

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: CÉLINE CONDORELLI

Céline Condorelli

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***Katie Guggenheim:** I'd like to start by asking you to introduce the first work people see when they enter the gallery – the huge gold curtain?*

Céline Condorelli: The curtain is an entrance piece. I have a specific interest in curtains. They are not quite objects and are completely shapeless except when they are hung. A curtain doesn't exist without its hanging mechanism, without its supporting structure.

***KG:** The material you've chosen is extremely light, loosely woven plastic.*

CC: Yes, it's so light there's almost nothing there. It arrived in an envelope. It is interesting how important the presence of something can be in relationship to how insignificant it might seem. Curtains are associated with interior design, so not quite architecture, nor quite art.

***KG:** They are very gendered objects.*

CC: Extremely – both in their making and in the history of soft furnishings in general. Curtains are completely out of fashion, and yet they are such interesting things because they characterise the threshold between inside and outside, between day and night, as well as private and public. The curtain at Chisenhale adds a further threshold. You enter the gallery and find yourself in what seems to be an interior, but then you walk all the way around it and another interior is revealed, with a window to another outside. Opening the window has created another threshold and it introduces other types of domesticities as you can see the houses at the back and you realise there is this kind of back garden situation.

***KG:** Another quality of the curtain here is its theatricality. There is something dramatic about the entrance to the gallery anyway – the slope down and the way the space is revealed suddenly – but you've removed the doors and the new curtain performs that function, but it's much more playful.*

CC: The company I worked with to make the curtain – Gerriets – specialises in theatre systems and scenery. The metallic stuff is used for slit drape shimmer curtains – like a Vegas Strip type of curtain – that allow dramatic appearances on stage. But it's actually made of space blanket, which was originally invented for the Apollo mission, to allow the spaceship to come

home, by insulating the engine and preventing it from cooling down too much – they thought that you wouldn't be able to start it up again, so it wasn't about the success of the mission, it was about saving their lives. It's a fabric that insulates light as well, but mostly temperature, and yet it's the almost nothing, measured in micrometres. Here it is weaved together with transparent polyester.

KG: *You've previously made a curtain just using the gold fabric – Structure for Communicating with Wind (2012).*

CC: Which sounds like wind going through the leaves of a tree when air blows through it. It's quite fascinating; and the way it moves is very sci-fi. This curtain moves more like a jellyfish. The plastic weave makes it much softer and gives it an animal-like quality. I was particularly interested in the way it is half transparent and what this does with light.

KG: *When you've talked about your curtain pieces before you've mentioned Lily Reich and the Silk and Velvet Café.*

CC: Yes, Reich has been an important reference for me for many years now. She opened *Silk and Velvet Café* in 1927, I think, in Berlin at the Women's Fashion Exhibition.

KG: *A textiles trade fair?*

CC: Yes. At the time, Reich was a much more established designer than her then partner, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. She designed this entire café using enormous lengths of fabric stretched over these bent tubular steel poles. We only have a few black and white photographs of it, but apparently it was lemon yellow, red and purple silk and black velvet. It must have been wonderful, and, a completely soft architecture. Really a space made out of nothing – fabric – furnished with chairs made by Mies van der Rohe.

KG: *We associate steel structures with Modernist architects such as Mies van der Rohe, and tubular steel is very obviously used in those chairs, but Lily Reich was using tubular steel as a support for the curtains.*

CC: In many ways she was much more radical than he was. She appropriated this domestic world of textiles and made a construction out of it. But for different reasons she almost completely disappeared from the history of 20th century design.

This exhibition, as a whole, tries to answer some questions that have been given to me by other people. The curtain is one of these attempts at, not

necessarily answering, but addressing an issue that filmmaker Jean-Marie Straub mentioned when I interviewed him a few years ago, before I went to Egypt, to do a project in relationship to his film *Too Early, Too Late* (1982). I was asking him about how to find appropriate positions – and the relationship between political positions and the position of the camera... literally where to look from. He told me about a sentence that haunts him, a quote from D. W. Griffith – a filmmaker most famous for *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) – who said that ‘what the modern movie lacks is the beauty of moving wind in the trees’. Of course I am not a filmmaker, but that image of wind blowing through the trees is so much about, not cinema, but the cinematic moment. In some ways, or in many ways, some of my curtains, including this one, try to answer that.

