

From Navigation to Negotiations : Back and Forth

by Chantal Pontbriand



Dawn Nilo's *Game Ball*, 2016

Once upon a time, I fell upon Stefan Zweig's *Magellan*. This is the story of a Portuguese explorer and navigator that set out in the year 1518 to literally go around the world. It had never been done. He did it by discovering a passageway between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans situated at the point of the continent now known as South America. This became the breakthrough, the "accident" that furthered our knowledge of the planet and its complexity. It also comforted the idea that by navigating and going ahead, as uncertainty prevails, breaking through established barriers is a real possibility. At the heart of this possibility is the world's imagination. It is the locus of true meaning and wealth. At its core, that is, because otherwise humanity has found many ways of perverting its discoveries into less noble enactments, a question high on the agenda of post-colonialist studies. Zweig in his keen critical analysis of the times and of the persona led the way to exposing the complexities of "discovery" vs knowledge.

This essay, based on Dawn Nilo's "navigational" work, will deal with a corollary concept to that embedded in her recent work: negotiation. Navigation and Negotiation telescope into one another, and this in order to achieve a satisfactory, however more or less predictable, outcome for every party involved. An outcome that provides a surplus, something gained or produced in excess, as well as an index to what has been achieved. Magellan navigated the oceans and could go further only by seeking out unpredictable passages in his journey. He negotiated with land and water, trying to see beyond, and get beyond what was already known, hence setting foot in unknown territory. But although Zweig's amazing insight links Magellan's project to that of the economy of the times, he most brilliantly outlines Magellan's mindset and determination to go beyond this economy based on territorial appropriation and commercial gain. One could say that he situates the voyage as a philosophical investigation into the shape of the world.

In a similar way, Nilo's latest project, *Performing Negotiations* (2019), also navigates to negotiate. It was staged in Brussels in the context of an event called *A Performance Affair re:production*: an experiment in putting together a commercial art fair geared towards the recognition and safeguard of performance and its artefacts or perennity. It addressed the economics of exhibiting performance within the visual art context by providing a platform for galleries to sell performance. With this in mind, Nilo set up an installation-performance mimicking a gallery with works for sale,



The Monk Contemporary (originally called Contemporary Monk) gallery booth at *A Performance Affair re:production*, Brussels Gallery Weekend, Belgium (2019). Hosted by Balzer Projects. Dawn Nilo (with her back to the camera) performing negotiations with a visitor on *Activation Painting (No.1)* while others pass through the booth.

and transforming itself during the four days of the event. This particular enactment of the piece was subtitled *A deal we can't refuse*. It consisted of getting people to play the game of “performing negotiations”. The game idea, or that of play came from an earlier piece called *The Great Game* (2016) which in her own words “uses the art of the fool, improvisation and play to approach alternative realities”.¹ When people decide to play, that is the moment when “performing negotiations” occurs, or to put emphasis on the immaterial live event as being a piece in itself, we could capitalize the process (as it is in the title) and call it *Performing Negotiations*. The process is the work. But parallel to that happening, objects spread about the room in which the installation is set up, are indeed up for sale. The whole set-up, live and immaterial as it is, but also encompassing its material aspects, becomes a piece also spelled out as *Monk Contemporary*, the name of the (fictional but real) gallery behind whatever is happening in playing this proposed “play”. “In Brussels”, Nilo recalls, “we negotiated a lot of deals, including selling the performance *The Kingdom of Fools* by the minute, a 45-minute conversation and many other magical moments of non-material art such as witnessing the moment of a gaze”. This tells us that negotiations truly happened between participants and that results manifested themselves in the end. But is there really an end, when one thinks that the performance itself was sold, and could lead to other enactments, and possibly many other sales, some unpredictable? One case in point is *Activation Painting (No.1)*, sold during the *A Performance Affair* art fair, which was really negotiated and then purchased, and consists of a blue carpet, three sheep skins and a red playground ball. From Nilo's perspective, the painting “inspires and embodies the “non-material residue of its performative negotiations”.² More activation paintings are yet to come, assembling the different parameters of the purchase: time and place of negotiation, objects, collector, and physical and immaterial destination of the work. This series lends itself to underlying the workings and value of a process akin to that of a creative commons. Upturning the “normal” rules of the art market and art fair, the new parameters, based on performativity rather than on the materiality of the object, open up new possibilities. (The *Performing Negotiations Prospectus*, a document which Nilo distributed during the art fair in Brussels, suggests some of these possibilities. It is reproduced at the end of this essay.)

