

GOLDBARRGOROD NICOLAS MOULIN

INTERVIEW WITH NICOLAS MOULIN BY CHRISTELLE ALIN AND CÉLINE CHAZALVIEL

FREE

To begin with, the Villa Arson is an exhibition space for which you are creating a new version of *GOLDBARRGOROD*, but then it is also the architecture of a building dedicated to art, conceived in the sixties as a laboratory and carried out by Michel Marot in the brutalist style. How does your proposal fit into this context?

Indeed the context of the Villa Arson is special, and you're right in pointing out that the way I am functioning on site for this update of *GOLDBARRGOROD* is dependent on it. The Villa Arson is more than a building, it's an actual city, or perhaps even a fortress. The fact that one can have access to the roofs of the various units creates more levels, and produces a maze which literally dilates the space. Its volumes are minimalistic, but also very complex. Concerning the exhibition space of the Galerie Carrée, I'm trying to take into account the "experimental" dimension that Eric Mangion [the director of the Centre national d'art contemporain] is interested in, and to transform this installation into a sort of "performance", or at any rate into a process that doesn't just take into account the sole result of the piece, but also all the stages of its creation. This is why, for example, I chose not to cover the glass door, so that we would remain visible the whole time we were working on the installation. The people who came daily to the Villa Arson were able to follow all the stages of the process, starting with the heaps of used computer "trash" spewing forth wires and filth accumulated from the ventilation filters, and onto a minimal and extremely precise result. Perhaps we can see a "didactic" aspect in this (the word is in quotation marks, because I don't particularly consider myself as an example to be followed) which relates to the fact that the Villa Arson includes both an art centre and a school. So what is this update of *GOLDBARRGOROD* about? About organizing chaos into a form of order, admittedly occult, but nevertheless radical. About a working process whose raw material comes from computer refuse (therefore designed by engineers) recycled and transformed in such a way as to reappear in an organized structure, a "web" which takes into account their shape and their "architecture". A rule which wouldn't tell you to "compose" a sculpture - in itself this would be rather uninteresting -, but how to obey the rigidity of these elements and of their "standards", so as to re-organize them in the order that they dictate. In the context of the Galerie Carrée, a large space of imposing proportions, the idea is to organize a "town plan" rather than to compose architectural spaces. Which is why, unlike the way I showed it for the first time at the gallery Chez Valentin (Paris) in 2008, I tend less to organize the elements together



This picture comes from an abandoned power plant (Thorpe Marsh power station) where I spent a lot of time last year, near Sheffield (UK). The structure is interesting to me because *GOLDBARRGOROD* would probably look a bit like this if it were exposed to bad weather.



The photos of this building, shot from three different angles, gave me the idea for *GOLDBARRGOROD* : a factory in the process of being torn down, revealing a dark and chaotic interior as the cranes are tearing it apart. One can see a very enigmatic structure made of metallic beams, which reminds me precisely of what you find inside a computer when it is taken apart. The picture was taken in Berlin in the Lichternberg district in 2007.

as an "architecture", and more to consider each bare element for what it is, and to try to make it cohabit with the others within a single great big network. A miniature city, a scale model, a skeletal computer room emptied of its components? What we see doesn't matter, each person casts his or her own mental reflection onto an abstract work. If you give a kid a table spoon, he will immediately make a flying saucer out of it, so it seems to me that anyone has the ability to enter a work and to appropriate it, if one adheres to what one is looking at. What is important is to let a diagram or an extremely "straight" "town plan" emerge from the chaos, at opposite ends from what is monumental or spectacular, and which nonetheless does not conceal a possible prior organization: this must remain "secret", the way a mathematical formula would be before you have understood it, or simply like a computer that you use without knowing what is actually going on inside it. In the reverse rationalist utopia of the XXth century "form is function", but in this case we could say "unfunction is form".

