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The Idea of North: The Furka Zone as a Form of Life, Followed by a Conversation with García

Benoît Antille

García (& Co.) has emptied the cafeteria of the Furkablick Hotel of any commercial reference. All the objects present in the room are neutral and inconspicuous. No brands, no logos. The endless piles of paper containers in a corner of the kitchen prove that the same meal has been served there since the very beginning: corn and tomato soup with cheese and sausage on the side. Toward the back, a discreet door gives access to the hotel. García won't allow visitors to take pictures. Most of Daniel Buren's famous shutters are closed. The interior is a stomach, an enclosed space brimming with activity. The basement hosts the kitchen and cellars. The ground floor: an office and the dining room (where the artists Ulay and Marina Abramovic once made a performance). Upstairs: the rooms, the library

and the office of the Furkablick Institute. Every nook and corner is filled with works in progress, installations and assemblages, each telling a different story. The window display next to the stairs showcases a hat that used to belong to Joseph Beuys, topped with a piece of shrapnel. Except for the few remaining functional rooms, the others host thematic collections of objects inherited from the hotel's activity. The series compose a brief history of design: ashtrays, glasses, curtains, towels, buttons, strings, carpets, furniture... The whole hotel is a bachelor machine putting the life of objects at the test, questioning their memory, addressing their resistance to time... Under the tectonic pressure of the Furka Pass, categories are shattered and reconfigured: are these artworks, artefacts, relics, ruins, documents, remainders or waste? An old wallpaper competes for attention with a painting by Olivier Mosset.

I first visited the Furka Zone on 23 July 2013, together with artist Eric Philippoz. As far as I can remember, the weather was rather mild. Eric and I were researching contemporary art projects that had a connection with the landscape for The Valais School of Art. The aim of our visit was to explore what remained of Furkart, a project as famous as it was discrete, led by Marc Hostettler, an art gallerist from Neuchâtel.¹ He and his wife Susy Müller owned the Furkablick hotel, built in 1893 on the Furka Pass, between the cantons of Uri and Valais.² Each summer, between 1983 and 1999, they used this venue peaking at an altitude of 2430 metres, to host some of the most famous artists of the 1980s and 1990s (including Ulay and Marina

¹ Marc Hostettler founded and directed the gallery Editions média, created in Neuchâtel in 1971. A specialist of silkscreen printing, he published some 150 editions of prints by Swiss and international representatives of concrete, systematic and conceptual art.

² The Furka pass, rich in history, has been visited by explorers, painters and famous travellers such as Goethe and Queen Victoria.

Abramovic, Daniel Buren, James Lee Byars, Terry Fox, Jenny Holzer, Joseph Kosuth, Richard Long, Olivier Mosset, Steven Parrino and Lawrence Weiner).

Furkart stems from the friendship of Marc Hostettler and American artist James Lee Byars who was fascinated by the Alps to the point of dreaming of a “grand mountain museum.” In 1983, the two friends met at the pass, where Byars presented a performance titled *A Drop of Black Perfume*³ – so symbolically launching the project. The actual artistic programme, however, began the following year. One of the participants, Swiss art historian Patricia Nussbaum describes Marc Hostettler’s pioneering programme in the book *Furkart Ephemera* (Nussbaum, 2019). According to her, Hostettler selected the artists for their ability to work outside of the gallery space. The idea was not to install pre-existing artworks, but to generate a reflection on the place itself (its topography, history and context), in order to produce site-specific gestures. While some artists developed their proposal at a distance, most of them worked on site.⁴ At the same time, Hostettler undertook soft renovations. Among other interventions, he commissioned Rem Koolhaas’s Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) to rehabilitate the oldest part of the hotel.

