

EVERYTHING OKAY?

An exchange between
Dora García and Karim Rouillon

In December 2005 I asked Dora García if she would be interested in creating a work in Aubervilliers. Dora had come here with a big book that she had just published in Spain, *Todas las historias, toutes les histoires*, a gigantic, still growing collection of “all the stories” she had garnered from newspapers, the Internet, other people, or invented using these same sources. We were already working together on a projected exhibition at the Laboratoires, for which she was studying certain aspects of East German society in the postwar years, notably the generalised surveillance and the tremendous power of rumour in a place where there was no really reliable information.

It was no doubt partly because of this personal context that, after her first trip to Aubervilliers, Dora expressed the desire to look in particular at the Cité République, a housing estate that we had seen only from the outside. Placed right in the centre of the town, the building was particularly intimidating in winter, when it was severe and imposing, and its star-shaped structure, with only one entrance, set up a crossroads, a junction where thousands of people crossed paths every day, like thousands of stories. As soon as word got out, there was hesitation about its name: Cité République, or Cité Lénine, and our surprise at the lat-

ter was met by stories: apparently, a bronze statue or bust of Lenin had been stored in the building’s cellars in the early 1970s, shortly after its inauguration. Everybody we spoke to had their own version of the story, which spread into a multitude of fictions. This confirmed Dora’s desire to work on this place, a place that initially fascinated us by virtue of its past.

At the time, France was only just emerging from a period of turbulence when, for a period of several weeks in November 2005, the social and existential malaise of young people living in extremely difficult circumstances around the capital exploded into violence after the provocative words spoken by a member of the government and degenerated uncontrollably in a mixture of nervous breakdown, hysteria and self-destruction. Although this flare-up had not spread to Aubervilliers, let alone the République estate, we did think it important to undertake a project that would give a non-judgemental image of the suburbs, without trying to offer conclusions, that would avoid caricature or hasty summaries.

In February, the estate was the scene of a mortal incident. We hesitated to continue our meetings and contacts with the inhabitants. But it was the latter who set us straight and defended the estate, countering the cli-



Dora García, *Cellule Cité Lénine*, 2006. Photo by Karim Rouillon

chéd images that always form at such times.

Dora suggested that her work should become a book—a novel, or rather, a chronicle of the estate, a snapshot at a given moment, the truth of that instant that made no claim to be anything more, not claiming objectivity or seeking to serve a cause. A photograph taken in accordance with certain rules, in accordance with the logic of this artist's work. Dora suggested that she not be the writer, but that she should choose the elements that would compose this portrait of the estate from the raw material of a day-to-day journal written by someone else. The instructions given to the person writing this journal were simple: look, breathe, perceive the rhythm of the estate, listen to those who spoke to her and, with their agreement, transcribe the conversation. Be an attentive and engaged observer, but remain an outsider.

This is what Karim, the chronicler we recruited, continued to do for two weeks in the month of May. Living in a flat on the tenth floor of the block, she enthusiastically tried to understand the estate, with all its complexity and problems. In her journal she sought to bring out the sometimes cruel everyday realities of the place, its bitterness, its anger, its injustice, its

despair, and sometimes its malevolent rumours, but also a humour, an energy and a humanity that were out of the ordinary. Here, the present definitely took the place of the past, and its implacable reality shunted into the background those stories mixing reality and fiction relating to the myths of the estate's origins.

We must admit that we struggled to cope with the irruption of this sometimes painful present, and on several occasions we found ourselves crossing the line we had marked out and entering into people's private lives. We only realised this when it was too late, when we distributed excerpts from the journal to inhabitants of the housing block. The anger and incomprehension of some of them were legitimate, and once again we offer our apologies, especially to those we did not speak to personally, for the excesses contained in the first version of Dora García's book, *Cellule Cité Lénine*. Since then, the text has been edited in order to protect and preserve the anonymity of the people who spoke to us, or who were mentioned.

In recognising and correcting our mistakes, we also found ourselves dealing with the difficulties inherent in any work done in social spaces, when it can be confronted

with other imperatives than the understanding sought by an artistic project. This work by Dora García, "*Cellule Cité Lénine*", is no doubt more complex than many other projects to carry out and communicate because of its distance, its refusal to play to certain expectations, and because of its internal logic, which is in no sense a response to a situation, let alone a solution to a problem (it is, rather, an active autonomous, independent principle). In such a context, the responsibility of the Laboratoires is to take on board the projects of the artists we have invited to work with us, to assess them in relation to the surrounding reality, to bring them into contact with that reality while adapting our working methods, with respect for the artists' methodological logic and the prerogatives of the context. However, part of that responsibility is also to abandon a project if its development is surrounded by hostility.