The titles of your works often sound like secret missions, with all their enigmatic aspects. These titles are made from names, sounds and notions from different languages, and often their impressive length makes them look impossible to pronounce. Where does *GOLDBARRGOROD* come from?

One of my inspirations in creating titles is glossolalia, the famous "speaking in tongues" which is the ability to talk or pray aloud in a tongue unknown to the speaker. This phenomenon is fairly common in religious trances, from Christianity to shamanism. Only human beings can do this. It's something completely irrational, but deeply rooted in our minds. To be sure, most of the time the titles of my pieces are enigmatic and impossible for the public to understand, but unlike glossolalia they always have a hidden meaning. One could say that I compose my titles in somewhat the same way that I am building the piece *GOLDBARRGOROD* : I take a series of words in relation to the piece that I'm working on, I empty them of their substance and recompose them in a different order according to their phonetic sonority, so that in the end the "sound produced" has stronger connotations than the literal meaning. Indeed this can produce very strange and harsh titles to pronounce. Sometimes I use German, which adds to my works a sonority evoking some enigmatic theory by a 20th century German inventor, a "The Cabinet of Doctor Mabuse" element, or again, a Kafkaesque element. Concerning *GOLDBARRGOROD*, the word comes from the name of mathematician Christian Goldbach, who invented a theory about prime numbers called "Goldbach's

Conjecture" which stipulates that every even integer greater than 2 can be written as the sum of two primes (the same prime can be used several times). This is one of the oldest unsolved problems in number theory and in all of mathematics, it's something crazy, one of these unverifiable fundamental discoveries that nonetheless functions, the intrusion of something irrational into sciences termed "exact". Gorod means "city" in Russian. So Goldbarrgorod means "Goldbachville", the unresolved mathematical city.

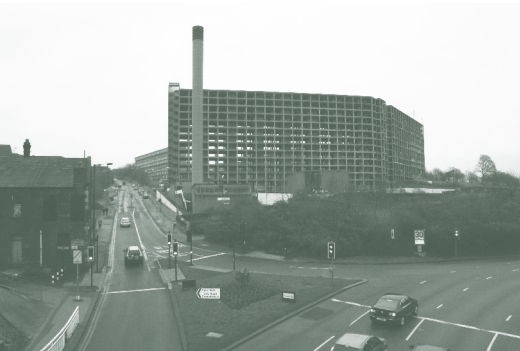
There is something very tedious and physical in sorting out, preparing and assembling this electronic equipment. At this point, how would you describe this new experience of installing *GOLDBARRGOROD*?

Indeed, the process of building *GOLDBARRGOROD* is always a hard core exercise. The recycled metal scraps are dirty, rigid, noisy and heavy. But this physical stage is essential in order to become familiar with the elements that I will later use. Taking them apart, un-riveting them, sorting them out, is part of this necessary stage of getting to know the material. To be honest I rather like it. Becoming familiar with the logic of the elements in order to organize them together more efficiently. The difference between this installation and the first one is a matter of scale. At the gallery Chez Valentin, the scale was easy to control, and there were also other works in the exhibition space. This time it's more extreme. There are no other pieces to hold up the installation, and there is also a site-specific aspect which leads the work towards something very different. It's more an installation, and less a sculpture/scale model. More conceptual in its elaboration. Less towers, more blocks, my concerns are really quite different from what they were the first time. As I go along I learn not to treat this refuse as mere material, but to consider it as a reality in itself. So it's less construction and more organization. Which I like, and which in the end takes me further than the notion of a scale model or sculpture. Perhaps more rigid, but more radical. This time I have to deal with spreading it out, and paradoxically I have to concentrate more on organizing the spaces between the blocks than on their actual mass. This fluidity is absolutely necessary for such a large surface, if one wants to go beyond the mere scale model of a city, or the demonstration of a primitive work of art being institutionalized in order to create a vast circulation network. A metallic web occupying it.