Nilo goes on to say: “I also negotiated the trade of a collector's soul for ubiquity under the condition that he serve the supplier (of ubiquity) as the lover. I was obviously not the supplier but the dealer.” Here, we further enter an unpredictable territory, that of pure imagination and desire, if not clearly stirring the collective psyche at work in the event, or habitual process in negotiations. Here, navigation takes over, with the unpredictable, the truly unknown, stepping in. Play has to do with this, as whatever game is in the works, one is always in a position of waiting, of active latency, eventually leading to a move, or a *bon coup*, which is endemic to the art of negotiation. Getting to YES is the idea, if one refers to one of the current world's bibles in the field coming from Harvard specialists Roger Fisher and William Ury : *Getting to YES, Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*.³



Dawn and Johannes Nilo performing negotiations with Frédéric de Goldschmidt on *Activation Painting (No. 1)* at *A Performance Affair*

Negotiations fail if there is no outcome, or if all parties involved do not benefit from the process or the encounter. Fisher and Ury put forward the concept of the “negotiation of merits” as going about with the objective of an outcome based on a “pacific” resolution, one that can be satisfying for all parties.

Just a side note here: Magellan and his crew experienced many difficulties in the journey to the “other side”, difficulties such as maps that were false, mutiny, cold, famine, illness, despair, lack of wind to propel the ships ahead (there were five ships in the journey in the beginning carrying sixty-five men: only one came back with eighteen men and this, without Magellan, who perished towards the end of the adventure). Until Magellan’s intuition that one could go around the planet, based on the little that was known in the field of geography in his times, proved correct, and in spite of Ancient Greek philosophers who already suspected the earth was round, common belief had it that the earth was flat.⁴ Love and desire were not absent from Magellan’s quest (and neither was the other side of the coin, hatred and disrespect, as accompanying challenges he also experienced). Nor are these passions absent from any sort of negotiation, most of which turn out properly when the other (and this is a two-way road) is recognized in his/her own merits, without any party necessarily “giving in”. On the other hand, the gift of recognition is part of any “successful” negotiation. It has to do with the human psyche more than with the basic materiality of anything being negotiated, of anything being “at play”.

Perhaps passion explains how Nilo’s interest in negotiation arose out of *The Kingdom of Fools*, yet another variation of *The Great Game* performed for the Swiss Performance Art Awards in 2018. In addition to a live interactive improvisation inside an artwork/“blue box” stage called *The Blue Cube (2017)*, it included a six-channel video installation of earlier improvisations performed within *The Blue Cube*. At this point, it is not hard to grasp that, in Nilo’s mind, the artist paradigm is that of a fool. Throughout history, fools have been seen as outcasts, as marginals, and sometimes as luminaries, inhabited by a gift of clairvoyance, with powers of divination. Women have especially been pigeonholed in this paradigm from the moment they would step out of “normality”. The marginality of the fool is a question that is currently at the forefront of socio-political debate, as QTBIPOC and individuals and communities speak out more and more and become more vocal and (hopefully and increasingly) recognized. How does Nilo go about dealing with this delicate issue? How does being a fool lead to inhabiting a Kingdom rather than hell itself? Again here, Nilo resorts to an aesthetics of play in order to better grasp any “supplement”, any unordinary perspective that can arise from foolishness. What can one learn from acting without purpose, without prescribed logic, without rules, or in the framework of rules (such as the one an artist gives her/himself)? And why six screens in the end? On her website, she goes about introducing the work like this:

A GAME OF INITIATION

In three steps

1. Observe what's happening
2. Enter the happening
3. Make something happen

With three rules

1. Don't hurt yourself
2. Don't hurt anybody else
3. Don't break anything

By entering the room you join the game.

Observe what is happening. There is a history. Feel free to ask questions. When you think you know what is happening, take the next steps. There are a myriad of fluid sub rules, guidelines, protocols, traditions, supposed too, definitely do nots and other such things that we are constantly discovering, forgetting, breaking, remembering, changing, dissolving and transforming. Learn them. Unlearn them. Make them up. When you get confused start over. The task is almost, but not entirely impossible. Try anyway. (That is the nature of hope)



THE GREAT GAME

EXPECT AGONY. EXPECT ECSTASY. BE NICE. PLAY FAIR.

The Great Game (2016) is a performance game that inspires and is entangled within *Performing Negotiations* and *The Kingdom of Fools*. Shown here: Performance Poster for *The Great Game* performed as a part of the *Society for the Common and Good*, GGG Atelier Hause, Basel in 2018.

[*The Kingdom of Fools* is] a conceptual space that activates the substance of possibility 'in between' in order to gain access to the pure, raw and immediate presence of the alchemist fool. It's an attempt to find a place of inner freedom and social responsibility in a world that is spinning out of control. I feel something very fundamental has to change in an explosive way, beginning with a personal or esoteric explosion from the inside out.

