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Millet Matrix II: Between Commission and Collaboration.

Millet Matrix II is the second part of a three-part exhibition project that focuses on one work by the Montreal artist, Rosika Desnoyers. The project's initial aims were to present the work of Desnoyers in a way that highlighted its intellectual and historical complexity, in particular in relation to the practice of painting and its relationship to conceptual art, and to use her work to explore the contemporary domestic space's socio-anthropological and epistemological status in an age when work and pleasure, the public and private can no longer be clearly separated, except perhaps through a conscious strategy to highlight their presence and diverse social functions. The works chosen for the two-part exhibition were *After Jean-François Millet, Gleaners (1857)* produced in 2002-2003 and another work by the same title that was produced in 2006. While each work was based on the same pattern, they were the product of different authorial hands. They were also purchased on eBay at different times. The two, and Desnoyers' accompanying monochrome 'error maps,' had been united under the title of *Millet Grid (2006)*. *Millet Grid* was first presented in *Millet Matrix I* in December, 2010.

While *Millet Matrix I* achieved its objectives, the spatial deployment of the exhibition's components (artwork, documentary elements, hybrid catalogue, research tools and documents), raised fundamental questions concerning the exhibitionary potential and function of a private domestic space, the authorial politics of the curatorial gesture versus the dialogic model upon which it was based, and the role of the 'artist-curator' in supporting work that was for the most part unseen by an art world public. There was also a question concerning the ambiguous status and identity of an artist who was undertaking a PhD in her practice and yet who *seemed* to adhere to a model of the skilled amateur woman artist whose rich and complex culture reached back to the eighteenth century foundations of her chosen medium (needlepoint painting).

Millet Matrix I focused on Desnoyers' practice, its relationship to conceptual art, colour field and minimalist painting, and the history of Berlin work as a medium that was used to automate pictorial production in the nineteenth century. Pictorial needlepainting, or Desnoyers' neologism *needlegraphs*, neatly capture the complex and contradictory nature of the little known social activity upon which this artist's practice is based; and her artworks articulate this activity, its history with contemporary theoretical and research-based artistic activity in an unassuming, yet unprecedented way. *Millet Matrix I* explored this articulation with the objective of revealing its complex and contradictory foundations and its contemporary artistic consequence.

Millet Matrix I's engagement took place in the context of Desnoyers' apartment, where her studio and academic workspaces were situated and complementary activities intermingled and migrated between autonomous rooms. Although

apartment exhibitions are not a new phenomenon, an exhibition that explores artworks in relation to the domestic deployment of university-based research practices are rare.¹ *Millet Matrix I*'s deployment in Desnoyers' apartment took account of her PhD. research, its relationship to her art practice, and their relationships to her domestic living space. But the exhibition did not attempt to redefine these relationships in its terms. Instead, it focused on the interrelationships between the two, and presented them as they existed in 2010, at the time of the exhibition, namely as activities that clustered in separate rooms in the apartment: a double living room/studio which was transformed into an exhibition space and an 'office' in which Desnoyers' academic research activities were concentrated.

The apartment's designated spaces have been transformed in the two years since *Millet Matrix I* was presented.² Since December 2010, Desnoyers has moved her bed into the room where her office was situated and she has relocated her PhD. research and writing activities. They now take place in the double living room/studio and, during winter months, the kitchen. However, the layout is not that simple. Important wall-based elements of her research process (in particular, the visual results of mapping overlays of the histories of English technology, art, philosophy and politics) have been conserved in her new bedroom. The result has been a fusion of research and visual practice within one space, with residues of her research activities remaining visible in other rooms (old office/new bedroom or kitchen). *Millet Matrix II*'s mandate was to redefine the interrelationships initially explored in the earlier exhibition within these new configurations and fusions of research/practice. However, since the relocation of Desnoyers' research practice did not effect the original layout of *Millet Grid* and its supporting visual 'documentation,' whose placement on the walls of the double living room/studio were intentionally conserved, the new exhibition can be considered to be an 'insert' into both a new, if fluid, configuration of research/practice, and also an 'insert' into the original exhibition.