When people comment on your work, the lack of a human presence is often pointed out. Paradoxically, certain works include precise instructions: "a training center for

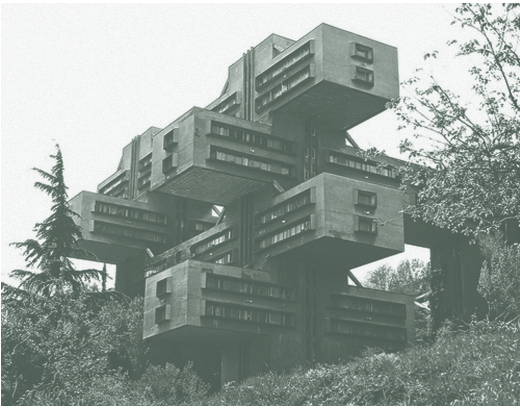
something unspecified" for *The Last One to Come In Closes The Door* (2002), "a group action with a transportation device in the central desert in Iceland" for *TOPOKOSM* (2002), and "the shelter can potentially be used to escape the visual control of observation satellites" for *KALMANOXI* (2004). How do you imagine the physical presence of the visitor, his movements, and his relation to the scale of *GOLDBARRGOROD*?

Just as I do for my titles, for some of my pieces I like referring to the possible "use" of an art work. Not a utilitarian use, but an "unspecified" use. It's a way of introducing fiction inside of fiction, or rather, as J.G. Ballard¹ put it, of going beyond fiction, which we've all had enough of, in order to be able to invent reality. With *GOLDBARRGOROD*, the idea is not to create a caricature of subversion by referring to recycled materials, blablabla etc. etc., but rather to include the process of life and death and obsolescence into the very nature of the artistic project, in confrontation with the art market that sometimes causes the works to become fetishes for social improvement. In other words, to grant a second life to dead things, and to make their mutation and their second death as much a part of the process as their "second life". In any case, once this piece has been built it is intended to be destroyed, or to disappear. It might end up as refuse, or it might be re-installed outdoors, left to face erosion and bad weather, and end up falling apart and returning to the soil. This is part of the very process. A construction designed to include the notion of its own ruin. The visitor's movements inside *GOLDBARRGOROD* are planned in such a way as to enable him or her to approach the piece, to avoid a "staged" aspect and to suggest a passage through it, the work will be accessible.



I stayed for four months in Sheffield last year; this skeleton remains from one of the most ambitious brutalist housing projects in Great Britain in the sixties. It was built in Sheffield in the place of former insalubrious districts, at a time when heavy industry was flourishing in the area. The social fabric was exemplary then, and this workers' housing development was considered to be a communist fortress during the riots of the Thatcher years, and the strikes against the dismantling of steel industry. 80% of the families of workers who lived there became unemployed, and the housing development became a ghetto. There were three large housing estates like this one in Sheffield: Kelvin Flats, Hyde Park Flats, and this one, Park Hill Flats. A few activists managed to have the building put on the historical register, as it is considered to be a masterpiece of brutalist architecture, whereas the other two were torn down, including "Hyde Park Flat", according to Thatcher's personal orders. The problem is, what can one possibly do with a listed housing development whose function is obsolete? Rehabilitate it? The architect who won the rehabilitation contest suggested luxury apartments, believing that one might gentrify this concrete monster the way that Le Corbusier's Cité Radieuse in Marseille was gentrified. Only no one from this gentle class wants anything but a little house with a garden, just like Corbusier himself in fact, who spent the latter part of his life in a cottage, and not in one of his high risers or concrete walls. By the way, the economical crisis has destroyed any hope of ever rehabilitating the edifice, and the building now remains in an intermediary zone somewhere between ruin and construction. Its excessive size turns it into a fascinating and dystopic work of Land Art. With Amanda Crawley Jakson, we organized a workshop and a symposium around this building. The conclusion was: leave it as it is, it's a beautiful ruin.

