

Guillaume Désanges

PROFILE OF THE CURATOR

In Conversation with Ruslana Lichtzier



Guillaume Désanges is an independent French curator and art critic. Visiting Chicago this fall to initiate the first residency of his ongoing project in the South Side of Chicago, the *Méthode Room*, in collaboration with Theaster Gates' Rebuild Foundation, Désanges' French Pavilion will accommodate cultural practitioners for an exchange that aims towards an expansion of local and international ideas and experiences. His first resident is architect Xavier Wrona, founder of the agency *Est-ce ainsi*, who will produce both an exhibition and public program that touches on radical ideas in architecture, the power of ideology, and its manifestation in reality.

This interview was conducted in April 2015, during Désanges' three-week research visit in preparation for the launch of the *Méthode Room* in Chicago. It was recorded, transcribed, and edited. While both sides communicated in English, it will be useful to note that English is a second language for both parties involved.



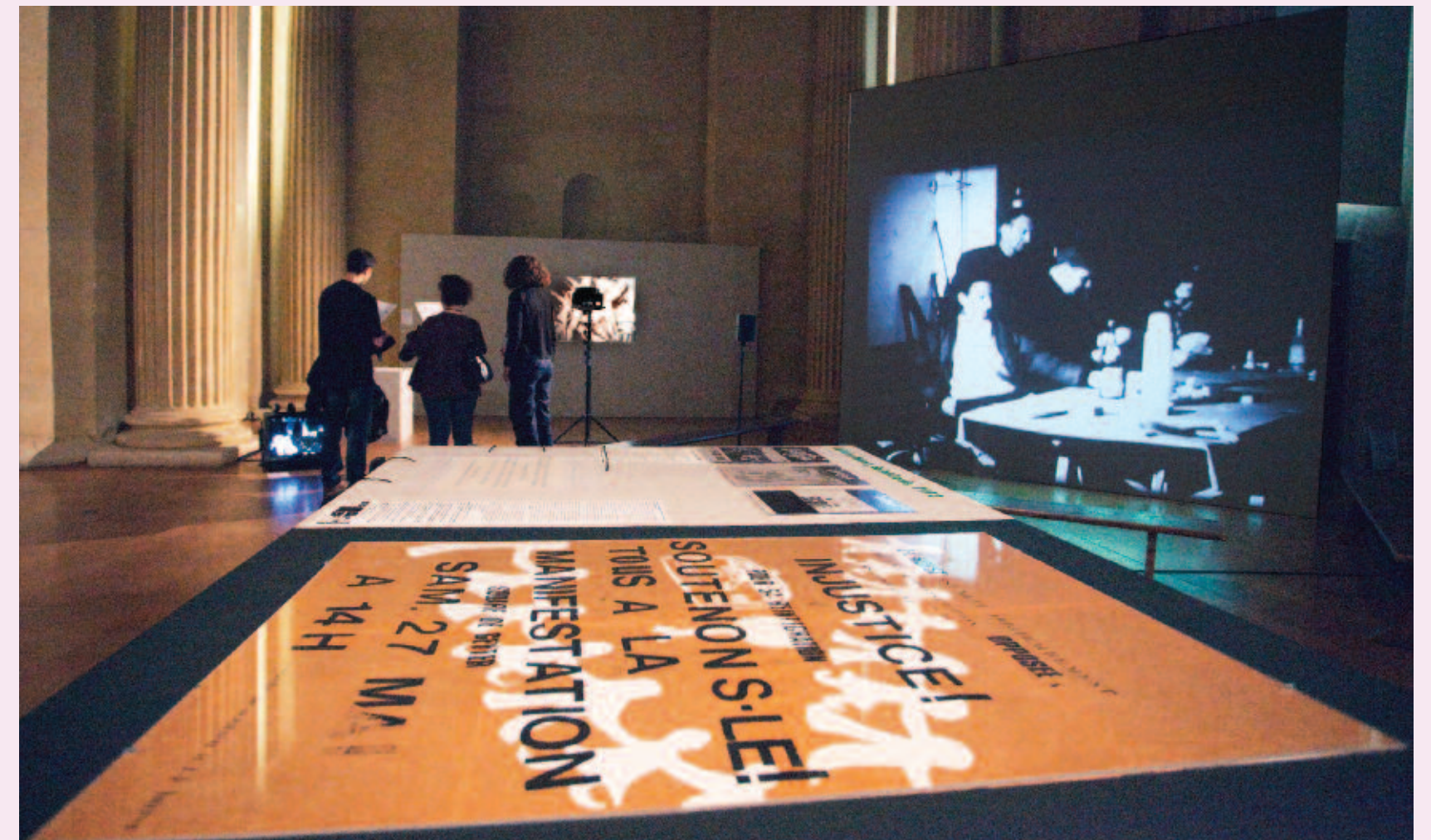
RUSLANA LICHTZIER: Can we start with you describing your plans for the fall, and if they have changed during your visit?