The six screens are organized in different modes of presentation: four are small box TV monitors, standing in for the four sides of a square, and two are large flat square screens. Together, they refer to the six sides of a cube. The floor plan of the installation is laid out geometrically to create two 3x3x3m cubic spaces, one including the video installation and the other consisting of the actual blue box stage titled, *The Blue Cube* (2017), which is the setting for the videos. Geometry, translating space and time into abstract configurations, is one of the tropes that come up in Nilo's body of work. It structures and represents the effect in a situation, but more so the way effect, feeling and thinking come together in a shape, enabling the interplay at work in the field that is drawn out. When encompassing this particular work, I immediately thought of Marcel Duchamp's five-way portrait, a common process done in a photo shop at the beginning of the last century, realized by using multiple mirrors. There is something in the multiplication of the self that image-making and mechanical, and now digital reproduction, reveals. Something of that surplus I was alluding to earlier. Energy in excess. Energy let loose. Energy that goes beyond what is already there. This echoes the principle of any negotiation. Negotiation, even though it is principally worked out with others, is also a negotiation with oneself, or one's many selves. Nilo's connections to Duchamp are undeniable as both artists resort to geometry, found objects (Duchamp's readymades and Nilo's assemblages in different works), and screens of sorts (video or mirrors)–enhancing incongruence between spaces, and generating some sort of confusion. A confusion that becomes a quest, a mystery or problem to solve, a path to (more) knowledge and insight into the world.

The Blue Cube explores the chaotic world surrounding us. In order to be "livable", chaos must be explored in itself. The raw interface of the mind/body with a physical/material world it is embedded in, together with the consciousness of its geo-sociopolitical zeitgeist, seeks to go beyond its finitude. This is a question of exploring time, with its different rhythms and flow.⁵ The process leads to an enhanced freedom through an enhancement of consciousness, a process I often refer to as "expanded consciousness".⁶ Nilo explains:

I am the first systemic prison, and I am a representative of all the others that I must free myself from, ideally organically and through love. To this end I use the intelligent absurd



The video installation within *The Kingdom of Fools* at The Gessneralle in Zurich during the Swiss Performance Art Awards 2017.

naiveté of the fool to approach the unknown, which, when activated in the right way, offers endless new possibilities for reality. I use goofy absurdity as a radical act of freedom in defiance against the lies of reality that oppress us.

It's a disguised revolution of freedom and it extends as far as the next person (or nation) that I must meet if I wish to create freedom as a sustainable substance. I have made a small attempt towards this revolution in these videos, as well as in performance with others and through texts that encourage the unknown viewer to join me in a space of inner explosion.⁷

There are ten performers in the video rendering of *The Kingdom of Fools*, a community of sorts that hops about the "abstract" blue background. We hear sounds, see gestures, there are a few props to interact with: a red ball, a white cube and a white paralepidid. The latter two are pedestals used in exhibitions and can evoke Western museology and art history, they are also "things", just things. They lay about the world and are the subject of philosophical investigations, not to say metaphysical ones. The ensuing improvised choreography makes one think of Robert Morris or Yvonne Rainer, and the constant interaction with banal objects in their performative work in the 1960s and 1970s. The in-siteness of performativity is at work here – the relation between the objects and the player, or between the players themselves – as individual propositions explored sometimes become communal efforts. Any sound comes from the mouths of the players and comes out as onomatopoeia, grunts, shouting, sometimes a few recognizable words, or at a certain point towards the end, a song comes up. An old and very common English children's rhyme - "Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon. The little dog laughed to see such sport, and the dish ran away with the spoon". Nonsense... or is it just a fool's tale? The song mimics the chaos of the world, and seems to foresee what will be put at the forefront at the beginning of the industrializing world in the work of Mallarmé, or James Joyce, or Gertrude Stein. This meant a revolution in words at the time, which meant a revolution of the mind attempting to seize a new zeitgeist in the context of times that were just as chaotic as ours. Words do appear on the screen overlaying the images that the video glides through. We are in the room, floating along in this blue bubble created by the six screens surrounding us. The words float in the air like clouds, repeat themselves, appear and disappear, surrounding the players on the screens, addressing us, the players in the field:



Inside the *Blue Cube*, video stills from the 6 channel video installation for *The Kingdom of Fools*.