Millet Matrix II has taken form through a *commission* that was initiated in December 2010. Moreover, it must be understood to have been proposed *within the context of a longstanding friendship and collaboration*. This formula was selected for a number of reasons. First, it could be used to create an analytically-based visual bridge between exhibitions. Second, it could be used to 'productively' fill the gap between exhibitions, and indeed, because of the length of time it took to produce the commission, the production process has spanned two years. The exhibition process was kept alive, over this extended period, through an exchange of 'intelligence' concerning the commission's progress—information that was woven in with news about the progress of Desnoyers' dissertation.³ Finally, most importantly, the commission was used to trigger a mutation in *Millet Matrix I*'s conceptual, historical and genealogical logics through the production of a new work whose authorship was no longer configured, challenged and then redeployed within the basic parameters of Desnoyers' practice (purchase of an anonymous needlepoint work, production of a second work based on the errors discovered in the original work,

which, in turn, automatically produced a third and final composite work that bore the author's conceptual-methodological 'signature,' even if not the actual physical presence of a signature). The result, in the case of *Millet Matrix II*, is a single 'meta-work' that transcribes and fuses *Millet Grid's* independent pictorial elements. However, this work is not based on the original *Millet Grid*. Instead, it is based on a small black and white reproduction. The reproduction accompanied an essay, 'Programming and Reprogramming Artworks: A Case of Painting and Practicing Conceptual and Media Art by Other Means,' on Desnoyers' work, that had been published in the Spring 2009 issue of *Intermédialités*, a Montreal-based academic journal. The journal was appropriated and transformed into *Millet Matrix I's* exhibition catalogue through the addition of inserts and an artwork composed of the black and white reproduction of *Millet Grid* and a Mary Cassatt painting, *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame* (c.1881). *Millet Grid's* black and white reproduction had also been subject to a dissected mode of presentation on a wall facing *Millet Grid* in Desnoyers' apartment/studio space, and supplementary copies were used for the catalogue's artwork insert in conjunction with the Cassatt reproduction. This mode of presentation was chosen because it mimicked, in turn, the grid-based presentation of *Millet Grid's* components within the context (and concept) of a single work of art. The new work therefore *artificially* explores and extends Desnoyers' Foucauldian-based genealogical method, in a secondhand manner, through the concept and practice of the commission. This exploration takes place with the distinct frame of reference provided by the new version of *Millet Grid* (*Millet Matrix*, 2010-2012). The differential dynamic between an original and its copies, a vital ingredient of Desnoyers' practice, mutates in *Millet Matrix* in the sense that the error-based logic of the artist's genealogical method, *as applied to the needlepoints purchased on eBay* has been transformed under the sign of the commission->collaboration. Instead of producing a work that operates in terms of stitching errors, the new work's production logic is rooted in an end-game strategy that is defined by a shift of focus from an original needlepoint referent to a small black and white reproduction. Since the two are no longer equivalent (there is no common underlying grid based architecture between the black and white reproduction and the needlepoint copy), Desnoyers' translational methodology and its archaeology of the error are no longer applicable or operative. *Millet Matrix* appears to represent an error-free methodological dead end. However, since it does function meta-visually in relation to its referents, it embodies another viewpoint on Desnoyers' practice, a point of view whose frame of reference is no longer another needlepoint, but an exhibition and its strategies and tactics of display.

Millet Matrix II extends the range of Desnoyers' 'genealogical' investigation, by refocusing the research process on the domestic space itself and on the strategy of commissioning a work that engages with the exhibition as a sociology and politics of display. However, the ideological and disciplinary underpinnings of a display practice are modulated through the word 'commission's' etymological field of associations where options and possibilities are mapped historically and semantically. A commission generally implies a financial exchange that operates as a contract between the person who commissions and the one who executes that

commission. However 'commission's' etymology supports a more nuanced definition of contractual exchange. For it introduces the ideas to 'entrust' and to 'commit' which tend to redefine the (binding) relationship that a commission creates through an affective and principled affiliation, as opposed to an exclusively pecuniary/contractual relationship. Entrusting a commission to someone is, in these terms, to create an affective and principled bond of commitment vis-à-vis the project to be undertaken, in place of a pecuniary-based contractual bond. In the case of *Millet Matrix*, the relationship was based on friendship, trust and a common interest in exploring the possibilities of a practice and exhibition.