¹ James Graham Ballard (1930 – 2009) was an English science fiction writer, author notably of the Concrete Trilogy with Crash, Concrete Island and I.G.H. published in the seventies.



The ministry of Highways in Tbilissi in Georgia, a masterpiece of modern soviet architecture. The Soviet people felt at ease with the most radical form of modernism, since they adapted themselves perfectly to the socialist dogma of “deactivating traditional folklore in their everyday life; source of reactionary thought.” This is why we find avant-garde masterpieces in the eastern ex communist countries, in the USSR, but also in the former partner countries of the COMECON. Today these masterpieces are falling apart.

Your interest in sound is not something new. Some of your projects (videos, installations) include sound, and for this exhibition you are inaugurating the label GRAUTAG RECORDS. How do you intend to relate this to your present work?

It’s true that I have a strong relation to sound and music in general. Perhaps because I grew up in an environment where there were many records. Beyond that, music is deeply part of my culture, perhaps even more so than the visual arts. To be more precise, I discovered the pleasure of listening to music very young, like many people, but I very soon created a direct link between art and music. It started when I was 16 and I was listening to industrial music, which led me to be interested in Russian Constructivism. Then when I was a student, techno music and Acid House parties held in industrial wastelands enabled me to create a link between science-fiction and art, between my practice and travelling, since in the late eighties (89 exactly) I discovered Berlin, where I still live today, through techno sound. So I naturally relate music to the notion of landscape, and most of my friends are musicians. Creating the label GRAUTAG RECORDS came directly from the relationship that I have with my musician friends. I’m interested in producing records like a collection. A vinyl record is a useful object, not nearly as archaic as one might think, considering its definition and sound quality have never been equaled. Producing these records interests me in relation to my work : how can an artist bring together musicians without using them like monkeys, or like a fashionable alibi, which is often what contemporary artists do when they want to bring an “underground feel” to their career? The idea behind GRAUTAG RECORDS was to create a label or a “collection” around the theme of urban dystopia and melancholy. I like asking musicians to play along with this idea. The work load gets divided amongst us while making the record. As we learn to get along around a certain “spirit”. This “ping pong” results in a record jacket and record which really stem from the encounter between them and myself. A hybrid. For the first record, BADER MOTOR, I suggested to Arnaud Maguet, Vincent Epplay and Fred Bigot to inaugurate the label in a certain spirit in relation not really to the piece *GOLDBARRGOROD* but to the Villa Arson and this Berlin-Nice connexion which has been developing in the last years. I asked this group to produce the record in relation to Arnaud Maguet’s exhibition at the Villa Arson in 2008², and to the record that came out on that occasion with the same three musicians, *Music for Plants of the Gods*³ [edited by *Les Disques en Rotin Réunis* (United Rattan Records)]. I had been invited to participate in this exhibition, whose theme was the relation that artists kept alive with the mythology of rock. My answer was a very melancholy slide show, as a tribute to Arnaud’s record with Christian Vialard *Greetings from Nowhereland* [United Rattan Records], which to me is one of the best records I’ve heard in a long time. This album, whose jacket is decorated with urban postcards, is the very illustration of what I consider as belonging to the “grautag” concept. Gray and boring Sundays, the outdated urban landscapes printed on the cards, this is the atmosphere I’m dealing with in this label. So I like giving the musicians the opportunity to appropriate this concept and to “play” this game in order to create a “Grautag” collection.

2 « What the Hell Happened to This Music ? » Arnaud Maguet & Guests, June 29th to September 28th 2008.
3 This is the sound track for Arnaud Maguet’s piece *Mind Garden* with Vincent Epplay, for more details cf. “Arnaud maguet & Guests”, Black Jack editions, 2009, p.56.



An unfinished project for a hotel in China, which has now disappeared under the waters of an artificial lake. An unlikely construction. Before finding this proof that it really existed, I was considering doing a photomontage with Photoshop.