What are you thinking
 What touches you
 What do you feel
 What see taste
 Who do you love
 Who are you
 Don't be afraid
 Don't be afraid
 Don't be afraid
 To sweat
 To die
 Freedom in Love
 Love in Freedom
 What do you hear see taste
 Remember why
 What are you thinking

The words go by quickly (and forgive me if I missed some!), they fly about, igniting your consciousness, and putting some of the focus on the words at play here – possibly a nod to Wittgenstein, the author of *Philosophical Investigations*, who recognized the value of word play in furthering knowledge.



Blueprint, as exhibited at Gerðarsafn - Kópavogur Art Museum, Iceland.

Behind the video installation is the actual 3 dimensional installation of *The Blue Cube*. This Prussian blue space is like a sky we are on the one hand meant to float in, let our minds wander, but on the other, we are also invited to let our own bodies wander, joining Nilo and interacting with her in the stage as a part of the “installation-becoming-a-live-performance” (*The Kingdom of Fools*). You just ask a helper to find you the right sized costume and he or she explains how to get in and out of the cube. This live aspect of *The Blue Cube* enhances its somatic dimension. It inscribes the piece in a third dimension, that of live physical experience, and enhances the commonness produced by it. One can imagine that once you step out of the room, the dance continues, the music composed of words, sounds, and silence goes on in your head as it has infiltrated your body. You become a cosmic/conscious being, refreshed by the experience you have just been a part of, not just witnessed.

Nilo comments on the interface between the blue cube idea and that of a kingdom of fools:

The Blue Cube is an installation consisting of three paintings (two walls and a floor) that are put together in a corner. The lower half of the cube is earthly and the upper half is spiritual and must be created or perceived through the imagination. Between heaven and earth is the free space that we can inhabit as human beings. *The Blue Cube* is the active creation of this space and it is the portal through to *The Kingdom of Fools*. Put another way, *The Kingdom of Fools* is the result of the activation of that free space in between, which is contained in a sort of safe way through art (so that one doesn't go crazy!). This is the same principle with the activation paintings. You have to activate them to achieve love in freedom and freedom in love for humanity. That's how my foolish heart thinks.⁸

The color blue (this again brings up Wittgenstein as he wrote about color as a philosophical trope) comes up again in a piece titled *The Question*, which is a book of poetry that includes sketches for a series of fourteen cyanotype prints displayed on the wall (*Blueprint*, 2017). These are in effect blueprints, a mode of existence that changes everything in the sense that a blueprint is a unique process which situates itself between drawing and photography. It needs light to exist, and if it fades, putting it back in the sunlight restores the blue and gives life to any motif, line or shape that has been imprinted on it. The series of blueprints can be read as a sequence as the viewer travels alongside the wall: it goes from beginning to end, from birth to death, and enacts a lifecycle. Everything born into existence perishes. However, things, people, animals, plants, objects do re-

generate themselves. And very often, novelty comes in: new patterns, new ways of doing and ways of seeing come up. New assemblages of “DNA”, propelled by metamorphosis, changing situations and necessary criticality. Catherine Malabou has written in this sense on the present situation we are navigating through, heavily touched by artificial intelligence. We can develop strategies to deal with an increasing seizure of the mind and body by digitalization (some refer to this phenomenon as a new version of colonization).⁹ Donna Haraway speaks of this ongoing process, as well as that of the environmental crisis, as demanding a necessary attitude: “Stay with the trouble”, says she.¹⁰ Facing chaos is the best way to go beyond. Dawn Nilo inscribes geometric diagrams of all shapes and sorts on her blueprints. These are translations of different transitional states and constitute a cartography of the mind/body question, the question of existence itself. The composer Charles Ives called it the “unanswered question”. This work projects us into the cosmic realm. And what is the cosmos, if not that space that every bit of DNA in us is linked to, part of.

Dawn Nilo invites us to navigate this world we are in and a part of. Not surprisingly she was born in Vancouver, a city at the edge of the world, facing the great beyond, that ocean named the Pacific, as it pacified the navigators, Magellan and his crew, after being stalled by the lack of winds in a passageway they did not yet know the outcome of.

No wonder the red ball comes up as a leitmotiv in Nilo’s work.

It is a sphere, a globe.

It is a work in itself titled *Game Ball*, and is emblematic of the game we are playing as living bodies on the planet earth. Think also of the notion of the “public sphere”, a concept Jurgen Habermas amongst other philosophers, picked up on.¹¹ It refers to the idea of the common, what lies between us, what lies in-between and is yet to be understood, or just dealt with. There is an urgency to re-invent the public sphere. In this sense, the work *Performing Negotiations* responds to the endemic Question of life on earth: something to be constantly negotiated and navigated. This while being at play, a mode of existence, inscribed in exploring relationships, which is an ongoing enactment of the breath of life.