Millet Matrix II explores the authorial politics of the curatorial gesture as it deploys and transforms itself through an affective and principled affiliation. It extends the dialogical model upon which artistic collaborations are based in the direction of the commission, and it also cautiously and tenuously promotes an exploration of the ambiguities that subtend the cultural and hence *political* necessity of supporting work that is, for the most part, unknown and, moreover, that consciously operate outside of the limelight of museum and gallery display. Such work claims an autonomy that is exceeding rare today. To draw sudden, unsophisticated attention to it can be unfortunate, if not dangerous. It must be engaged on its own terms, with a clear understanding of the potential impact that a gesture of engagement could *represent* in private and in the public domain. We live under the influence of regimes that relentlessly and brutally promote omniscient visibility and that actively colonize the invisible in the name of an obscure but 'universal' democracy. They function under the banner of a 'democratic'—hence 'collective'—concept of a *transcendent* public good. Practices that eschew such homogenizing pressures in the name of cultural independence must not only be treated with respect, but should also be accepted as viable models for localized counter-practices. A commission that valorizes commitment and entrustment, extended in the context of a long-standing collaboration, captures the essence of that respect; while flirting provocatively with the obscure collective powers that promote the unconditional acceptance of a society of ubiquitous surveillance and all that this implies in terms of the homogenization of behavior, cultural and labour practices and activities.⁴

Millet Matrix is the product of this collaboration and this commission. It is a work that could not have been produced within sole the context of Desnoyers' practice, and yet it could not exist without it, or outside of it. Neither could it exist without Desnoyers' consent – her acceptance of the commission. *Millet Matrix II* is its frame: private apartment and a mixture of both 'studio' and 'office.'

NOTE (November 28, 2013): Millet Matrix II was planned as a semi-public site of dialogue and exchange, on the nature and politics of contemporary art and its practices, with individuals who might choose to visit Millet Matrix's context of presentation by invitation and appointment. However, it was never opened to the public. It remained a private collaboration and exhibition, its format chosen in order to further probe the implications, boundary conventions and alternative possibilities of

the exhibition process and format under different (private) conditions of display, dialogue and exchange.

Notes

1. See, for example, the *Society of Exhibition Organizing* founded by Wim T. Schippers and Willem de Ridder in the 1960s. A 1966 flyer for the society proclaims, *Now there is the possibility to have your favourite exhibition at home (or any spot you desire)*. See also the catalogue for the 1981 exhibition, *Apartment Number*, sponsored by A Space, Toronto, in particular Daniel Buren's intervention; the catalogue for the 1986 exhibition, *Chambres d'Amis*, curated by Jan Hoet under the auspices of Museum van Hedendaagse, Gent; and the catalogue for the 2006 exhibition *The Space of Freedom: Apartment Exhibitions in Leningrad 1964-1986*, Joel and Lila Harnett Museum of Art, Richmond, Virginia. However, I know of no apartment-based exhibitions that explore artists' working practices from the viewpoint of the impact of academic research on domestic space.

2. It is important to note that the spatial management of Desnoyers' domestic environment is subject to seasonal adaption (movement of 'office' and studio activities to a more sunny location during the winter), as well as transformations due to the economic necessity of periodically sharing her apartment with a co-tenant. In this sense, each exhibition has negotiated different concentrations and configurations of academic research/artistic activity within the apartment's rooms during the months immediately preceding their opening.

3. This process was also supported and stimulated by an ongoing dialogue with Marc James Léger, which resulted in an interview that was published in *Etc* in 2011 and an essay, '*Homo Academicus Curatorius: Millet Matrix as Intercultural Paradigm*,' published in *ONCURATING.org* in June 2013, also by Léger, that analyzed the relationship between collaboration, contemporary curating theory and a broader capitalist democracy in which cultural production takes place. Léger has also commented on the present essay. His ongoing interest and engagement have been essential to the process of collaboration explored in the Millet Matrix project and to its success as a reflexive critical practice developed in relation to friends and peers.

4. For another innovative approach to the question of collaboration that could also be treated in terms of the concept of the commission, see the work of Sophie Bélair-Clément, in particular *2 rooms equal size, 1 empty, with secretary*,⁽¹⁾ that was held at Artex, Montreal, between September 27, 2012 to January 26, 2013.