GUILLAUME DÉLANGES: Considering that I have been working on this project since last fall, my current visit did not change my plans much—it did, however, confirm my intuitions about Chicago; it being a perfect place to host this pavilion. I feel that there is a true sense of collaboration here, and a very fertile ground as far as the historical and intellectual context is concerned. This current trip reinforced my will to organize a challenging and experimental residency program in the South Side—although, I do not even think of it as a residency any longer, but instead more as a guest house, or a small scale alternative institution that is run by different people for a certain amount of time. The project is not about a residency, in the sense that its aim is not to welcome people that will act concretely. Rather, I am interested in creating a space that allows an outsider to enter this place, and actually to participate in the cultural energy of the city—using his or her work and desire, while focusing on a specific project. This is quite a challenging idea—to create a zone in which guests are active and not passive observers—and we will have to see if it is really possible. With that being said, I truly believe that such innovative project can take place here.

RL: Recently you conducted a research project in Miami, together with the Spanish artist Dora García. The space hosted you, and exhibited a step in the continuous relationship you have with the artist, as it is not the first time you

worked together. I am interested in how you define this kind of practice in relation to it being exported overseas, and exhibited somewhere else, without having the local context. That is perhaps the way I imagine what you are going to do here with *Méthode Room*.

GD: Yes—in Miami, I experimented in curating a one-day performative exhibition. The show was the execution of my invitation to Dora García to publicly brainstorm with me on some of the main themes in her work, focusing specifically on radical marginality, psychiatry, politics, and artistic creation. During this event / exhibition, we materialized ideas by placing documents on the wall; images, texts, words, and objects. For me, it was an experimentation in curating in a mode of emergency, which necessitated the origination of spontaneity and collective intelligence. On the outset, this project had nothing to do with Miami. It was totally exported because I did not have the opportunity, like here, to visit several times in advance, and to prepare for it. Look—I know that there is a problem in coming to Chicago without *precisely* knowing the specific context, but I am fine with it. In this project, the guests are chosen carefully; the participants I select will bring who they are, and therefore confront who they are with what is here. They are not going to give lessons, or act as if they are from within, as locals, but they will interact with a reality—and with fiction too, I would add—from a critical perspective. Their own critical perspective. In the end, it is not a question of The Exterior versus The Interior. It is a question of interacting, meaning taking from a reality but also giving back to this reality. This is the idea.



RL: Looking at your work, I would not suspect you to be one of the “free-agent curators,” jumping around the world and making projects that are totally isolated from any current local issues. The exhibition you curated, *There was a time in the Past where the Future was Present*, at the Museum of Art and History, Saint-Denis (Paris), is a very political and specific project that responds to the place the museum is located in. Something I find very interesting in your work is that you tend toward dualistic ideas or tensions—one of them is the Universal versus the Specific, and it comes out in your vocabulary as well. In my mind, I pair the project you are doing in Paris together with what you are doing in Chicago as something that brings opposite energies together, but those that are of the same interest.

GD: To be frank, when you say you do not suspect of me being someone who shows something from the exterior—in a way, yes actually, I can do that and I have done that. In this way, I think that the opposition you describe is not valid for me. For example, in Romania I did a project called *Child’s Play*, involving young children who reinterpreted selected iconic gestures of the history of performance and body-art. Although the project was geographically un-rooted, and could have taken place anywhere, the way it was executed—having had to cope with the local context—kept changing it. In my mind, that exact point is what made the project so special.