The dialogue that follows points up the initial intentions of the project, Karim's first impressions and Dora García's reaction to this period of residence in the housing block.

FRANÇOIS PIRON

21 MAY

Karim, is everything okay? I'm starting to worry about you, your last text is so beautiful and so sad. Could you give me a clearer picture of the graffiti you mentioned?

Thanks, and take care. Let me know if everything's okay.

DORA

13 JUNE

Would it be okay with you if we did a conversation with a view to putting an article about the CCL project in the next issue of the Laboratoires news bulletin?

All the best,

KARIM

13 JUNE

Of course, the interview's a great idea! I think we're supposed to be meeting on July 5, but we can always do it by email. I don't know if I've already told you, but I really am very happy with the content of the texts, and even more so with the pictures. Everything is really great.

See you soon,

DORA

14 JUNE

In return I'd like to thank you for having trusted me for the last two weeks. We'll be seeing each other on Wednesday 5 July at the Laboratoires. As for the interview, we could do it via the Internet if necessary. It would be interesting, for example, to talk about your detachment as effected via my presence in the Lenin Estate and conversely I could think about the implications of being a neighbour here while playing the detachment game with you via these exchanges. What do you think? Do you have any other ideas? It's up to you.

Do you recall that SMS you sent me (Everything okay?)?

KARIM

14 JUNE

We'll be talking very soon. Your idea of distance—nearness—occupation—narration seems a very good one to me.

When do we start?

DORA

15 JUNE

What if you start?

KARIM

18 JUNE

Once I'd got the project for the Laboratoires and Art Grandeur Nature clear in my head—the Lenin Estate idea—I realised I was going to need a go-between, someone to be there on my behalf. First of all for practical reasons: as the mother of two small children I couldn't just take off for two weeks. And then, being a Spanish woman of almost forty with a limited grasp of French and no experience of life on a housing estate, I would certainly have difficulty being accepted. There were more conceptual reasons, too: I've often worked via substitutes or proxies, and I enjoy that—it gives me the chance to keep my distance and judge my work as an objective spectator, together with the possibility of surprises, because there's a second mind at work along with mine. It's as if I were able to become somebody else. Isn't that everybody's dream—especially in the case of artists? It means I can cut free from my little artistic fears and my human limitations. Like in the novel *Fahrenheit 451*, when Faber gives Montag the chance to resist while he himself stays in the background, watching the hero fighting back on his behalf and staying in full-time contact via a tiny microphone. So I'm Faber and you're Montag.

DORA

19 JUNE

During those two weeks, for some of the residents I was a strange neighbour replacing the artist who'd been living there before me; for others I was a journalist hungry for news; some of them thought I was a cop; and you see me as your accomplice. So I'd like to know exactly what you mean by "go-between" and "Montag". I'd like to know how you, as a spectator, saw my moving about, my encounters and my discoveries; what seemed to fit with your instructions and what sometimes seemed to be out of your control, given that there was this distance between us. Did you have the feeling that this distance could be a distorting factor in the light of such totally concrete facts as the language barrier, communication in writing or the differences in family situation, age, sex and maybe other things? In what way do you feel that you sometimes got closer to me or to the residents, and what caused this? Or in more imaginative terms, how does one identify with one's "hero" so as to become someone else, open to being surprised? What were your expectations?

As far as I'm concerned, every day I was in search of my own surprises, by which I mean pro-

gramming my wanderings through the building so as to meet people, trying to get myself accepted as a neighbour and an artist; sharing the residents' daily lives by trying, discreetly, to find a certain rhythm to life in the building and, above all, not falling into the trap of pseudo-poetic housing estate mythologising. I was concerned to find the right balance for my brief stay, so that I could express what I was experiencing as an "outsider" or a newcomer to this place. But most of all I wanted to give as accurate an account as I could of what some of my neighbours had to say—distorting it as little as possible so as to make a given form of reality more concrete for you. With this in mind I tried to be someone else, too, or to become one of them. Strangely though, on the other hand, I avoided reading the blog too often, because it gave me the *a posteriori* impression of being projected into another space again. Each time I had to establish these different distances—real and fictive—more clearly so that I could try to make contact with other people for you.

KARIM

20 JUNE

I was expecting writing that was much more "neutral" and descriptive, much more legalistic, so to speak. I was expecting more distance between you and the estate and I was (agreeably) surprised by the "poetic" or literary quality of your writing, by your ability to create characters rather than describe the residents in a more "reality TV" way. So right from the outset I felt that the project was better than I had imagined. It moved into fiction straight off; even while sticking to the truth at all times it found its own narrative rhythm, and living characters, and so my go-between unequivocally became an author and myself a reader. There were passages that really moved me, and I wasn't expecting that. The text "The lift door is open onto the void", dated 21 May 2006, was a turning point. After your journeys through the different floors, and the discovery of the sarcophagus and the graffiti, the actual building surprised me.