Supplement

The Performing Negotiations Prospectus, by Dawn Nilo, outlines guidelines for negotiating the terms and agreements of a deal when buying selling and performing art.

Performing Negotiations Prospectus, 2020

Subject to revision

Basic terms of Negotiation

1. Anything may be collected as an art work after reaching an agreed upon purchase price or trade agreement.
2. Concepts, and non material works may include agreed upon or spontaneous physical or mental actions as well as authored words and ideas and performances.
3. Objects may include, but are not limited to, one of a kind or authored works and multiple found objects.
4. Once a previously unauthorized concept, non material work, performance or object is purchased, it becomes the property of the collector. Unless otherwise agreed upon, the creative copyright is collectively attributed to Contemporary Monk, the dealer and the collector.
5. An extra discount may be applied if the artist maintains royalty rights to any further sales or reproductions.

Menu of Terms and Agreements for Negotiations Specific to Concepts and non material works

Performances may be purchased and collected with:

1. The one time right to initiate the performance as one of an open edition.
2. The one time right to initiate the performance as one of an agreed upon limited edition. Once an edition limit has been agreed upon, the artist may reduce but not exceed the limit in agreement with another collector.
3. An installation or stage element that is integral to, and required for the work.
4. The exclusive right to decide when, where and by who the performance may be performed (under conditions agreed upon with the artist).
5. The exclusive rights to the work, with a donated agreed upon number of editions for non-profit use.
6. The exclusive rights to the work, with an open edition for non-profit use.
7. A bespoke agreement.

Menu of Terms and Agreements for Negotiations Specific to Objects

Objects may be purchase and collected:

1. With an accompanying signature or certificate of authenticity from the artist or Contemporary Monk.
2. As one of an open edition: The work, or an object of a similar kind, may be reproduced and sold an unlimited number of times. Note: Another collector may negotiate a lower edition limit at a later date, but this limit may not be lower than the number of currently existing copies at the time of agreement (see point 3 below).
3. As an agreed upon limited edition: Once an edition limit has been agreed upon, the artist may reduce but not exceed the limit in agreement with another collector.
4. As a unique work: Thereafter the original, or another object of similar kind, may not be reproduced or sold as a work.
5. Through a bespoke agreement.

Menu of reproduction protocols

Works may be reproduced by:

1. Only the artist
2. Representatives trained and designated by the artist
3. Representatives, chosen by the collector, following the artists instructions
4. Through a bespoke agreement

ENDNOTES

1. Quoted from Dawn Nilo's notes to the author.
2. Quoted from the artist's website: <https://dawnnilo.com>.
3. Roger Fisher and William Ury : Getting to YES, Negotiating Agreement without Giving In (London: Penguin Books, 1991).
4. This idea still has currency today as I discovered when visiting Fogo Island, situated on the North-East coast of Canada, in the Atlantic Ocean. See: <http://www.museumoftheflatearth.ca>.
5. Note: Nilo is now living in Switzerland where Monte Verita brought together artists and thinkers including the figure of Rudolf Steiner. The Austrian philosopher promoted a holistic conception of life bridging the intellectual, artistic and practical worlds in an ongoing flow of discovery and learning. He was also known as an architect, an educator, and invested himself (with others in a communal lifestyle) in the environment, social renewal, agriculture, nutrition as well as medicine. Hence rhythms and flows were at the core of his thinking, bringing together his many interests. A figure Nilo seemingly salutes in her own work.
6. "Expanded Consciousness" is the title of the third section of my book : The Contemporary, the Common: Art in a Globalizing World (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013).
7. Quoted from the artist's website.
8. Notes from Dawn Nilo to the author.
9. Catherine Malabou, Métamorphose de l'intelligence. Que faire avec leur cerveau bleu? (Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 2017). In this recent opus, which reads much like a manifesto, Malabou revises her previous thinking about the brain and its plasticity, and ensuing cautionary remarks concerning the invasion of high-tech in our daily lives, and sees it now as being a metamorphosis rather than an "invasion" or distortion of the mind/body question. Similarly to Haraway, she invites us to accommodate change and work with it, coming to terms with (negotiating and navigating) reality.
10. Donna J. Haraway, Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene, Duke University Press, 2016.
11. Habermas, Jürgen , The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society, Polity, Cambridge, 1989.

Chantal Pontbriand is a Canadian curator and art critic whose work explores globalization and artistic heterogeneity. She was was the founder-director of Parachute magazine in Montreal and the recipient of a Governor General of Canada Award for Outstanding Contribution in the Visual and Media Arts in 2013.