KG: *So the curtain has a cinematic quality, perhaps more than a theatrical one?*

CC: As a presence it’s cinematic. I think a lot of the works in the exhibition are more related to the cinematic, or the theatrical, or even TV, than they are to conventional art objects. They have this prop-like quality. They have double or treble lives... I try to really work with their functionality rather than their form.

KG: *It seems to me that they also all have stories attached to them – all of your research and the references and anecdotes that surround the works – in the way that props are part of stories. But we should mention the wind and where it’s coming from...*

CC: So the wind is totally artificial. No... it’s infrastructural. The exhibition can be navigated by following the flow of air that comes from the street, goes through an extraction fan that pumps it into the gallery, and then through the office door and out of the open window. It’s crossing the entire space and beyond it. The piece is called *Alterations Existing Conditions* and it is an adaption, a customisation of the existing architecture, putting in an extraction fan, removing a door, uncovering the window, propping open the office door with a wedge...

KG: *A doorstop?*

CC: It’s not actually a doorstop, but a wooden wedge. It comes from the roof of Spitalfields market, before they did it up into what it is now. There were hundreds and hundreds of them that basically were propping up the entire roof. It was completely safe but a very handmade architecture. My friend Simon Popper brought me one of the wedges and it has been in my house ever since. I liked this idea of a massive bit of city infrastructure held together by this tiny

little thing... so that's propping open the office door, and it's why this piece is dedicated to Simon.

KG: *Does he know? Will he be surprised to see the wedge again?*

CC: I don't think he has any idea that it's going to appear. He knows that there is a piece dedicated to him because I told him last night.

KG: *How do people feel about having these works dedicated to them?*

CC: I don't know. I haven't told everybody. For instance I haven't told Johan Hartle because I thought that it would be nicer as a surprise when he goes to see the show at the Van Abbemuseum. Avery Gordon laughed, and really enjoyed the thought. These pieces are not presents, nor are they representations: dedicating something to someone has to do with acknowledging their relationship to you – their importance in your life – through both gratitude and promise. The curtain piece – *The Bottom Line* – is dedicated to Kathrin Böhm; somebody that I have been talking to about curtains and everything else for a long time.

The title, *Alterations to Existing Conditions*, comes from an exhibition made by Christopher D'Arcangelo and Peter Nadin in New York in the late '70s. I was first told about it by Gavin Wade and it became an important reference in our work together. It was a cumulative exhibition over one year, which started with the building up of the gallery itself. The credits for the show – naming everybody who worked on it – also comes from that. It's a way to structure an understanding of labour.

KG: *This relates to one of the ideas underlying the whole exhibition – the relationship between work and friendship. In your work for the online How to work together 'Think Tank' and in the forthcoming book, The Company She Keeps, you discuss these ideas with sociologist Avery Gordon and philosopher Johan Hartle. How did these conversations start?*

CC: I met Johan on a flight to Oslo. We started chatting and it turned out he was a philosopher working on ethics. I was just starting to think about friendship in this way and couldn't believe that no women philosophers had ever written about friendship. I asked him, and he was puzzled. We began writing to each other and started a quite intense dialogue over this. Our conversation forms the first chapter in the book. In the exhibition, the double 'tête-à-tête' furniture piece, titled *The Weird Charismatic Power That Capitalism Has For Teenagers*, is dedicated to him. This work is really a narrative device in several ways; it's a structure made for multiplying talking.

