**Biennale Momentum: is the future of art collective?**

By Magali Lesauvage

On the island of Jeløya, in Norway, Momentum 12, a biennial organized by the Tenthaus collective, is reminiscent in its spontaneity and participatory nature of Documenta 15 in Kassel, led by the ruangrupa collective. Can this model, which divided the art world in 2022, be transposed to another context?

A man who coos like a pigeon, another busy on a sewing machine, a woman who pulls the cards, another who offers a free hug: this is not a surrealist collage. This is the workshop "To Give and To Expect Nothing in Return" organized by the Indonesian collective Gudskul (or rather a handful of its 57 members) on the day of the inauguration of the Momentum biennial 12 designed by another collective, Tenthaus, at Galleri F15 in Moss, on the island of Jeløya, Norway. Landing in this enchanting setting – red wooden houses, fields as far as the eye can see, open horizon towards the Oslo Fjord –, it takes a little time to understand this game of more or less chaotic Russian dolls, and to integrate into which looks like a party where everyone is having fun but to which one does not have the feeling of having been really invited.

Tenthaus is this group of around twenty artists and art workers – and almost as many nationalities (Iranian, Taiwanese, Argentinian, Mexican, Norwegian, Indian, British, Italian…) based in a utility building in 'Oslo. “We don't live there, we need limits,” concedes Mechu Rapela, Argentina, who prefers the title of driver to the title of managing director – that is, one who “keeps everyone on the path they have to follow”. Initially composed of a handful of artists, it gradually grew to reach 20 people. "We just knocked on the door," say in chorus Shahrzad Malekian and Matilde Balatti, attracted by the call for air. If the first is curator and the second administrator, the roles are not fixed: apart from their own work, each member of Tenthaus can propose a performance, the reception of a guest, a collaboration with a publisher... not, but you can declare a veto. “Everyone makes decisions on different subjects, and the others trust each other,” says Valentina Martínez Mariscal, a Mexican who studied cultural engineering in Paris before joining Tenthaus. Which doesn't mean we agree on everything. The key is to put your ego aside and trust. »

sign of the times

The invitation to Galleri F15 is a sign of the times: art belongs to the collective. After the Indonesians from ruangrupa were invited to Documenta 15 in Kassel last year, the Norwegian public art center has chosen Tenthaus for the 12th edition of Momentum. In this rural setting, an hour's drive south of the Norwegian capital, the biennial entitled "Together as to gather" has the air of Documenta 15 on a smaller scale, with its shared kitchen, its participatory workshops and its performance in nature. This was a memorable event, each collective inviting other collectives in an exponential momentum, driven by the idea of lumbung (Indonesian word designating a community barn, and by extension the sharing of resources and experiences).

As in 2022 in Kassel, discussions, shared meals and collective activities intended to "bring other gatherings" are at the heart of the Momentum 12 program, which unrolls a list, not of artists but of participants - around a hundred, figure also flexible – to varying degrees, some presenting works in situ, others signing a text. As in Kassel, the biennale is not for all that empty of objects. Within this tight framework, the tangible works are few in number, but each is striking in its accuracy. Inside the main building of Galleri F15, we can cite the installation of woven conversations by Anawana Haloba, the performative drawings by Andrea Parkins, or the video of an illegal road trip aboard freight trains presented in a mold-ridden shelter by the Czech collective WET. Some pieces echo from the inside out: the map of the pipes surrounding the art center (by Margrethe Pettersen and Line Solberg Dolmen) reproduces the surrounding landscape, until emerging near the coast. The public is also invited to produce, notably in the DIY printing workshop of PRINT chronicles.

Exposing its contradictions

But is the energy, both protesting and constructive, instilled by ruangrupa in Kassel transposable in a very confidential context, a very wealthy country and a society that is still not very mixed? Documenta 15 was an event ment-river: from one day to the next, the visitor did not bathe in the same current, causing some frustration, partly compensated by the extent of the proposals. On the contrary, the human size of Momentum 12 makes it possible to avoid indigestion: we are a thousand leagues from a biennale-marathon colonizing an already saturated cultural hub, like Venice. Contrary to a spectacular conception of art, the effect can be deceptive. We go around the exhibitions in two hours, maximum. But the moment continues, especially online. "The Internet is our main exhibition space, both as an archive and a link with those who are far away", explains Mechu Rapela. A web radio broadcasts the conversations recorded live on the lawn of the art center, the biennial site collects unpublished texts throughout the event, while a flap newspaper serves as an evolving catalog, in which one can insert a multitude of free self-publishing to take with you.

Another paradigm echoing the Documenta: the artists, in turn, are present throughout the biennial. In the neoclassical building, Gudskul, who has been collaborating with Tenthaus since 2019 and was also in Kassel last year, has set up a cozy lounge, to chat with the artists or play a game of chess for four. Outside, the Gudkitchen offers collaborative cooking, dugnad (a term which, in the Norwegian tradition, designates the maintenance of a common good) or karaoke, while the workshop is open permanently. However, on the day of the opening, we mainly met members of the two collectives there... The model here seems to reach its limits, the artists themselves composing the crowd of visitors, on the fringes of a public that is doubtless less captive than that of Kassel or Venice. "The art system is not made for a group of twenty people", recognizes Mechu Rapela, who recalls that major museum institutions are increasingly inviting collectives, like the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid or from EMST in Athens. And the art market even less: “We don't sell things, but we sell something”.

Black on white

If in Kassel, actions and messages openly criticized the neo-liberal and colonial system of art, here the institutional criticism is softer. On the day of the opening, German artist Stephanie Lüning made a stable of colored moss overflow. At the entrance to the main building, performers, harnessed with hammers and screwdrivers, lie on the ground or bow their heads, before embracing each other. A proposal by Jasper Siverts, Ana Marques Engh and Bendik-Bendik Syversætre Johannessen that evokes the fatigue of art workers. The question of money is tackled in black and white, in the form of an artist's invoice, which does not fail to enumerate its invisible tasks - smiling at new people, cleaning and maintaining its work and those of others, responding to incessant emails… Tenthaus is financed by public structures – European Union, Norsk Kulturråd (equivalent to the Norwegian Ministry of Culture), city of Oslo –, but also by a banking foundation, the Sparebankstiftelsen. In a country where oil accounts for half of exports and generates income that feeds a quarter of the state budget, it is therefore indirectly fossil fuels that feed the cultural sector, including Tenthaus. While Momentum 12 precisely calculates its carbon footprint, this contradiction is illustrated in the cartography of Alessandro Marchi, declining the tax evasion of large Norwegian fortunes, mostly linked to hydrocarbons. Again, the contradictions are addressed directly.

If today certain institutions give visibility to artists' collectives, these remain fragile. The area of Oslo where Tenthaus is located is undergoing gentrification. "We're going to end up getting fired," sighs Valentina Martínez Mariscal. Several of its members see their visa expiring soon, without assurance that it will be renewed. Dependence on external subsidies is another factor of organized precariousness. Is the porosity of collectives among themselves the key to their survival? Moving, nomadic, evolving, Tenthaus and Gudskul have embarked on a partnership called “Stitching Ecosystem”, which connects them from Oslo to Jakarta. Like a loose fabric, floating on the surface of an art system that will quickly absorb it or reject it on the periphery.