In 1999, Hostettler decided to stop Furkart; the project was becoming too heavy. According to Patricia Nussbaum, “the number of artists who were able to adapt to that kind of environment was not unlimited; and the never-ending, exhausting search for funding was the last straw.” In terms of heritage, this project leaves behind various interventions outside of the hotel (such as

3 “The action unfolds on top of the Furka Pass, near the Rhone springs, in Switzerland. James Lee Byars, inspired by his memories of Japanese monks and poets retiring in tiny mountain observatories to contemplate the world, has invited a couple of friends. He is walking slowly, then suddenly he leaves the path to walk toward the edge of a precipice along a grassy slope. He stops and carefully places a drop of black perfume inside the tiny, hidden cavity of a huge rock. James Lee Byars is wearing a golden suit and a top hat. It’s the 24th of July. The perfume is volatile”. http://www.mac-lyon.com/static/mac/contenu/fichiers/artistes/notices_collec/byars.pdf. (last accessed: February 9, 2021).

4 Significantly, Furkart coincides with a key moment in the history of art in the public sphere: the public auction organised in 1985 under the impulse of William Diamond, regional manager of the General Services Administration (GSA), to address the public complaints about the installation in 1981 of Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* on the Federal Plaza in New York (the installation had been commissioned by the GSA).

Max Bill's stone hearth and Per Kirkeby's brick sculpture), on the hotel (such as Daniel Buren's shutters and Mark Luyten's writing on several windows); and inside of it (a collection of works, remnants and ephemera). Beside material traces, Furkart also survives in the collective memory of a small circle of aficionados who attended Hostettler's events: the project was not meant to meet a large audience at that time. In 2014, however, it was promised to a posthumous success, as the co-directors of the Centre Culturel Suisse (CCS), Jean-Paul Felley and Olivier Kaeser, proposed the event "The Experience Furkart" in the framework of the Nouveau Festival at the Centre Pompidou, Paris.

"Posthumous" was just an assumption. In this occasion, Eric Philippoz and myself discovered that the Furkablick Hotel was still active, as we found out when we ended up meeting the person in charge of this legacy. The first encounter with García took place in the hotel's cafeteria, the only space still open to the visiting tourists and users of the Pass. During the two hour-long visit of the building and its surroundings, Eric and I didn't talk much, impressed as we were by the place as much as, if not more than, by García's personality. Back in the car that took us back to the valley, this discovery put us in a state of juvenile feverishness. The experience was so unexpected, what we had experienced so uncategorizable, that it would take me a while to understand the true nature of my growing fascination with the Furka Zone. This place is addictive; I have been going back there every summer since 2013, often accompanied by friends and peers.⁵

At the time of Furkart, Marc Hostettler benefited from the financial support of a

5 I am thinking, among others, of Leigh Markopoulos, then director of the curatorial practice programme at the California College of the Art; of art historian Julian Myers-Szupinska; of Adam Sutherland, director of Grizedale Art; and of William L. Fox, director of the Centre for Art + Environment of the Nevada Museum of Art.

Swiss foundation for arts and culture, the Alfred Richterich Stiftung, for which García was already working. After 1999, when the gallery owner decided to stop his project, the situation remained in standby for years. But in 2004, after much hesitation, Alfred Richterich finally decided to repurchase the building through his foundation, saving it from certain dissolution; and García accepted to take care of it.

This might be the right time to point out that García – who could be described as a deep character with penetrating and mischievous gaze – has had a rather atypical career. After dropping out of school at a young age, he made numerous experiences before starting to work in the publishing sector, which led him to work with Harald Szeemann (1933-2005). Among other collaborations, García has been in charge of the comprehensive publication of the famous curator's exhibitions.⁶ Szeemann's wild and 'pataphysician's imaginary might have been inspirational...

When García (& Co.) started to work at the Furka Pass, Alfred Richterich left him free rein. One of his first initiatives has been to set up a framework for future activities: he thus created the "Furkablick Institute." This sibylline title – as one can postulate, had the merit of breaking with the art world's rhetoric, in order to maintain the institute's activities below the radar. García, like Hostettler does not consider public relations and marketing as priorities. For the past fifteen years, he has been going to the Hotel every single year, as soon as the pass opens in late June, until it closes in October. But, García likes to measure time in his own way; he only counts the number of months that he effectively

⁶ Bezzola, T. and Kurzmeyer, R., eds., *Harald Szeemann – with by through because towards despite: Catalogue of All Exhibitions 1957–2005*, Zurich; Vienna–New York: Voldemeer–Springer, 2007.

spent at the Institute, which would amount to five years in total, that he mostly spent in stylite-like solitude.

