

Artist profile: Céline Condorelli

By Chris Wiley



Céline Condorelli & Gavin Wade, *Support Structure* (Front View): ‘in support of Art: I Am A Curator’, 2003, Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery, London photo: Per Hüttner

At first, Céline Condorelli’s immensely variegated, interdisciplinary practice as an artist, architect, and theorist can seem daunting to fully grasp. Unlike many contemporary practitioners, who seem to make a virtue out of creating bodies of work that can be summed up in easily digestible sound bites for the benefit of collectors or the writers of museum wall texts, Condorelli dodges and weaves away from classification, often showing up where you would least expect her. One could find her, for instance, facilitating the creation of an ambient soundtrack for Chinese shopping malls in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou (*Music for Shopping Malls*, 2007), heating a gallery in Cambridge shire, UK with a custom-installed wood stove fueled with fallen branches gathered according to one of the rights stipulated for the collective use of British Common land (*Life Always Escapes*, 2009), or in New York erecting a cardboard replica of the study of Saint Jerome that doubled as a donation point for a public art library in Istanbul (*Revision—Part I*, 2009). But as modally diverse and geographically peripatetic as her practice can be, close examination reveals that Condorelli’s work is unified at its root by an approach that mixes the concerns of structuralism, on the one hand, with what curator Nicolas Bourriaud has coined ‘relational aesthetics’, on the other. It is, in other words, a practice built on a solid methodological bedrock, upon which individual projects shift like sand, never manifesting themselves in

the same manner twice. Nowhere is this methodological approach more apparent than in the sprawling, multi-part project *Support Structure* (2003-2009), which Condorelli executed in collaboration with artist/curator Gavin Wade. Billed as an “architectural interface” that “aims to create a space which is continually reinvented by its users in relation to its context,” the project was comprised of a series of case studies in the practice of “support,” as it could be applied to a wide-ranging litany of specific contexts: art, corporations, community, politics, education, urban renewal, shopping, institutions, and the public. In each of these case studies, Condorelli and Wade set about creating a structure designed to facilitate interaction both with the context at hand, and between the people who occupied these contexts. As the title of their project implies, these structures were designed as forms of ‘support’, a term that here takes on a multivalent meaning. On a formal or practical level, these forms of support tend to hew to the definition of the word that deals with physical structures that either prop up, or serve as a ground for other activities and forms—a scaffolding or similar framework is a good example of the former type of structure, while a sculptural plinth or a theatrical stage could serve to illustrate the latter. On a more conceptual or metaphoric level, the forms of support that Condorelli and Wade produced in relation to each context are similar to those that exist (ideally)

between friends or lovers—encouragement, assistance, and enhancement, hopefully of the mutually beneficial kind. Some examples might be helpful here, before a further examination of the methodology of the Support Structure project is undertaken. For the project's first case study—phase 1 – in support of Art—Condorelli and Wade devised a modular storage system that was designed to help facilitate the goals of Per Hüttner's project "I Am A Curator" at the Chisenhale Gallery in London. The show, as Hüttner conceived it, was one that took a frenetic and democratic approach to curation, allowing members of the public to sign up to curate one of a series of thirty day-long exhibitions, using a preselected cache of artworks that were stored in Condorelli and Wade's storage system and then exhibited with it. As might be expected, this first iteration of the Support Structure project was the most literal: it provided a structure (the storage system) that acted as a means of support (as both a platform for the production of the rotating exhibitions, and as method to aid in the realization of Hüttner's exhibition strategy). Later phases of Support Structure, however, would prove to be both more ambitious and ambiguous, but they nevertheless maintained the same baseline set of concerns. For example, phase 3 – in support of Community (2003) saw Condorelli and Wade constructing a small mobile shelving unit designed to serve as a library for the Portsmouth Multicultural Group, an organization founded to promote inter-cultural awareness in the community of Portsmouth, England. The library, which was stocked with books suggested or donated by members of the public, was an attempt to offer support to the Group by helping them expand their previous working definition of multiculturalism. Interestingly, the creation of this open-ended library structure ultimately resulted in a somewhat more complex notion of what the act of support could mean: issues raised by the library led to internal upheaval within the organization, which resulted in the resignation of two of its members. Further phases of Support Structure saw Wade and Condorelli creating temporary posters and protest-style placards displaying local resident's suggestions for urban renewal in the Eastside district of Birmingham (phase 6 - in support of Urban Renewal, 2007), an engagement which led to the later creation