KG: *Here it also functions as exhibition seating, but were 'tête-à-tête' seats traditionally used in public places?*

CC: They come out of the vocabulary of 18th century furniture invented for social relationships. They are beautiful things but very dated, and tacky in some ways. I've tried to use furniture as a typology to allow some domestication of Chisenhale, really as an attitude towards the space. So thinking of giving as much space as I possibly can to the body in general. There is a lot of room to sit and rest and read and contemplate or climb... furniture is always a kind of preposition – with, in, on, by, of – the apparently neutral support to our volition, and yet it structures touch or approach.

KG: *The piece À Bras Le Corps – with Philodendron, is adapted from another historical archetype of furniture design – the ottoman.*

CC: Ottomans were made for public spaces in the 18th century, for museums and parks. They were enormous islands of furniture placed in the centre of rooms, and often heated. The plants – the Philodendrons – add another dimension to the work, they are alive and they require light and feeding and care.

KG: *Why this plant in particular?*

CC: 'Philo' is the friend, as in philosophy, which is the friend of knowledge. Philodendron is the friend of the trees. It's one of the only climbing plants that doesn't kill the thing that it's climbing on, and actually protects it. The Philodendrons are on a steel structure partly covered in lino that they are climbing over. We'll see during the exhibition how much they overgrow it. They are something that is actually alive in the show. I'm hoping that they totally invade it and cover it up. The piece is dedicated to Amalia Pica, who is a specialist in interspecies communication – she's an artist who makes things speak – and also a great friend.

KG: *There are lights that give out artificial daylight built into the piece. Will these be left on all the time?*

CC: It depends on how the plants are doing, but they should have a supportive environment for them to grow. Obviously the uncovering of the window lets in natural light, but it's not that much.

KG: *I'm just imagining what the gallery is going to look at night when no one is there, with the plants lit up and then the 'tête-à-tête', which will glow in the dark.*

CC: I'd love to photograph that. The work has a non-human life. The Philodendrons will see it glowing at night.

KG: *You've described your interventions in the gallery as attempts to make the space 'domestic' – introducing fresh air, light and seating.*

CC: Early museums and galleries were really modelled after domestic galleries but then gradually through the 20th century all comfort, everything that relates to the body, is removed from the museum, until we have something that we recognise as the white cube. This model then starts to influence domestic spaces, so now people have interiors that look like galleries, it's gone full circle. Removing comfort corresponds to taking the body – or bodies – out and leaving a disembodied eye in its place: somehow vision is considered the only sense that should be present in the museum. You're not supposed to have any other kind of physicality.

Alternations to Existing Conditions is about not taking exhibition spaces, in how they appear today, for granted, as if they were always like this. The only point of historicising this is to put it into question, when you identify the beginning of something it means that you can alter it.

KG: *Władysław Strzemiński's museum furniture also appears in this exhibition.*

CC: Yes it is under *Spatial Composition II* and appears from below in the edition *Neoplastic*, which is also a conversation around this bench, but here with James Langdon – a graphic designer who I've had a long working relationship with. It's also present in the bau bau wallpaper, or billboard. I found this display device in a photograph of his *Neoplastic Room* in Museum Sztuki, Lodz, Poland from 1948. As far as I understand, Museum Sztuki was the first artist-founded museum. The entire collection and the building were secured by a bunch of artists who really wanted to invent an institution for the art of the future and Strzemiński was instrumental in that. He created an environment as an artwork for other artworks, an exhibition room.

KG: *Was the display conceived for specific artworks? Or was it adaptable?*

CC: It was for artworks by Katarzyna Kobro, his previous partner. The whole room is a gesture of love, for a love that is already gone, as she's left him by then. I thought from the few photographs of it (only one of the original construction) that it was a bench, hence it being the model for a bench in this show. When I went to Museum Sztuki in the autumn of last year, I found it in the archive – it's not a bench at all, it's a plinth. My version, *Spatial Composition II*, is covered in concrete fabric – covered like you would cover furniture before going on holidays.