You often refer informally to the beauty of these monumental, ruined, brutalist architectures, pictures of which you collect (pictures that you took while wandering through cities, or that you collected on the internet), what do you plan on doing when you look at these “white elephants”?

The point is not so much in planning something as it is in creating archives. All these images are a basis for thought. Either while I am collecting them on the internet, which enables me as I go to locate places that I think I should visit as soon as possible, either when taking pictures with a camera or a cell phone, which adds a physical and practical experience of the landscape to this archiving. This raw material is a crucial element to my work. In doing this, what is at stake is a study of my environment, sort of like a set of illustrations of plants, or like a kind of geopsychic map. Hideouts. These pictures show a great many ruins, but not exclusively: there are also buildings that are still in use or still taken into consideration. Concerning the vestiges, they attract me because of an interesting characteristic, this proof that architecture is sometimes revealed to us when its original function no longer exists. Once this function has vanished, there remains a kind of abstraction, similar to that which I try to attain in my work. A monumentality both monstrous and outmoded, ruthless evidence to the process of aging or to the failed ambitions of an epoch, which by the way enables us to stand back from our own contemporary era’s ambitions. Perhaps this is all a bit “romantic” after all. I don’t refute the word in the least, since I also know how to go beyond its generic conotation, and what it really means historically. I like to point out that this movement appeared in the XVIIIth century as a reaction to classicism, a forerunner in detecting dystopia in the exhausted cultural and symbolic system of the time, just like today a certain romanticism could very well emerge in reaction to the exhausted system of our society, a society unable to bury the corpse of post modernism and its systematic relativism ... who knows?



Habitat 67, a housing project in Montreal Quebec. This project built on site for Expo 67 was one of the jewels of avant-garde brutalist architecture in the late sixties. Today it is still visionary in its ability to organize individual housing units in the midst of a mass housing project. It was designed by Moshe Safdie who later designed really bad stuff.

If one should draw a map of the places where you’ve been and where you’ve selected architectural forms (concrete grids, details of buttresses, unfinished buildings, etc.) one would include most of the globe, and yet we have the feeling of a common destiny to all these constructions, in the form of future vestiges. You speak of them as “exoskeletons”, to use James Graham Ballard’s word, can you explain what you mean by that?

J. G.Ballard mentions this example of an “exoskeleton” in 1964 in his short story *The Terminal Beach*, which to me is a fundamental text. He infers this notion of an abandoned building as being an archeological expression not of the past, but of times to come. This is a very surprising reversal, due to the

fact that he considered our history as having been stopped by mankind itself when it discovered the ultimate possibility for self-destruction, and for its own apocalypse: the H bomb. I like this way of interpreting vestiges as traces of the future because of the interruption of time, because of this suspended time where we now stray like ghosts. When talking about exoskeletons, Ballard refers to bunkers, architectural surroundings deprived of their meaning, just like those that interest me, beyond the notion of vestige and of a ruin as an architectural project. Not especially in the style of the XVIIIth century and the *Désert de Retz*, but as a contemporary answer to an environment which we know is disappearing beneath the heavy steps of neo liberalism. Considering obsolescence and ruin as our future is not just being romantic, it’s a reality, as Philip K. Dick⁴ understands it: “Something that continues to exist even though we no longer believe in it”⁵. These realities which keep existing even though we no longer believe in them are, in the field of architecture/landscape, essential to my work. Our society systematically erases its own traces, our era will only leave future archeologists a few cans of nuclear waste buried in salt mines, and arid deserts caused by environmental devastation. I forgot to mention the continent made of plastic refuse forming in the Pacific Ocean. As we organize the destruction of everything that shows signs of ageing, our world will leave nothing. Unless... Unless global economy falls apart, even if it’s painful, and even if, like today’s Dubai, or the Dahab (Sinai) of the 2000s, entire fields of unfinished buildings continue to exist in total neglect and entropic forgetfulness. There, nature will rule once again, and earn the right not to be domesticated, or landscaped, or “Yann Arthus-Bertrandised”. Paradoxically these skeletons and exoskeletons, these white elephants are our only security that we will leave memory traces in time. Today our survival relies on the fall of our system.