García also decided to expand the horizon outlined by Hostettler. Furkart's artistic heritage is just one of many other histories that make this place unique: histories connected to geology, to tourism, to army and to scientific research among others. These intertwined layers and their respective testimonies constitute the complex a territory that García came up to call the "Furka Zone."

Some observers described García as a "curator" in the etymological acceptation of the term, namely as a person whose role is to "take care" of someone or something. It is true; he is tirelessly working to the maintenance and enhancement of the different heritages and stories that cohabit in the area. In particular, the works and documents produced by the artistic activity, the objects that have remained in the hotel since its creation, as well as the buildings erected on this territory (the Furkablick Hotel, two outbuildings – including the one appropriated by the Belgian artist Panamarenko – nearby military barracks and a barn).

The real nature of the activities that he developed at the Furka, however, defy categorization. There is no point in trying to assign him a formal title such as "curator," "landscape designer" or even "artist." Nor shall we attempt to analyse the assemblages and collections of objects that he created. Let us focus on the practice instead.

García (& Co.) developed his activities organically, by incubation or immersion, i.e. by eating, sleeping and living on site (like Ancient Greek patients who healed

themselves through their dreams, when sleeping in the sanctuaries of Asklepios). His practice has likely been shaped by the place itself: this at once inaccessible and over-crowded transit zone, which hosts parades of tourists, drivers, motorcyclists, mountain-bikers, scientists and soldiers – if the weather allows it – before reclaiming its rights for at least eight months a year, when it is covered in snow and ice. A living and ever-transforming environment, this place imposes entropy and slowness as fundamental principles. Its polymorphic nature, capable of going from one extreme to the other in a few hours, relentlessly resists any endeavour, whatever the field, be it about hotel industry or art.

The zone does not only threaten concrete projects, it undermines our categories, discourses, models and assumptions. It draws us into a Socratic dialogue that brings to light our contradictions and limits. Why and for whom would one create any artwork up there? What meaning should we ascribe to the accumulated objects from the past? Should we preserve all of them, or the most representative items only? Should such a heritage be restored or taken over by nature? Should this place be turned into a museum, a mausoleum, or a new destination of cultural tourism?

García answered these questions like a Greek philosopher, by adopting a “form of life” (in the sense given by the historian Pierre Hadot),⁷ i.e. a practice whereby every action is connected to a thought and every thought to an action – in other words, a praxis, the transformation of the self through action. We are therefore in the field of a practical reason, which implies the underlying presence of an

7 The concept of “form of life” is also at the heart of the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who had a considerable influence on contemporary art. See for instance his text *What Is an Apparatus?*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford University Press, 2009). See also Estelle Ferrarese, “Le projet politique d’une vie qui ne peut être séparée de sa forme. La politique de la soustraction de Giorgio Agamben”, *Raisons politiques*, Presses de Science Po, 2015, 57, pp. 49–53.

ethics to guide our actions. And this might be where the strength and uniqueness of García's approach resides. Since he started to go to the Furka Pass some fifteen years ago, he has carefully examined each of his *decisions* without subjecting them to any limiting criteria.

Adapting to the geological rhythm of the place, García takes his time (for instance, it took him at least two years to decide that the title "Furka Zone" was appropriate). As for the results of his actions, they are not measured in terms of productivity, return on investment, visibility, number of visitors or networking, but only in terms of their consistency with the requirements of each situation. In quantitative terms, this approach is absurd – especially since it does not seem to be addressed to anybody. In qualitative terms, it is salutary. The rhythm and dedication applied to every gesture imposed by the Zone (from the most trivial to the most complex) are diametrically opposed to the prevailing management ideology, as shown by the evolution of the art sector. From this point of view, the implications of his position are at once philosophical, aesthetic and political.