I was trying to read all I could about the working-class suburbs, and the uprising, and when I found myself back with Michael Haneke and his "Lenin Avenue"¹ all the pieces fell into place. The distance was always calculated, but

1

In the Michael Haneke film *Hidden* (2005), Lenin Avenue provides the main protagonist with clues enabling him to track down

the person he suspects of anonymously sending him videotapes of his private life.



Dora García, *Cellule Cité Lénine*, 2006. Photo by Karim Rouillon

its beauty surprised and moved me. You were an outsider, but you weren't out of place the way I would have been if I'd done things myself. I found your character totally natural and rounded out in the CCL novel. So it was the emotional side of your work I hadn't been expecting, and it made all this into something broader than my original concept. The last two pieces on the young people were full of humour and compassion—by compassion I mean empathy, the ability to tune into someone else's feelings. This empathy, this ability to sense the feelings of the building's inhabitants, was the most remarkable, most unexpected thing, and I wonder what might have happened if you'd stayed longer. What I'd really like to know, too, is how you spent your days there: if there was also a feeling of melancholy due to the fact of not being at home.

DORA

21 JUNE

My days seemed very short, because I really wanted to keep a close eye on everything and achieve a certain kind of everyday life: to fuel the blog, but especially to get myself accepted as a neighbour—to achieve my goal by talking and listening to people. To be able to dialogue and have a *raison d'être* as far as the residents were concerned. It's true that two weeks is a very short

period in the life of a housing estate and the first week I was a bit lonely. I didn't have too much contact with the residents: some of them were busy with their daily affairs and others were wary. Sometimes I wondered if I would ever succeed in making contact with my new neighbours—in closing the gap. So I often strolled around just outside the building. And I would sit on a bench as an observer; initially to be identified by the residents while keeping a certain distance. Then I gradually moved in closer by hanging about in the lobby, which was a meeting point because of the lodge and the letterboxes. I introduced myself as a neighbour wanting to know more about the life of the building from its construction up until the present. Some women residents introduced me to their neighbours, both male and female, and I began saying hello to people as a way of gradually starting a dialogue with them. Curiously the young people of my own age kept their distance at first. A young resident had died and the grieving in the building hampered dialogue: sometimes there was nothing to say, other times you shattered a silence that was becoming harder and harder to bear. So I preferred to let things happen naturally without impinging on this distance. No doubt some young residents needed to keep their distance from tragic events.

KARIM

22 JUNE

Yes, I know how difficult your work was. The grieving in the estate certainly did not make things any easier. You arrived at a highly traumatic moment, but this wasn't by choice—things just happened that way. The distance between you and the residents and the shift to a more easygoing relationship is readily detectable in the bulletin. At one point tenants were quoted in *Le Parisien* and what they said gave me the feeling that some of them thought you would be a good spokesman and that they could use your presence to get a hearing. Was there a moment when you felt that at last you were being told things—stories, opinions—with the idea that you would make them public later on, put them into circulation in a circle wider than that of the building and its residents? Did you see yourself as an intermediary? And when the young people ultimately accepted you, why do you think they did it? Wasn't it because they too wanted a hearing from people outside their habitual circuit?

DORA

27 JUNE

Some of the young people are really mistrustful of journalists, but it was also a matter of having to break free of certain circuits. The last narrative I collected is important, because it came from



Dora Garcia, *Cellule Cité Lénine*, 2006. Photo by Karim Rouillon

someone who had grown up on the Lenin Estate and could talk about a more peaceful past. Some young people don't want to speak out because they say they're not listened to and that anyway it's too late. The youngest ones have always been faced with the estate's problems and have found a way of living with them. I think that last person I spoke with grasped the political scope of this project. He wants things to change, whereas other, younger people are pretty resigned, which makes them less responsible. He told me he could speak for the younger people because they follow leaders. They need a model.

KARIM

27 JUNE

Tell me, were you all along convinced you were doing something worthwhile—something honourable and honest—in writing a diary that would work as a medium for getting the Lenin Estate out of its short-circuit of complaint and grief, or just a diary made up of stories and true accounts? Or did you also have doubts—a feeling of mistrust—in the sense that, rightly or wrongly, it might seem that an artist was exploiting an urgent situation, one in which something needed to be done, one that was very important for those involved? And that this artist—me—might be using it for her own benefit, her own career? Were you at all times convinced of the value of

what you were doing? What's your personal opinion, as an artist, of projects like this one, or even the one in the Landy² neighbourhood, which are art projects embedded in very grave social situations?

