

A CONVERSATION WITH NADIA GUERROUI

EDP

Dear Nadia, I'd like to begin by thanking you. It was your idea to share, on our website, the transcripts of conversations with artists whose experiences of the world and formal concerns interest us deeply.

NG

I find that there is an intrinsic engagement—and I weigh my words here—in placing conversation front and center in this way. We're living in a period where speculative dynamics are being called into question. In that sense, what you're doing is quite unique in the "art world". You're always seeking deep exchanges. It was only after suggesting it that I reflected on the significance of this idea of conversation in relation to the ever-shifting context we live in today.

EDP

When you talk about "speculation," do you mean the tendency to appreciate art with "one's ears," to stay on the surface rather than confront, if you will, the thing itself?

NG

Yes, exactly. It creates a sort of false dichotomy between the artist and the art that is *produced*. Certain names become reassuring, like brands, while fears greatly limit our relationship to art. When you first came to the studio, your almost insatiable curiosity and your eagerness to push things further deeply moved me. I felt it was a given for you to trace each artist's intellectual universe. That stance is inspiring for any artist—or any person—driven to cultivate an intellectual framework and question their relationship to the world and others. It took me a while to get to this approach based on coming together and sharing insights. Before, I strongly distinguished the professional from the personal and the human connection. But eventually I thought, "that's not it," because art exists to communicate and transmit. Often, as artists, we're not there to see or witness how the message is received or transmitted. But now, when someone comes to the studio, I even like not knowing who they are or what they've done before. Just like in my work, I try to leave space, free from projections or predictions—to just leave space.

E D P

French art historian Jean Clay said that when considering an artist's practice, one should always set aside biographical elements and focus solely on the work *stricto sensu* and its evolution. What do you think? Do you believe plastic work can be entirely dissociated from the artist's personal journey? Or conversely, do they inevitably intermingle—such that the artist might benefit from embracing a certain authenticity (if that's even the right word—the idea that the universal lies in the particular and singular...). Is your work influenced by your personal history or family background? Do you give them space in your work, or do you prefer that your work speak for itself? Jean Clay also speaks of an "essential motif" unique to each artist, which one must identify... As reductive as it may seem, is there a thread, a red line, running through your work that allows you to set aside biographical elements and still bring the work into the world?

N G

I'll answer a little off-track... After an exhibition is mounted, I often continue the work. In the run-up to the exhibition, I can be entirely in my bubble—but afterwards, I observe closely how the work is received. The multiplicity of responses informs what I do next. I'm not seeking anecdotes or details, but I'm rather reflecting on the stance I want to adopt. It's important to position oneself in relation to the world. When giving shape to exhibitions, I also like knowing who I'm engaging with and what their sensitivities are, to find common ground. I don't believe there is an absolute rule. Maybe I just differentiate between biographical elements I choose not to foreground, and simply being with the world and my work.

E D P

But that is something you aim to create on the spot, because, as you said, you are not going to conduct prior research to figure out what connections you might weave, or how the relationship will be established. It takes shape at the moment of sharing the work, when you can try to be particularly attentive to its reception...

N G

Yes, being attentive, asking questions... and deepening to inch toward understanding. It's not necessarily about revealing everything about yourself, but sensing a sensitivity and what really matters.

E D P

One could consider it a social—or even political—dimension to your work...

N G

Yes. When I said earlier that having a conversation filled with genuine curiosity—like ours today—is an intrinsic engagement, it's also because I'm deeply convinced that there are modes of resistance that may seem trivial yet are incredibly important. It presupposes working on oneself to shed biases we might have about others. It's also, for me, a way of caring for my creativity.

E D P

Yes—being nuanced perhaps too... You told me at our last lunch that your favourite philosopher was Vladimir Jankélévitch. Could you tell me what drew you to his work? Or why him in particular? Although it doesn't surprise me at all...

