

A Telling

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It always begins with breakfast. As a team, we developed a common ceremony, with aspects satisfying each of our needs, our individual rituals merged into one. For some, the ritual was coffee, a morning necessity. For some, the ritual became the search for food: daily bread, fruit, eggs, or whatever strikes a fancy at a market, for a good price. For some, eating was crucial. Together, our rituals merged into a ceremony, each day and every day, bringing cohesion to what would be a chaotic series of events punctuating the effort to pull off what would emerge as our Portique. Each breakfast was a moment of peace, conversation, and reflection.

Portique did not arise as a result of a strict, linear process. Rather, the project came into focus through a series of conversations, negotiations, and emerging technical requirements, and lived as a result of the manifestation of those limitations and discussions into form.

One of the early motivators of the project was discussion: internally and externally, and perhaps within ourselves, re-evaluating our roles in the context and among our group. While still in Vienna, our group undertook a combination of tasks, some performative, some analytical, and some personal, the main goal of which was to not just understand a new perspective on context, but also to understand each other, to allow us to be more comfortable with discussion amongst ourselves, and outside of ourselves.

From our kickoff in Vienna, we learned how to express ourselves within a group of people from extremely different backgrounds, each with different perspectives, in a way that was not aggressive, but rather progressive. Through stimulating conversation, we developed an internal repertoire that was the basis for our communication on Portique. 'Starting from nothing' is the exact condition of Portique: without any understood limitations, how do we create? Through discussion, we discover boundaries, practicalities, and concepts which start to form the idea in a collaborative field of minds. Through research into context and materiality, we discover potential.

Our first introduction to the real, contextual constraints emerged at an initial visit to Studio Kirah. We should begin our own design initiative, rather than aid individual productions. This was a suggestion that we agreed with, and that freed us to work autonomously.

A second discussion arose the same day, one of context. As a group, we visited several sites near the studio, some of which had been promising from our research in Vienna, which had been aided by some helpful information from François. Each of these sites were vastly different from one another: the Terrain, being wide, un-cordoned, and open, the Cafe Kipe, being walled and small, the Ocean, being the edge of the city. Several other sites around and between these conditions also arose: some urban, some residential, each with varying degrees of openness and space. The struggle naturally emerged of how to choose a site, or whether we wanted to choose all of the sites, each option laying a different set of rules on the table: permanence vs mobility, that began to influence our intervention.

Time is limited. And it always seems to run faster than expected: with only nine days to go after the first day, an intense brainstorming session was necessary. With knowledge of the discussions that had prepared us for this stage of the process, we began creating in earnest, not leaving the apartments unless necessary. A makeshift office emerged in one space, around the communal table in the dining room, with a bare wall for pinup behind. Open windows

allowed air to circulate through the stifling space; pens, pencils, paper, and a broken old laptop were our tools.

Exercises in conceptualization began through the process of drawing and sketching, punctuated by discussion as ideas evolved from one moment to the next. We had adapted the architectural process familiar to us in Vienna to our new office. Pinups of sketches followed by rounds of presentation and critique, through sweat, breaks for thought, bottles of water, and cigarettes on the balcony. The heat of conceptualization was matched by the heat of the apartment.

Round after round, certain constraints were agreed upon, forming geometry that would emerge as the final Portique. Primary among these was the notion of transgressing borders, bridging the performance space and the public space. The final object would need to be a link over or through a wall, interacting with either a doorway or a perimeter around a closed space containing a performance. Emerging also was the notion of portability, that just one site for the installation wasn't sufficient, it should manifest itself in as many locations as possible.

Materials were chosen to explore based upon our research in Vienna. Should the frame for this object, whatever it may be, come from mangrove wood? Steel members welded on the Terrain? Plastic piping? Wood is lighter, but mangrove joints may not be so durable. Plastic piping may be hard to come by. The final choice was steel.

Three decisions then emerged in parallel to the discussion of the actual form of the piece: Steel, Portable, Bridge. As these conditions emerged, so the design evolved. Beginning from radically different positions, round after round of discussion, we gradually drew together into a basic shape: a pair of vertical frames spaced apart from each other, held together by a membrane above. What was this membrane? In our research, we discussed netting and textile, and the performative implications of both. Was pattern important? Was shade?

Often from within our enclave, the outside world would interrupt, bringing the reality of our presence to bear. Children playing below would make a racket and get our attention. We'd run out of water and need to take a trip to a shop, a wail from outside would signal a death in the family. Even being new to our environment, the realities of working in an unfamiliar context became clearer in bursts: we were interlopers, and needed to behave and design with conscious care.