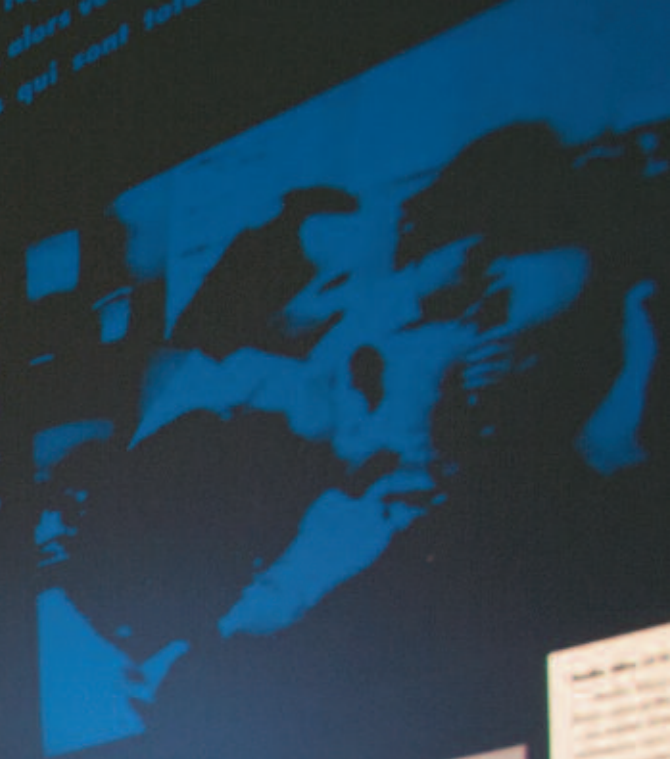
I find the task of responding discreetly to a specific context a bit problematic. The attempt to identify the needs of a place and to address them results in dead-ends, from my experience. In general,

I do not find this opposition, working with or without a context, as relevant. A good project is neither blind to, nor determined by the context; it must escape both pitfalls. In my work, I always pay attention to the words I use. For example, I never say that I am doing something *about* the context, but that I am inspired *by* the context. This holds a big difference. I do not know the context of Chicago, and I did not know the context of Romania, and even if I did know it, I am not sure that it would be best to tackle it on its home ground. I would rather do a show about Chicago in Paris or in Romania, than in Chicago. That being said, in Saint-Denis, I wanted to create a site-specific exhibition. I was drawn to its archives—they excited me, but I did not want my work to reflect them. Rather, I wanted it to be inspired by it. Anyway, I had to break the logic of *The context*, although I’m quite familiar with it because I used to work in that area. I had to bring to it something different. Voluntarily, I enforced myself to remain a stranger to the place, which allowed for interesting tensions to surface. This same methodology is applied to the project in the South Side. *Gates’ Dorchester Project* is a tremendous inspiration in my wish to organize this experimental residency, it being the hottest spot in the City, full with energy and problematic stakes, but it does not mean that the residents will reflect directly on *Dorchester’s* archive. In sum, I am dodging the possibility of having a Stockholm Syndrome with the context I am working with, although I am inspired by its dynamism.

RL: The idea of working with the context is a classic curatorial concept that makes shows that are about something, while from our conversation it is



l'été 1977, le prolétariat joua entre dans la scène,
également. Toutes les universités d'Italie commencent
à être occupées. Ce n'est plus un mouvement d'étudiants,
c'est un mouvement de chômeurs, c'est un mouvement qui
repose à l'intérieur des universités toute son expérience
de vie. Contre le chômage, contre le travail au noir, contre
l'État, contre la violence.



“A good project is neither blind to, nor determined by the context; it must escape both pitfalls.”

TITLE PAGE:

Curated Session #1: The Dora Garcia files, exhibition view, Perez Art Museum, Miami, 2014.

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PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT AND RIGHT:

There was a time in the past where the future was present, Exhibition view, exhibition produced by the Seine-Saint-Denis department, the city of Saint-Denis Museum of art and history, 2015, © Christophe Delory.

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PREVIOUS SPREAD:

There was a time in the past where the future was present, Exhibition view, exhibition produced by the Seine-Saint-Denis department, the city of Saint-Denis Museum of art and history, 2015, © Christophe Delory.

apparent that you are pushing the limits of curatorial practices, this being only one example. In your projects, you are a participant as well, and not only a producer. You have previously quoted Harald Szeemann in saying, “intensity will always find its medium.” Do you agree that this is what you are searching for in your practice?