KG: *Could we talk more about the bau bau wallpaper? You've described this first layer, made in collaboration with Ralf Pflugfelder, as a map of your practice, is that right?*

CC: Yes, as a landscape of my practice. 'Bau' means 'building' in German, and also 'in construction' so it refers to a building site. 'Bau bau' is Italian for 'woof woof'. It's also the name of the café of the museum in Leipzig where the first version of this work is installed. The image comes from a three-dimensional model made by my friend Ralf Pflugfelder, who trained as an architect. It's based on a score that I gave him about a series of narrative objects that question the legal status of objects themselves. They are called *Deodands*; objects, which, according to an English common law, active up until 1846, were implicated in legal arguments. This terribly upsets the dichotomy between what is intentional and unintentional, as related to the animate or inanimate, and transforms any notions we may have on the status of objects as being fixed or reliable. It also describes how we rely on a set of manners and provisions for dealing with beings, things and objects in recognisable ways.

KG: *This is interesting in relation to notions of value and systems of exchange. Capitalism is based on us entertaining the belief that objects have meaning and value even when it isn't inscribed in the material itself.*

CC: It's beyond material fabrication.

KG: *I'm looking forward to seeing how the exhibition will be animated through the programme of events, including conversations with Avery Gordon (marking the launch of the book, *The Company She Keeps*) and David Bussel. There will also be a performance in the gallery by musician John Tilbury. How will the events make use of the objects in the exhibition?*

CC: Well, *Spatial Composition II* is dedicated to John Tilbury and was developed as a piano bench and instrument for him to use for the performance – he will play the exhibition somehow. John will be interpreting the first lines of Beckett's *Stirring Stills* and this text also provides a kind of score for *The Double And The Half* – a work that is also a kind of instrument for Avery Gordon. I don't know how she wants to use it but it's definitely made in relationship to her life. She's somebody who speaks and writes so it's a place to speak from and a place to write on, in a very straightforward way.

KG: *If you climb up, the view at out of the window is also something quite special.*

CC: The view out of the window is a way of knowing where you are. Entering the exhibition space at Chisenhale is usually like going out of time as well as out of place, like many gallery spaces. I'm trying to integrate and re-embed it into life – both in the sense of the lives of these people who are involved in the show, and the life of the exhibition's context. Opening the door to the office is part of the same gesture, it opens up connections to the context.

KG: *The Double And The Half is a kind of assemblage of different bits of furniture – steps, ladders and a desk.*

CC: It is entirely made out of furniture that acts as extensions to the human body – different kinds of ladders and legs, prosthetic devices – but they all rest on each other to stand up. Each piece in this exhibition is a set of relationships, between me and other people, but also physical and infrastructural. They all depend and rely on something – electricity, the wall, the floor... In this piece all of the elements work together to make a structure, and none of them stand by themselves.

KG: *Do you relate this your interest in structure and infrastructure to your previous practice as an architect?*

CC: I spend a lot of time trying to be specific about what it is that things do, to create a very precise aesthetic experience, by which I mean in relationship to how things are used, navigated, inhabit, not how they look.

KG: *Finally, I also wanted to ask you about I am a Curator, which was an exhibition you took part in at Chisenhale in 2003. It was particularly important because you produced the first iteration of your ongoing Support Structure project with Gavin Wade for the show.*

CC: Gavin and I met, probably not by chance, through Kathrin Böhm. Per Huttner invited Gavin to design functional furniture for his exhibition, and Gavin and I proposed an exhibition system as a support structure. It was the first time we did something together, and the show cemented our working relationship, which lasts to this day. This became the first phase of our *Support Structure* project, 'in support of art'; as a piece in a show that creates the conditions for the show itself, while also being an art object. Somehow this opened up a whole set of questions that I am still trying to answer. It was, for me, the recognition of a territory, in terms of a site for a practice yet to come. Conditions and relationships, framing devices, display devices... all of that in some ways already appeared in that first support structure. It's quite nice, and an interesting coming of age, to be invited back to do a solo show here eleven years later.

*Céline Condorelli interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events
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