Colors became clearer to us, through a discussion of our research: Gold? White? Red? Pink? The final design begins to emerge as such: two portal frames, leaned outward from each other at an angle of 70 degrees to the ground, or positioned perpendicular to the ground in a way which was reconfigurable between the two positions, held together by two membranes of thread, each in a cross-crossing pattern from one portal frame to the other, one above stretched tight, receiving the tension of the leaning portal frames, one below hanging loose, each with a fringe of thread hanging on opposite sides of the form, in front of the portal frames.

Our steel tube construction method proved beneficial to the design: steel tubes could slip in and out of each other, allowing our system to be demountable, and the membranes of thread to be rolled into a spool to be transported from site to site. The form came down to a few parts only: two frames made from posts and a pair of cross members each, these members would support a textile, and could be rolled into the opposite cross member for portability. The portal frames would be attached to base plates, each with two sleeves for different construction configurations. Finally, for fear of the unpredictability of such a delicate tension system, a few concrete blocks attached to thread, ensuring the system didn't fall inward.

Suliman, the chief of the Terrain, was kind enough to introduce us to a group of welders on his territory. Through mediated discussion, and relying on some extremely helpful translation,

we exchanged drawings, a method of communication almost more helpful than language, and developed the ideas of steel joining methods, as well as member sizes, and welding techniques.

We needed to see more, to push us through our roadblocks. It was Sunday, so as a team, we decided to find our way to the city center, to take a break from the intensity. Conakry is an extremely long city, and we were located roughly in the middle, our destination being on the far Western side, in the old colonial area. After discussion with the motorbike taxis, we decided on a location and a price. Though we didn't all quite make it to our destination correctly, the day was still informative, if not extremely startling: motorbike taxis at interstate speeds were a new phenomenon for the team.

We visited a museum in the old town, dedicated to Guinea's history, where we found an example of an old Guinean loom, with two rods holding threads, which were gathered into a knot at the base of the loom. The delicate movement of the threads in the moving air was enticing, the membrane formed by the weaving pattern eye-catching. This could be our textile.

Welding lasts long into the night, darkness sprayed with fire, under minimal lighting. If the power goes, so does the welding, but as long as they can see, the welders continue. We work together to develop techniques for assembling such a structure, using templates, temporary attachments, and makeshift supports.

Excursions to the Kaporo market yield a sampling of thread for our Portique. We are able to gather a small amount from a surly vendor, who required slightly more than a simple translation to interact with, but we had a start. More would have to be acquired from the medina, the largest market in the city, and one of the largest in Western Africa.

The medina is a city in and of itself, within the megacity of Conakry. A seemingly infinite maze with one goal: materials. There is a set of rules unclear to us, and an unfathomable pattern to the activity and movement. A few questions to the locals in regards to directions through the maze, and thread is found in the bustle of the exhilarating corridors of the mega market.

Having a few of our components at hand, we begin testing in earnest. First, how do we tie the thread? What kinds of knots will let us control length, remain tight, and result in a fringe? How hard is it to work with even lengths between two cross members? Using mangroves as a stand-in for our steel tubes, and fighting against the quick approach of darkness at the end of the day, we test the creation of a pair of simple portal frames, strung over the perimeter wall of Studio Kirah. It's immediately apparent that the lengths of thread must be exact, or the frames will hang from each other incorrectly. The ground is uneven, any construction of supports for running our threads between our horizontal members must be perfectly level, or the threads will be incorrectly tensioned. We had a problem.

It had been a long day, and we were exhausted, running from place to place. We found sustenance through a man a short walk from our apartment, selling whole chicken, chopped roughly in a grid, bones and all, and seared on an iron stove over a small fire. A tender meal with which to restore ourselves and ponder our problem, maybe the chicken will save the day.

Gravity! How to maintain the perpendicular relationship between the two rods for our thread membrane, keep them at the same distance from each other, and level? We devised a spectacle of a construction method, using the height of Studio Kirah building itself to hang both of our rods off of, from the roof down to the ground, at the exact distance we needed. Extreme as a construction method, but necessary. The next day we would begin in earnest.

An early start and a few final preparations, and we're ready to begin. Causing somewhat of a mini-performance itself, we bring our metal members up through the studio, to the roof. Some careful preparation to avoid injury, and we've fixed one bar to the roof structure of the

building. A little more careful prep, and we're ready to hang the second bar from the first, forming a rectangle, hovering in space, ready for our weaving. In a few teams, we begin cutting threads to the correct length, tossing threads from the roof, and affixing them to both the bottom and top bars in our pattern: a group of threads in a cluster on one bar, distributed across the whole bar below, creating a criss-crossing, woven 'textile'.