N G

It may sound odd to say, but it was his voice that captivated me from the start. I began by listening to his recordings, which were unlike my preconceived notion of philosophy as a discipline removed from life. I particularly loved how his archives show the love he feels for his students and his desire to pass knowledge on. His words are embodied in his voice, and his thinking is marked by a certain fearlessness—he doesn't chase control or let anxiety guide him. He accepts that some things elude us. It's paradoxical, but fascinating, how he inhabits both the vague and the undefined, while remaining incredibly precise. Through his words, you sense his lived experience and his personhood, even without biographical detail—which aligns completely with what we were saying earlier. To grasp the thoughts of certain philosophers, one needs to have read a very specific intellectual register, often deemed foundational. But with Jankélévitch, his intellectual power—which is quite outstanding—is not exclusive.

E D P

Yes, he's not dogmatic.

N G

Exactly—and he's also very fluid. In that, I think his writing has aged beautifully.

E D P

Perhaps, as with an artist, reading Jankélévitch feels like he points to something felt in the flesh, even if we struggle to express it in words. His "je ne sais quoi," far from being reductive, opens the field of possible experience.

N G

Yes—I see in him the opposite of solipsism, with this idea of being part of something larger, not being the centre. It's rare to find that spiritual touch in philosophy without it being—as you said—dogmatic.

E D P

Which brings me to another question I wanted to ask: regarding Thierry Davila's intervention on the "infrathin" in Duchamp's work, at the collection in Brussels, you asked if Duchamp was a solitary figure. What, for you, is the significance of solitude? Do you see yourself as solitary—and to what extent is that a strength or something to be overcome?

N G

I used to think in terms of a dichotomy: introverts on one side, extroverts on the other. Now I'm beginning to understand that one can be a bit of both.

E D P

If I'm not mistaken, an introvert draws energy from solitude, and the extrovert from social contact. I've heard that few are purely introverted, more are extroverted, and many fall somewhere in between. Where do you position yourself?

N G

I don't envision myself somewhere in a grey zone, but rather in both places simultaneously. Without moments to think, moments just with myself, I couldn't have the energy to engage with others. About a month ago, I led a writing workshop at Kingston University in London. It was a big leap—I felt like I was throwing myself into the void, because it depended not just on me, but on group dynamics. It was essential for me to leave the space completely open, so everyone felt free to express themselves. Although solitude can be seen as disconnection, it's also what enables me to be in the world. Without that preparatory reflection time, being open to everything said that day—with fifteen people around the table—would have been much harder.

E D P

I'm not sure "solitude" is the right concept to describe an active observation of oneself and the world, so one can then be available to guide others, to share...

N G

I also connect solitude deeply to devotion and responsibility. Sometimes my collaborators only realise, at the end of mounting an exhibition, the degree of exacting detail involved—things that weren't obvious until seen. There's a duty that

falls to artists. We must ask ourselves: "What are we giving? What are we giving through our work?" Culture is integral to human history, carrying immense power. Fully dedicating oneself to it and becoming aware of that responsibility can in itself generate solitude.

E D P

So solitude is linked to a form of intellectual integrity. But does that posture of total honesty—which is such a beautiful definition of an artist's role—fit alongside immediacy, your immediate sensibility, that primal sense? Is that demand sustainable when you're simply in sync with the world?

N G

I've always envied artists who work with immediacy and authenticity, who have that spark or flame. In my practice, I've always felt the opposite: a need for self-reflection. I need to continually question and balance everything. Still, I've had a few rare moments of absolute clarity—things that simply imposed themselves on me, where it just was, without explanation.

E D P

If I recall correctly, you said your latest work *Second Sight* came to you. The gesture emerged spontaneously, like a flash...

N G

Yes, that piece revolves around a spontaneous gesture—the gesture I make each morning, wiping steam from the bathroom mirror. I love that it's a gesture we've all made at one time or another. It carries a kind of vividness, almost infused with primal energy. Again, it's not about control, but being open to that energy within us and expressing it, with as much sincerity as possible.

E D P

Does a gesture like that—once it comes to you—teach you something? Upon receiving it, is it complete, or does it reveal itself over time? Is it a revelation you embrace as such, or do months later return to it with questions?

N G

I circled around that gesture for a long time without fully grasping it. I was searching for something both humble and evocative of that inability to express ourselves in words. With its vivacity, the gesture moves beyond language and contains something in which anyone can see themselves. That sense of collective consciousness matters deeply to me. It drives many of my decisions, because I don't feel the need to express my individuality. Of course, I recognise that I have a visual field that is becoming more and more defined—but to me, it is defined by

the openness and room left for the viewer. I cherish these things that may seem trivial, yet are accessible to anyone who chooses to look.