By maintaining the Furka Zone active, García keeps it alive. He is constantly moving things around, bringing changes to the place, recombining the objects. And each of his actions abide to his "art" of decision-making. This might be a way to prevent the Zone from being reified, instrumentalised, or turned into a museum, an amusement park or a high-altitude suburb. Is García trying to preserve it from any form of appropriation or recuperation? At the same time, the chosen terminology is far from any romantic ideal. "The Zone" evokes a no man's land, a

hybrid space, inaccessible, unfathomable, abandoned or dangerous, purely functional or waiting to be salvaged... García embraces the complexity of the place, while working in the underlays – those that the distracted visitor will not necessarily perceive.

By turning the Zone into a permanent construction site, García feeds his own *praxis*. Wherever it looks, a careful eye can notice changes from one season to the next: the result of a decision or an on-going decision process. These changes are consistent with spiritual exercises. The dialogue with the Zone is above all formative, or even transformative: it is a daily practice, endlessly renewed, following the pace of the opening and closing of the pass... The idea, however, is not to make the apology of detachment or withdrawal, but to develop a deontology, a search for the right gesture and for self-coherence. García, however, would not let himself be reduced to seriousness... Once must also show a strong dose of humour, wit and derision to survive up there.

Conversation with García

“In life it’s all about observing, even when participating.”

Leigh Markopoulos (1968–2017)

You once told me that you dropped out of school at a very young age, worked for a publishing house called Voldemeer, collaborated with Swiss curator Harald Szeemann and have been in charge of the Furkablick Institute for almost fifteen years. Is that the right way to introduce you?

“Alice did not quite know what to say to this: so she helped herself to some tea and bread-and-butter, and then turned to the Dormouse, and repeated her question. ‘Why did they live at the bottom of a Well?’ The Dormouse again took a minute or two to think about it, and then said, ‘It was a treacle-well’”. (Lewis Carroll)

Early on, you developed a taste for wandering sideways. When you were a teenager, you spent some time in Paris and lived a bohemian life of sort. You used to hike along the northern coast of Normandy, on the beaches of the Allied Landing, sleeping in concrete bunkers from WWII when it rained. What can you say about that experience? Did it inform your practice?

“Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise”. (Lewis Carroll)

Since you collaborated with Harald Szeemann, I feel obliged to ask you whether this legendary curator has had an influence on your practice? And if yes, in which way?

“with by through because towards despite”. (Harald Szeemann)

I know that you have a very large scope of interests. Can you tell me who else has been influential?

... in relation with the Furka Zone: among many others, Alfred Richterich, Huang Qi, Leigh Markopoulos, Marc Hostettler, Johannes Gachnang, Uwe Nettelbeck, Gabriele Goettle, Kate Fowle, Martin Hüppi, Agathe Jarczyk, Marc Egger,

Robert Wilson, Heiner Müller, Charity Oghagbon, Urs Simmen, René Mamie, Peter Zigerlig, and Dawa Yangzom Jantsentsang, all of whom I had the privilege to see in action; and of course innumerable other encounters, often short, sometimes longer, in many cases anonymous (first and foremost, though, the “Gegebenheiten”, the “given”, the catastrophes, the dead bodies, the rocks, the wild blueberries with cold milk, the ever-changing wind).

When did you first hear about Furkart? Did you know this place before? Did you attend Hostettler’s events?

No, I just had a fleeting, remote notion about the place.

When you have been proposed to manage the legacy of Furkart and the Furkablick Hotel, did you already have a vision of what needed to be done up there?

I did not.

Do you remember your first impression when you arrived at the Furkablick Hotel as the “master of the house”?

I was never the “master of the house”, rather some kind of a caretaker, or a keeper...

After much consideration, you decided to call it the Furka Zone. How would you describe this Zone to someone who never went up there?