of a permanent public gallery space dubbed Eastside Projects (phase 9 – in support of Public, 2008), as well as the creation of a voluminous sourcebook composed of texts and documents that form a heretofore absent theory of support itself, which was authored/edited by Condorelli (Support Structures, Sternberg Press, 2009). The Support Structure project's connections with structuralism should now be somewhat clear: each phase of the project saw Condorelli and Wade engaging with the underlying structure of the context at hand, be it modes of exhibition making and display in phase 1 and phase 9, the preconceived notion of multiculturalism in phase 3, or the voices of a blighted urban community in phase 6. Similarly, the project's connection to Bourriaud's relational aesthetics should also be readily apparent: Condorelli and Wade's interventions in each given context are fundamentally concerned with the facilitation of interaction (with the context itself and/or with others in that context) rather than the making of an autonomous artistic statement. What is interesting, and perhaps not as apparent, is the way in which these two methodological strands work in tandem to create a hybrid approach. Rather than simply creating an environment, or structure, within which the social can be enacted, as is commonplace in relational aesthetic practice—Rirkrit Tiravanija's staging of free communal meals in museum and gallery spaces is perhaps the most prototypical example of this—Condorelli and Wade have tailored their interventions to encourage social engagement with sets of specific structures that otherwise remain invisible, overlooked, or discounted, but which are in fact integral facets of their given context. As a result, what is created is a more focused relational practice that makes a virtue not only of the creation of a social environment at the expense of the autonomy of the art object, but also strives to serve as a ground, or support, for the investigation and occasional interrogation of that which we normally take for granted. While the Support Structure project is perhaps the most salient example of the use of this hybrid methodology in Condorelli's practice, as it occupies a lion's share of her artistic and theoretical output to date, it is also a characteristic of much of her other work. This is clear in the case of the previously mentioned works *Revision—Part I* and *Life Always Escapes*—the former providing



Il n'y a plus rien (There is nothing left), 2010, Installation view, Manifesta 8, Murcia, Spain, curated by ACAF, commissioned and produced by Manifesta 8 and ACAF, Photo : © Ilya Rabinovich

a platform that both allows users to interact with a far flung public art library, and displays, as a result, what these users deemed necessary or important for this library to value and possess, and the later providing structures (the aforementioned stove, as well as a veteran containing a collection of early 20th century postcards of British Common land, depicted in the style of 19th century picturesque landscape painting) that encouraged interaction with local Common land though the gathering of fallen wood and provoked reflection on the underlying law that structures this land's use, and, by proxy, the laws that govern more prevalent forms of private land. Other works, such as *Alterity Display* (2004), a flexible display structure erected in a London gallery that was used as a framing device for the work of a rotating roster of other artists who would utilize or react against the structure during the run of the exhibition, and *Revision—Part II* (2010), a flat-packable architectural platform designed to be the site of a temporary art school, also clearly share a similar structuralism/relational methodology.

Of course, in keeping with the general flexibility and diversity of her practice, it should come as no surprise

that just as it seems one has constructed a rubric under which Condorelli's works can be grouped, she shifts in another direction, evading our grasp. Her current project, "Il n'y a plus rien" ("There is nothing left") (2010-present), will be a tripartite meditation on the history of 20th century Egypt, which, if the first and only realized "movement" of the project is any indication, will mark a significant aesthetic and thematic shift in her practice. This first movement, which was devised in the Egyptian city of Alexandria and first realized as part of Manifesta 8 (Murcia, Spain), takes the form of an installation work in which two series of slides—one that shows a woman strolling on a Alexandria beach before she sets off on a journey away from Egypt aboard a large steam ship, the other that tracks the arc of cotton production from the fields of Egypt to the now-defunct cotton mills in Lancashire, England—are projected onto two disparate surfaces. The first is a large Egyptian cotton sheet that hangs languidly from the ceiling and acts as the projection surface for the images of the departing woman, while the second, on which the images of cotton production are projected, is a smaller sheet of semi-opaque reflective Mylar that hangs



“Il n’y a plus rien” (**There is nothing left**), 2010, Installation view, Manifesta 8, Murcia, Spain, curated by ACAF, commissioned and produced by Manifesta 8 and ACAF, Photo: Céline Condorelli

loosely in a frame, the latter affixed perpendicularly to the fabric sheet, on the wall behind it. Taken together, these two sets of images, which are refracted, doubled, and rendered ghost-like by their atypical supports, tell an elliptical, elegiac story of the British colonial project, which was deeply entwined with the highly lucrative cotton trade, and the subsequent forced exodus of families associated with British cotton interests that occurred in the wake of Nasser’s nationalization of the cotton industry in 1956. Primarily, this story is one about the remembrance and experience of place, about how one’s experience of a location is always necessarily bound up with one’s fragile, shifting personal narrative surrounding it, and how a rupture in that narrative can cause the place to change irrevocably, to be rendered into a ghost of itself, even when it remains physically intact. (The work’s title was taken from interviews conducted by Condorelli with different people in Paris who had grown up in pre 1952-revolution Alexandria; it refers to just such a shift: when asked about the city, they responded that the city they had loved was gone—“Il n’y a plus rien”, “There is nothing left”). But, of course, the story is also one that is concerned with the

structures of capitalism and colonialism that underlay and made possible the lives of those who were forced to leave, structures that, in their enormity, could only exist as specters, like the refracted, immaterial slide projections in Condorelli’s installation.

Like Condorelli’s previous work, a type of structuralism is at play in this new project, but it is a structuralism that is tinged with a poetic sensibility—one that engages with the warp and weft of human experience. And, in light of the momentous recent events in Egypt, which saw the ouster of Hosni Mubarak through the sheer force of the people’s will, perhaps this new direction in Condorelli’s practice is a timely one. After all, the protesters who swarmed Tahrir square day after day to demand their freedom and their dignity were not in need of an artist’s help to enter into a meaningful relational engagement with history. However, what might be of use is to explore the ways in which others can or should engage with such an events. How fitting, then, that the second movement of “Il n’y a plus rien” will be about Egypt’s history of revolutions, a history that is clearly still in the making.