] and associate researcher at the Institut du développement durable et des relations internationales [Iddri].
9. One of the exhibition's sponsors is Infinite Acres, a company which, after having developed several high-tech urban farms, is now trying to make its investments profitable by selling its technology.
10. "Nobody batted an eye." Adam Sutherland during a press conference at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 16 January 2014. He added: "all these projects kind of failed through lots of different ways and functioned in a strange, artistic way." The conference can be seen online: <https://artmuseum.pl/en/doc/video-grizedale-arts>
11. And, on a more personal scale, on his own education, as Adam Sutherland was educated in an alternative school in the countryside.
12. Excerpt of an interview conducted on 8 July 2020.
13. "Central to our ethos is the pursuit of valuable function for art." Source: www.grizedale.org
14. The criteria are accessible here: <https://www.arte-util.org/about/colophon/>
15. "The idea of art that is useful or that is effective, is not new; before the autonomous orientations of Modern Art resonated through the 19th and 20th centuries, art predominately operated as a religious, ritual, practical or educational tool as part of daily life". Source: www.arte-util.org
16. So be it! Grizedale Arts is now thinking of opening a pub: a place open to all where algae-based beer and fermented beverages will be served.
17. Interview with Antje Schiffrers, 29 June 2020
18. The list of products can be found here: www.vorratskammer.myvillages.org/kategorie.php?id=33
19. Since the potatoes had not been harvested because of the rain, the guests had to do without them.

20. “(We promote) a form of learning which is both an act of commoning and a moment in which knowledge becomes relative, collective and applied. *Learn to Act* is about the near future, how to act, and how to support each other.” Kathrin Böhm, Tom James and Doina Petrescu, *Learn to Act. Introducing the Eco Nomadic School*, published by aaa/peprav, 2017.

21. Janin, Rémi. *La Ville agricole*, Fourneaux : Openfield, 2017

22. “In a broad sense, whether you like it or not, the city is also an agricultural project, and we should imagine, propose and anticipate, throughout these deep, ongoing, changes, possible conscious hybridisations between cities and agriculture, in order to develop the means for an agricultural city planning.” (*My translation, T.N*) Janin, Rémi. *La Ville agricole*, op. cit., p. 10.

23. Originally programmed from September 18th to November 15th 2020, it will be divided into three phases running until 2021.

AUTHORS

CAMILLE AZAÏS

Camille Azaïs is an art critic and fiction writer. A former student of the Ecole normale supérieure de Lyon, she regularly contributes to specialised journals (*ZéroDeux*, *Revue Profane*) and writes for institutions (Centre Pompidou, Collection Pinault, Radio France). She has curated a number of exhibitions, notably at the Florence Loewy gallery (*Faire des fleurs* in 2014, *Subterranea* in 2017). In 2017, she founded the magazine *Ingmar*, dedicated to fiction writing in the field of visual arts. Her critical work focuses on the multiple dimensions of the relationship between contemporary art and the living, as well as the role that fiction writing can play in the invention of a new relationship with nature.