GD: My main interest in that sentence is the question of the economy of work. I usually quote Szeemann when I am teaching, or when I meet professionals, curators even, that say “you know, I have this project but I am waiting to get the money.” And I think, “No, you don’t need anything to make a show. You don’t need money, you don’t need a space, you don’t even need ideas... what you need is Intensity.” I first heard this sentence in a film about the artist Miroslav Tichy. He is the perfect example of the minor position in art that I love so much. Tichy had nothing; no network, I am not sure he even had any skills. And then he did his wonderful work, which is all about intensity. The same goes for Czech artist Jiri Kovanda, who is a model for me of what I call the nuclear force of art: tiny little frictions that create devastating explosions of meaning and emotion. Whatever the scale of the project (or the form, or the means, or the medium), intensity will find its way to touch people. This is the kind of spirit that I am inspired by as a curator. I am not confident enough to say that I have intensity, but I know I can always find a way to do a show if I want to. If the necessity comes, I can make a show here, I can do a show in the street, or in children’s school, or in a museum.

RL: This intensity is predominant in the curated session with Dora García, that has the aspect of the performative production and the time-based research, which, I felt, had resulted in something different, unique. In your text, you expressed the fragility of that moment...

GD: The outcome was unexpected, as it did not follow not a pre-set course of development, and I was very happy with it. I enjoyed the limitations, although the project had its problems, one of them it being too short. If I had to do it again, I would do it for two days—which does not seem a lot different, but is still twice the time. The second problem was the fragility of the project. What were we actually showing? Not art, nor original documents, but representations of documents, as traces of thoughts; as if they were mental footnotes. Due to this structure, the outcome was decontextualized and quite lost on the surface level; although the work of García is everything but a surface level. And yet, this iconographic surface created something new and different, it brought to light a fragile kind of knowledge; a kind of cognitive cartography that made an immediate sense. As a visitor, you confront with this surface, of hundreds of Xeroxed images and copies, then you are exposed to a new, unfamiliar discourse, that unfold through the relations—the links between the images and titles that create autonomous layouts—while the previous conversation and comments that created this visual, material discourse are vanished.

RL: This opening of thought reminds me of [German art historian and cultural theorist] Aby Warburg.

GD: Yes, I agree. Warburg brings to mind another important force, which is the sensuality of theory. I mean sensuality as mobility, an unsettled relationship to knowledge. This mobility was used by Warburg in a very practical manner. It expressed a choreography of the mind, which allows one to work with intuition as with intention. Also, I really like Warburg’s way of working without synchronization, but rather in a diachronic manner, as if expressing another kind of history, a non-hierarchical and non-progressive one. In my own practice, even while addressing specific periods in history, I try to avoid the order of things. That is how we worked in Miami—while focusing on specific periods of time, we did not attempt to create a new order. We did not try to create a disorder either; we just did not care about order.

RL: Ok, and yet, you are concerned with the question of history as a discipline. Your shows create new links between contemporary artists and previous generations, with fresh historical links. The way I see it, in your work, you operate as a cartographer, but instead of approaching history through a vertical perspective that traces a linear outline, you approach it from a horizontal perspective that creates a kind of a collapse; with this, new historical connections surface, and create a new map.

GD: In French the word “*Coupe*,” means “*Cut*,” as in a cut of a tree. The cut exposes a circular structure; it does not follow lines of progress, but rather connects, on the same plane, different periods of time. This idea, of considering history not as a linear progression, but as a series of permanent spheres that are intrinsically connected to each other, is close to me. I adopted it from Warburg, and Didi-Huberman, and also from Manuel de Landa’s “1000 years of non linear history;” he created a very inspiring image for me to work with as a curator. I am trying to address History in a creative manner, or better, I am trying to oppose “histories” to “The History,” to create a regime of narration rather than of a discourse. It is a way of considering History as an always ideological constructed, movement. To sum it up, it is the projection of some beautiful fictions, which can be indefinitely retold.

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Guillaume Désanges is an independent curator and art critic, founder and director of Work Method, a Paris based agency for artistic projects. He organizes international exhibitions projects and lectures. Recent projects include: *Concrete Erudition* (2009–2011), Le Plateau-Frac Ile-de France, Paris); *Wander* (2011, Centre Pompidou Metz); *Amazing ! Clever ! Linguistic !*, An Adventure in Conceptual Art (2013, Generali Foundation, Vienna, Austria); *Gestures of the mind* (La Verrière, Brussels); A Universal Exhibition, documentary section (Louvain-la-Neuve biennale, Belgium, 2013), *Curated Session #1 : The Dora Garcia Files* (Perez Art Museum, Miami, 2014), *There was a time in the Past where the Future was Present* (Museum of Art and History, Saint-Denis / Paris, 2014), Ma’aminim, *The Believers* (Tranzitdisplay, Prague, 2015).