

1.

EVERYBODY BECOMES PART OF THE GAME —
BUT WHAT MIGHT THE NAME OF THIS GAME BE?

You have those moments where everything seems to fall in place, where the artwork, the artist and the public fall together. A magic spark comes through. They don't happen often.

In July 2001, I participated in a multimedia project called *The Return of the Swallows*. Together with the Firefly, I re-created a mini-society in Brussels. With 30 swallows, immigrants and Belgians, we realised performances and films led by our dreams and desires. In order to become a swallow, one had to become oneself in becoming another — and thus live intensively.

The Moscow Biennale for Contemporary Art also created this kind of magic for me. An open space that, once you were in, you could freely wonder through.

Day 1

It is afternoon.

The heat burns me.

I was not prepared for this.

I thought Moscow was cold.

Like the bears, so cold.

Actually, I had no idea about Moscow. I did not have time to think.

My brother is deadly sick.¹

There was also a feeling of not belonging. Both Brussels and Moscow were places I did not understand the rules, the people or the language.

Also both projects had a healthy sort of a constant chaos. Presentations and work processes overlapped. Things were going on everywhere. And sometimes, by accident, you walked into beauty. There was a *mélange* of artists, non-artists, volunteers, labourers, academics, public and crew.

The emphasis was on the process, on the moment where art meets life, where people and things gathered. From morning work-

outs to shared lunches and drinks. You could freely step in and out. That was articulated by letting the public in to become part of the process and part of the game.

Maybe the only difference was that, in Moscow, my goal was to finish an artwork in 10 days. In Brussels I had had no deadline and we continued until we all, participants and artists, decided it was finished. This would have been an interesting thought for a biennial.

Both projects deal with ephemeral processes and outcomes. Some of the *Swallows*' happenings were not recorded. In Moscow you knew that all the work made would disappear after 10 days. It gave the projects the character of an extended happening.

I think we must try to build these situations more often. That is to say, collective ambiances, ensembles of impressions determining the quality of a moment. According to Guy Debord, these moments are passageways, without a future — indeed, discontinuous moments or events that try to tap real life. Eternity is the grossest idea a person can conceive of in connection with his acts.²

It also leads you, as an artist, to other forms of creating, thinking about an artwork differently. Without the constant pressure of production which is a result of a capitalist system and liberal government.

2.

A DÉRIVE

But the essential thing is surely the connection to the people. *The Return of the Swallows* brought together 35 people from different nationalities and very different backgrounds.

In Moscow I was working on *Skull* 3³ with a group of people of different ages, backgrounds and cultures: migrant carpenters from countries such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Sukhrob was their leader. Together with Daria, an artist and volunteer from Moscow and Mu, an artist from China, we worked closely together as a team. We had not known each other before and did not have much time meet up besides work. I think we were all open to be *dérives*.⁴

Day 3.

A man stands in front of me, motionless, he does not smile, he blinks his eyes. What's your name, I ask?



“The Laborer,” he says.

He stretches his arms in front of him... shows his hands, turns them slowly... “I am designated to help you,” he says.

I tell him we’re going to swear and honour. I give him my grandmother’s needle.

I give all of us a needle, we know the stitch, we know the smell, we recognise the tissue of the Skull. In a backspace we eat together... we eat with our hands... we drink tea.

I think of my brother, he can’t eat, he can’t drink. I asked him what would be his first desire. He says... a glass of water I’d kill for.

Day 4.

I give my words, my wallet, my jewellery to Dasha. I’m not a mother, a daughter, a sister, a wife anymore. I know how you sleep, she says and adds ...it is only with the heart that one can see rightly, what is essential is invisible to the eye. “How come you are so clever?” I ask.

“Because I am old,” she says.

It was in the process of the making of the skull when we discovered each others’ strengths. As an artist, I pulled myself back to float on the energy of this temporary collective. Another artist said, “You have courage. How do you let other people work on your artwork?” But it is in this energetic and open space where a social sculpture is created.

The making of the *Skull* reunited memories and dreams. Sukhrob had never made a sculpture and was very impressed by the process.⁵ He took selfies of every step and was very proud to make it into the local newspaper *Metro*. The work reminded Daria of her childhood. Mu said he got power from it.

Day 6.

It’s Sunday morning. There is nobody. Just Sukhrob and me. He wants to ask me things, I want to tell him things, we do not understand each other’s words. He looks for translations on his phone. He says “...the nails have elves’ heads, the skull con-

fides secrets to us, the shelter is where it all comes together... the hidden tissue. I say I do not understand you, but it sounds nice. We smile, drink tea and look proudly at the *Skull*.