“Try and go on. The pure plateau air. Yes, it was a plateau, Moll had not lied, or rather a great mound with gentle slopes. The entire top was occupied by the domain of Saint John and there the wind blew almost without ceasing, causing the stoutest trees to bend and groan, breaking the boughs, tossing the bushes, lashing the ferns to fury,

flattening the grass, and whirling leaves and flowers far away, I hope I have not forgotten anything. Good. A high wall encompassed it about, without shutting off the view, unless you happened to be in its lee. How was this possible? Why thanks to the rising ground to be sure, culminating in a summit called the Rock, because of the rock that was on it. From here a fine view was to be obtained of the plain, the sea, the mountains, the smoke of the town, and the buildings of the institution, bulking large in spite of their remoteness and all astir with little dots or flecks forever appearing and disappearing, in reality the keepers coming and going, perhaps mingled with I was going to say with the prisoners! For seen from this distance the striped cloak had no stripes or indeed any great resemblance to a cloak at all. So that one could say, when the first shock of surprise was past, Those are men and women, you know, people, without being able to specify further". (Samuel Beckett)

Why the name Furka Zone? What does it represent for you?

Time will tell: "The meaning of a word is its use in the language". (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

Do you perceive the Furka Zone as isolated? Peripheral? Why is it so important to maintain your activities "below the radar"?

...
Would it be fair to say that you have long worked in solitude? If so, was this isolation necessary to develop your practice?

...
You've been working at the Furka Zone for about fifteen years, right? How
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In the heart of the Zone, floating:
“de tomaso honey” (spectra laminate
edition) by Thomas Horvath
Photo: Janis Osolin

In the heart of the Zone, surviving:
Architectura
Photo: Janis Osolin



would you describe the activities or practice that you developed there?

“Cheshire Puss”, she began, rather timidly, as she did not know at all whether it would like the name: however, it only grinned a little wider. ‘Come, it’s pleased so far’, thought Alice, and she went on, ‘Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here?’

‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to’, said the Cat.

‘I don’t much care where...’, said Alice.

‘Then it doesn’t matter which way you go’, said the Cat.

‘...so long as I get somewhere’, Alice added as an explanation.

‘Oh, you’re sure to do that’, said the Cat, ‘if you only walk long enough’.

Alice felt that this could not be denied”.
(Lewis Carroll)

How would you put into words the process that guides your decision-making? What matters to you?

“Playing with Infinity” (Rózsa Péter);
“Normal Desires.” (Bruce Nauman)

I remember you saying that “any decision that you make excludes other possibilities”. Do you remember that? Do you still believe so? Does it mean that it is more important to maintain open fields of possibilities rather than achieving things?

Absolutely.

What did you learn from the Furka Zone? Did the Zone change you? If yes, in which ways?

“In this way formless is not only an adjective having such and such a meaning, but a term serving to declassify, requiring in general that everything should have a form.

What it designates does not, in any sense whatever, possess rights, and everywhere gets crushed like a spider or an earthworm.” (Georges Bataille)

What are your favourite moments in the Furka Zone?

“When it rained, when it snowed”.
(Samuel Beckett)

What kind of difficulties did you encounter up there? What was the hardest part? Did you ever feel antagonised by the Zone?

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to”, said the Cat.” (Lewis Carroll)

In which direction can the Furka Zone evolve?

“The forms are many in which the unchanging seeks relief from its formlessness. Ah yes, I was always subject to the deep thought, especially in spring of the year. That one had been nagging at me for the past five minutes. I venture the hope there will be no more, of that depth. After all it is not important not to finish, there are worse things than velleities”. (Samuel Beckett)

Since years you have been an actor, as well as a privileged observer of the art world. How do you look at the evolution of this field which has become a sector? Is this still such a good place to operate from?

“Not that I don’t believe in eating / but I just want to make the distinction between / Art and eating.” (Agnes Martin)

What can one learn from the Furka Zone?

“Things are alive as much as men are.”
(Marcel Proust)

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I know that you are a fan of Glenn Gould – not only because of his music, I imagine, but also as a character. In a series of radio broadcasts titled “Solitude Trilogy”, Glenn Gould created “The Idea of North”, a documentary on the influence of the Canadian far north on the life of its inhabitants. Do you feel close to that experience?⁸

Always inspiring, always a pleasure...
“e bianca neve scender senza venti” (Guido Cavalcanti).

⁸ In 1970, PBS aired an experimental film based on this series (produced in 1967), directed by Judith Pearlman.

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