E D P

That freedom you give the viewer—to feel or not, to linger or pass by—it's fascinating. Which brings me naturally to ask about the poem accompanying the work. Beside the gesture, grounded in materiality, there are also words. Do the two form a whole? Do you leave that to the viewer's appreciation?

N G

It's really the notion of the ineffable that connects these pieces and prompted me to present them together. They all contain something definable only by contour, something we can't express. Writing the poems is almost always, for me, an impulsive burst of inspiration, even though I carry them within me long before. For these in particular, I drew on my relationship to night, revisiting memories and intense moments I've lived. A process of erasure also connects the vivid gesture we mentioned and the poems—I aim to move away from expressing my individual identity and toward something in which anyone can recognise themselves. The feeling of contingency in the face of night, for instance—that connects us sensorially and beyond. Regardless, I hope that with my poems, even though I use words, there remains space for readers to appropriate and live through them.

E D P

That's captivating. You are also drawn to natural elements like light or water (your current project!). Are you drawn to their materiality—or should I say their immateriality? Are they, for you, revelatory? Is it the temporal dimension that interests you? Do they carry symbolic weight, or are they treated as themselves? Have they always fascinated you?

N G

Yes, something always draws me to these two elements. I collected impressions and sensations ceaselessly before realising what fascinates me is their great versatility and what they reveal about our relation to time. When I was younger, I worked with highly controlled light settings, focusing on the effects light created. Today, it seems more relevant to let light permeate spaces. In my "Untitled (Card Draw on Wood)" series, the moments when all the rainbow colours appear are spectacular—but I love every moment, even the less dramatic ones, because I'm captivated by permeability, by the fact that it can live. It's that relationship to time and life...

E D P

Yes, again, we are free to pay attention to these minute—yet magical—phenomena or not. They are full of nuance, almost imperceptible at times. Would you side more with Heraclitus, who says everything is in perpetual change, or with Parmenides, who claims nothing changes and the world is immutable? A drop of

water can turn to ice or evaporate—two states of the same element... Or is the world in constant flux, meaning you and I are never exactly the same person from one moment to the next... Time slips away inexorably, and maybe we must learn to embrace that too...

N G

I'd say, again, a bit of both (laughs). I love paradox and contradiction (laughs). My perception depends on the time scale: a day, a season, a civilisation, a geological era, or the formation of the universe. In a way, the more distant the perspective, the more everything appears changeless; the closer we are to lived time, the more everything seems in perpetual change. It all depends on standpoint. I love the idea that just a minute ago—even biologically—we were not the same beings. In seven years, all the cells in our body will have changed. And yet, we are made of star dust.

E D P

That's vertiginous. Earlier, you hinted at this between the lines, but are you particularly interested in certain domains of knowledge and their advances? Natural sciences, social sciences, technology...? You told me you have a curious, thorough temperament and fear being swept away by a subject at the expense of your own creative thread...

N G

I think I'm always trying to find balance between that intellectual nourishment and producing work to show. But it's still unresolved for me. I alternate between periods of deep reflection, where I get totally lost in thought, and periods of intense production where even my sense of my body's movement feels different. I've never found a balance.

E D P

I find it liberating to accept that perfect balance—between pursuing one's mission and being open to external elements—is a perpetual quest... Especially hard to achieve in today's information-saturated world where it's easy to get lost...

N G

In the intellectual realm, distance allows us to glimpse the meaning of certain things. As you said earlier: it's vertiginous. Sometimes, you need not to think too much about the scope of what you're doing, so you can do it with ease and inspiration...

E D P

Perhaps everything you consume continues to stir in your unconscious...

N G

All my readings on attention economy and our cognitive biases, for example, have never translated literally into my work. I never wanted to illustrate them, but they convinced me to deepen my sensitive research and adopt a radical stance toward perception. The urgency and relevance of these issues drive me to create works I might not have done if I were, say, forty years older.

E D P

And that perhaps carries the weight of an engagement too...