Dismounting the new membrane was a spectacle in and of itself. Laying a white sheet of fabric on the ground, perpendicular to the wall, and underneath our hanging textile, we slowly lowered the top bar, attached to the roof structure, down to the ground, while at the same time, moving the lower bar away from the wall, always keeping the membrane in tension. After reaching the far end of the fabric, we began rolling the bar and new textile in the white cloth, so as to keep it from tangling. The next day would be entirely about weaving, starting the process all over again, for the second membrane.

Once complete, we bring all of the pieces, together with painted blocks to match the colors of our metal frames, to our first site, the Cafe Kipe. It's a late night, but we begin discussing how to arrange our first installation, how first to give our Portique its final focus, and first manifestation. We're tired, and in some cases a bit unwell, tensions are a bit frayed, but we come to a decision.

The next morning was early; the first day of the festival. Bright, hot, and still sleepy, we hustle through our morning ritual, and make our way to Cafe Kipe, it's time to bring it to life. We quickly realize that due to the weight of these members, the erection of the Portique is not as graceful as we intended. Taking quite some time, and some careful coordination of movements, we slowly raise one frame vertically on their base plates, then slowly another. Once stable, the first frame is lifted again, and fixed to the second position: at a 70-degree angle from the ground. The second frame follows suit and we hold our breath. Not a movement. The frame stands, the upper membrane in tension, the lower, gracefully hanging below. A pattern of shadow lines on the ground write our textile onto the earth.

It's time for the opening, beginning with a performance by members of the festival for visitors, the public, and government officials at a site near the Cafe, on the Terrain. After the opening, members are invited back to the cafe for a panel discussion, and are asked to enter through a corner entrance, which we have aligned our Portique towards. Guests are received by our installation, and seem to enjoy it. They walk through the fringes, photograph themselves with it. The dancer, Lionel Fredoc, is inspired by it, and performs an impromptu dance in the shadow of the threads. His clothing shines, the same colors as our Portique, his movements are mesmerizing, graceful. Even through our exhaustion, we are entranced.

But there is no rest, as our next installation site is waiting for a performance that very evening. We carefully dismount our membranes, laying the frames on the ground, and roll our textiles into their white sheaths. With some help from a truck we were able to hire on the Terrain, we moved everything to the old presidential palace, Papa Koly. Given the distance to the performance site, we rode along in the bed, sitting on the blocks of our installation. The city moves past peacefully, our driver taking the less crowded roads, roads flanked by fields, trees, and small homes.

Some discussion ensues on the site in regards to the location of our piece, but the final decision is mutually agreed upon to be ideal: underneath the pediment of the entrance gate, acting as a portal through the opening into the performance site. Exactly how we hoped it would behave. We are becoming much faster at assembling the Portique, taking far less time than the last. After construction, we enjoy its presence, playing in the shadows of the threads. A motorbike uses it as a passage. Before the performance begins, we illuminate it with a red

safety light, and welcome the audience through. The two performances of the night were a spectacle: first, we were entranced by the scenography and production of *Traces*, a performance by Samira Negrouche and Fatou Cisse, then later, immersed into a piece by Hakim Bah and Cedric Brossard, *Traque*.

The end of the night again, and though tired, we need to disassemble the portique once more, and ready it for its journey to the next destination tomorrow. The morning comes, and we ready ourselves for transportation to the last site, the *Petit Terrain*, a smaller, open pasture used in the daytime for soccer matches, and at night for a few, small local bars. After a discussion with the scenographers conducting the evening's performance, *Les Survivants*, a piece by Lionel Manga, it was determined that we could use the Portique as an element of the scenography, a dream of our intentions.

The performance space is a circle of candles, perhaps twelve meters across, interrupted only at a far end by our Portique, opening into the circus space. The fringe is separated, and darkness falls, the performance begins. A mad rush of acrobats, the Compagnie Tangbata, carrying stacks of plastic chairs over their heads flies through our structure, then begins tossing the chairs back and forth across the circle. As acrobats rush in and out of the backstage, through our portal, we feel integrated with the spectacle, contributors in the end, despite our initial separation from the festival. We are enamored with the performance, and honored to have contributed.

It's over, our form has been brought to focus, and allowed to live and live with the festival. We assembled it one last time at Studio Kirah, an effort as simple to us at this point as standing ourselves up after sleep, to ready for breakfast.