4 Philip K. Dick (1928 – 1982) was an American science fiction writer, author of novels and short stories dealing with the theme of modifying and manipulating reality, such as *The Man in the High Castle*, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (renamed *Blade Runner*), *Ubik*.
5 Translator’s note : the original quotation by P. K. Dick being unavailable, these lines are translated from the French version.

ART CENTER TEAM
Éric Mangion (director of the Art Center)
Patrick Aubouin (technical manager)
Alexia Nicolaidis (in charge of exhibition support)
Michel Maunier (in charge of communication)
Christelle Alin (manager of the department of relations with the public)
Céline Chazalviel (in charge of relations with the public and of publications)
Cédric Moris Kelly (in charge of documentary research)
Jean Brasille (photographer)
Cécile Torun (trainee)

INSTALLATION TEAM
Juliette Dumas, Florimond Dupont, Raphaël Emine, Hervé Gendré, Baptiste Masson, Etienne Rey, Mathieu Schmitt and Floriane Spinetta.

MEDIATION TEAM
Brice Courtes, Esmeralda Da Costa, Mathilde Fernandez, Julie Foti, Maxime Leclair, Salomé Laloux-Bard, Pamela Lamour, Michaël Lanouilh, Simon Nicolas, Floriane Spinetta, Cécile Torun and Rémi Vacherot.

PRACTICAL INFORMATIONS
Exhibitions open from July 2nd to October 17th
14 - 18 PM every day, 14 - 19 PM during July and August
Closed on tuesdays. Free entrance

Access
By tramway – station Le Ray
By bus n°4 and n°7 – station Deux avenues
By car : from promenade des Anglais follow boulevard Gambetta then boulevard de Cessole
Via the A8 motorway, exit at Nice nord

Villa Arson Nice

école nationale supérieure d’art
centre national d’art contemporain
médiathèque d’art contemporain
résidences d’artistes



The Avicenne Fondation, Paris. This is Claude Parent’s project, built at the international student hall of residence in Paris for Iranian students. One of the most beautiful buildings in the capital city. A metal architecture, brutal and without details, a suspended macrostructure upholding breathtaking double spiral staircases. The building is disused now, but it has just been put on the historical register. We were invited by Glassbox to stay there last spring to make a film with Marie Reinert, where Claude Parent will make an appearance. An incredible experience. The film will be finished in November.

NICOLAS MOULIN
inaugurates on this occasion a musical label (GRAUTAG RECORDS) whose first album is realized by Fred Bigot, Vincent Epplay and Arnaud Maguet (BADER MOTOR). GRAUTAG was recorded in Berlin last March.

He is represented by Chez Valentin gallery in Paris.

ÉRIC MANGION
is director of the Centre national d’art contemporain - Villa Arson Nice and is curator of *GOLDBARRGOROD*.

CHRISTELLE ALIN and CÉLINE CHAZALVIEL
Department of relations with the public of the Centre national d’art contemporain - Villa Arson Nice.

THANKS
Fred Bigot, la galerie Chez Valentin, Vincent Epplay, Alexandre Fratini, Hervé Gendré, Xavier Gendré, Arnaud Maguet and Marie Reinert.

Translation : Claire Bernstein
Printing : Espace Graphic, Carros

Relations with the press
04 92 07 73 91
Michel Maunier
communication@villa-arson.org

Relations with the public
04 92 07 73 84
Christelle Alin
alin@villa-arson.org
Céline Chazalviel
chazalviel@villa-arson.org

20 avenue stephen liégeard
F- 06105 nice cedex 2
tél. +33 (0)4 92 07 73 73
cnac@villa-arson.org
www.villa-arson.org