N G

For the 2021 Kunstenfestival Watou (curated by Chantal Pattyn and Bénédicte Goessaert), I produced *in-situ* interventions that at times became imperceptible. You really had to work to seek them out in different locations (a church, a former château, the festival house). The team invested fully in an incredible preparation for mediation and press coverage. Their support was as indispensable as exceptional, but visitors still had to complete the work themselves. For some, it caused a resonance in their daily lives, where they began to see light differently—while others completely rejected that radicality. Those two reactions were quite extreme, with little in between. For me, pushing the boundaries that far, in today's world, is essential.

E D P

You often speak of "lightness." Why is it important? Do you think it has a political dimension, that it ought to be defended? If so, what does it oppose? Individually, your work is very serious, very considered... Why strive for lightness?

N G

My answer may again seem slightly off... But one of the most elegant things, in my eyes, is when someone cooks an incredibly sophisticated dish and makes you forget all the effort behind it. Lightness to me is not synonymous with superficiality, because unfortunately we can address deeply serious subjects while skating on the surface. Without diminishing the relevance of urgent questions we face as individuals and society, it's also important to know what we live for—plain and simple. "How to resist?" is a question that's weighed heavily on me. Watching news or witnessing events, I just want to let out a loud scream... but in my work, I question what I want to bring into being in the world. In the end, making space for a certain lightness and gentleness can also be a form of resistance, because culture has that immense quantum power. If we're only in revolt or screams, we can't create alternatives. I think both are necessary—and I wouldn't oppose them, because artists, as society's conscience, can act on multiple levels. We can also commit to precision, to offering reasons to live and to be. Certain exhibitions have moved me profoundly, forming a before-and-after in my life. I don't claim to bring that with my work—but at least something that is both spiritual and

imbued with lightness, to emphasise how we're all alike in what we need, and to bring an alternative into existence.

E D P

I understand you perfectly. Do you feel like addressing that bluntness, that lack of nuance you've detected in the contemporary art world? A sense of enclosure, a kind of dogmatism, that has disappointed or even outraged you...

N G

What outrages me these past few years is seeing individuals reduced by essentialising certain identities. It reveals a desire to understand everything, absorb everything, and forget everything immediately. I dream of more nuance and everyone being able to define themselves in broad registers. Every person, every artist, deserves complexity. For example, when the main connection between several artists in the same exhibition is as tenuous as how they are perceived based on attributes they have not chosen—that's reduction, essentialism. I don't want to see any artist through that lens, but through what they carry within and give. Personally, I also like to subvert expectations—not being where I'm expected—but simply owning space as I wish.

E D P

Can you tell me a little about the work you'll be showing at Cloud Seven in Brussels?

N G

It's actually quite amusing. After browsing Frédéric de Goldschmidt's collection database, Ariane Sutthavong (the guest curator based in Bangkok) initially showed interest in another of my pieces—but I told her it had already been shown there. As her exhibition proposal evolved, she eventually selected *Friction in Plain Sight IV*, which had already been included in the inaugural 2021 exhibition and catalogue curated by Gregory Lang. That series itself originated from an on-site research at KM21 museum in The Hague, which triggered an in-situ installation in early 2020. For this piece—around a more autonomous textile moiré, one that lets itself be traversed—I thought it would be fascinating to present it again in the same venue, but in a different space. I was very excited to explore how reconfiguring the piece could reveal new potential. The inaugural exhibition—partly due to Covid—ran for quite a while and was very visible, so we could play on the memory of those who'd seen it. More importantly, it allowed us to emphasise how the environment can fundamentally transform the pieces. For instance, it was placed against a window last time—and this time, I'll play with shadows. The circulation is different, the air is... And I'll also be showing pieces I've just completed, which reactivate a series I started ten years ago: vacuum-preserved dried flowers. I gathered them in the Ligurian mountains and have carefully preserved them for years. They're modest, non-spectacular wildflowers, fitting the curator's concept of fragility and delicacy. These flowers will appear intact even in

200 years, because they're vacuum-sealed. But any effort to freeze time cannot fully succeed—we can only slow time's work.

E D P

Thank you, Nadia!

N G

Thank you too!