DORA

28 JUNE

I don't think I was always certain about it in terms of morality or honesty, because nothing seemed fixed to me apart from the length of my stay. I tried to achieve a certain freedom so as to produce the texts with feeling and sensitivity, and especially so as to understand other people. And I let those people talk to me about whatever they felt like, without rushing them into everyday problems. But I did want to encounter them via these problems, because for them it was also a way of dialoguing, and speaking about themselves, which isn't easy. I even think that not everybody was saddened by these problems, and that talking about them was a means of passive self-protection in a very serious social situation or of attracting attention so as to try and change things.

I used this situation in an attempt to understand things with other people, so as to transcend

² It refers to Thomas Hirschhorn's *Musée Précaire Albinet* project, undertaken in 2004

in Aubervilliers's Landy neighbourhood, in which Karim Rouillon took part.

the everyday and certain inescapable facts. It seemed especially important to me to act as a mediator, by which I mean to get information—true or false—circulating in the interests of generating a collective awareness of certain things and making room for a broader, less paranoid field of expression. In this respect I was sure of the value of what I was doing, because some people did express themselves and give rise to new relationships. I wonder now if they think of me and if my presence there has left some trace. I wonder if I succeeded in creating a fresh link between them, between myself as an artist and them, and between you and them. Personally, I often think of them; and in addition to remembering them, I hope they'll succeed in organising themselves so as to have some collective weight, and that this will gain them new respect. Maybe an art project can also bring respect and shatter certain clichés. This experience has really changed me.

KARIM

29 JUNE

I put that question to you because I think there's an urgent need to define the role of an art project in a society that's sometimes extremely tense. Obviously I personally never had any doubts about the honesty of the project, because my basic intention was never anything more than to

listen to stories from the Lenin Estate; from the beginning that seemed interesting enough to me, with no need for any extras. As I see it, what emanates from this building—not only the residents' narratives, but also its architecture, its *raison d'être*, its past and its present—is a fragment of the history of France and its subterranean currents. So for me it was a gift and a privilege to be able to work in a place like this, which excited my curiosity from the start and opened me up to all sorts of possibilities.

It's also important for me not to have a clearly defined product at the end of the process; as you so aptly pointed out, the only fixed element was its duration—two weeks. What we ended up with is a book, a blog and memories; and this *intangibility* removed the project's falsely artistic pretensions, because the outcome, constructed with what we received from the estate's residents, was not definable in advance. From the start it was very clear in my mind that I was not out to "give" the Lenin Estate something its residents hadn't asked for, as, for example, when you create an installation or present a work of art on an estate; among other things I was aware that nothing would have the same intensity as everyday life on the estate. An installation would have been a dead loss. So it was honest from the outset, because we had no pretensions.

And I think it's very important to follow up the development of the project and the impression it will make on the residents with the presentation of your stay in the estate in September and of the book and the material you collected. I think this phase is going to be very important for me, and I'd like you to be there for that in one way or another.

DORA

29 JUNE

I hope we'll be able to share our new impressions, together and with the residents, after the next stages in the project. I think my presence has created expectations...

KARIM

30 JUNE

One last thing. In the book we're in the process of publishing, you appear as the author of all the texts and the photos, and I've split the copyright between us. I've often worked with other people on art projects and I'm hardly ever the sole creator of a project, even if, when it comes to the crunch, I end up taking all the responsibility. But

I've never before felt that the other person—in this case you—was actually the author, with me as the trigger and the person responsible. What do you feel about this authorship business? To what extent do you see the project as belonging to you?

DORA

2 JULY

That's not an easy one to answer. You left me a lot of freedom and I appropriated the role you'd given me. In that respect I felt responsible for your project, but I also felt responsible for what some of the residents said. So there is a real concern about responsibility.

KARIM

Dora García is a visual artist, associate artist of the Laboratoires in 2006. She lives in Brussels (Belgium).
Cellule Cité Lénine/ Rooms, Conversations, exhibitions by Dora García from 16th September to 19th November 2006 in the framework of the biennial Art Grandeur Nature "Mutations Urbaines" organised by the Conseil général de la Seine-Saint-Denis with the support of the Région Île-de-France, in collaboration with the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. Production Argos vzw, Brussels with Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers; Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst, Leipzig; Vlaamse Audiovisuele Fonds; with the support of SEACEX-Spain and the Town of Aubervilliers.