The main structure of the *Skull* was already constructed when I arrived. The process of putting on chicken wire, tissue and loam was followed correctly. In every step Mu, Daria and Sukhrob taught me something new, even though I had been making these kinds of sculptures for over 10 years.

Every day we stepped back and looked at the skull to see if all of us could find ourselves in it. Which is why in the end I agreed with Mu to change the name on the label to mention all of us.⁶

Day 8.

I lit candles for my brother in the Church of Our Lady.

I call my brother, excited, I tell him about the language as sweet as honey, I tell him about the scents and colours, the faces that are like the faces of my sons. I realise that he will never be able to join me. I tell him collaboration exists in the possibility to dream.

3.

WHAT IS THE LIGHT?⁷

Because the work process was so intense I was not able to get out of the room I was working in, which created a relation with the in-situ artists in the same space. On the last two days interesting connections were made, the space became ours. Honoré brought parts of his performance to the *Skull*. Fabrice mirrored the *Skull* on his wall and Babi used part of the tissue to make his last artwork. This all started on the last day and it would have been interesting to see how it might have evolved. The energy and social warmth made us believe we could lift the *Skull*, which in my view we did. Because as Bart said, we are all driftwood.

Day 10.

Loftiness is a habit we, mankind made ourselves guilty of too often.



A visitor comes in, another one, can you move out of the way please, I want to take a picture. And there is where it is... where I no longer exist... where the image blurs... where the Skull lifts itself. What remains is the light it triggered.

1
All diary entries are from *Driftwood*, a surreal fairy tale based on my experience of the biennial and the loss of my brother.

2
See Guy Debord, *Report on the Construction of Situations*, 1957.

3
Skull series (1999–2016)
1999, I built the first skull in reaction to the Yugoslav War, from an urge to make a strong image to counter-balance all the violence. That skull was suspended from the truss of my studio and made of wood and loam. In 2002, reacting to George Bush's declaration of war after the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, 2001, I built another skull on the roof of MuHKA in Antwerp. 2015 was the year I created a third skull at the Moscow Biennale for Contemporary Art. That one was inspired by my thinking about migration and became a symbol of transience, vulnerability and solidarity. In 2016, when Gilles Laurent, sound engineer of my films, becomes a victim of an attack in the Brussels Metro station Maalbeek, I make the fourth skull.

4
See Guy Debord, *Theory of the Dérive* (1956). In a *dérive*, for a certain period of time, one or more persons drop their relations, work and leisure activities, as well as other motives for movement and action; and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.



(Sukhrob Ganiev: We met with Els at the Moscow Biennale where she created her work *Skull*. In the beginning, the idea of our role and input was not quite clear to me. But when she gave a detailed vision of the project, the picture crystallised. Her interpreter and assistant Daria helped us a lot in terms of communication.

It was the first time in my practice that I had to create a sculpture of such an impressive scale. I believe this was true for each member of our team. Initially, the wooden frame was quite far from a skull shape. For 10 days we struggled to achieve the right form. But Els convinced us that a perfect shape was not the heart

(major concept) of her work. The essential details of the skull she brought with her: small, assorted, human-shaped wooden bars. They served as teeth of the skull and looked like carved chunks with polished heads and pyrographed eyes and noses.

Another challenge of our work was to lift the whole construction 20-30 cm above the floor. After lots of effort we had to face the bitter truth — it was technically impossible. Finally, we agreed with Els that we would lift it just 10 cm high.

We covered the wooden frame with metal gauze and fabrics on top. We had to make several incisions, stuffing these with hay where necessary to get

the right shape of a skull. When we finished this shaping, we covered the whole sculpture with clay to give a flair of time and decay.

We had two major goals in our work: the first was to make Els happy with what we do and the second was to amaze the audience. Hopefully we met Els's expectations. As for the second task, it's difficult for me to judge.

The language barrier was also quite an issue in our cooperation with Els. But it did not discourage her. She did her best and used gestures and Daria's help. We were really happy to work with Els and hopefully it was mutual.)

6
Li Mu's diary (see page 43).

7
Song by The Flaming Lips, 1999. (On an untested hypothesis suggesting the chemical in our brains which enables us to experience the sensation of being in love is the same one that caused the Big Bang which was the birth of the accelerating universe)

