

Artist, worker, goatherd and storyteller interview with Till Roeskens

BY SYLVIE COËLLIER

Till Roeskens has chosen to live his art as grassroots involvement. Artist, agricultural worker, goatherd but also storyteller, from Germany to Venice, from Israel to Palestine via the Alps, the Camargue and Marseille, he tells Switch (on Paper) about his nomadic yet perfectly situated experiences.

From Germany to Venice

I grew up in Germany, in various places, including Düsseldorf. My adopted father had deep admiration for Joseph Beuys. I remember the news of his death in 1986. I was 12 years old. I came to France at the age of 16 for a language stay that was supposed to last three months and lasted a lot longer! I was in a Steiner school in the Bourbonnais region; on the side, I learned the art of stained glass making with a master glassmaker, which made me want to go to Venice to learn how to blow glass in Murano. I went to Italy at the age of 18, first working on farms, I followed the sun and found myself spending the winter in Sicily. In the spring, I did a grand tour of Sicily on foot, trying out a simple life style, with very little money, sleeping in caves, climbing over fences to visit temples... Then, when I went to Venice, I soon realized that Murano glass was for the tourists, and it was not what I wanted to do. In Venice, I met a girl who was sketching in the streets and was hoping to get into the school of Fine Arts, and I thought, well, why not? I liked drawing landscapes, I even sold some in St Mark's Square... I took the entrance exam, and I passed. But I was completely lost there. We had 6 hours of anatomy a week... In art history, you had to wait until the fourth and final year to broach the 19th and 20th centuries. It was a long time to understand something about the art of our time... I quickly skipped the first year, to spend some time in Venice. Four of us, from four different countries, crammed into a small house overlooking the canal...

Israel, Jordan, Egypt, the Sahara and Bedouins

I still had wanderlust, I wanted to go further south. I went to the only desert I already knew, in Israel, where my grandmother had taken me one day... giving me a very idealized image of the country. She was not Jewish, but she had many friends in Israel. She was from Gdansk, and during an organized trip to Israel, she had met an Israeli woman who also came from Gdansk, both of them felt nostalgia for the same lost country. She became her best friend! So, at 20-21 years old, I went to volunteer in a kind of kibbutz. The people were nice, but I soon realized that I was not on the side that really needed: we lived surrounded by fences,

in the midst of watered lawns in the heart of the desert, while the Arab villages behind the fences didn't have enough water... Little by little, I moved to the other side, meeting Bedouins who lived near there in illegal villages. In what were like Indian reserves, where they couldn't lead traditional lives. They had no right to graze their herds, because the whole desert was taken over by Israel, either as military zones or natural zones... I really loved the people, and I think it was essential, as part of my journey, to meet this nomadic culture, to meet the reality of oppression, too, and resistance...

And it was important, a few months later, to meet the Bedouins in Jordan where they continued to roam freely with their herds. We made a long journey, with my friend of the time, mainly on foot, sometimes hitchhiking, throughout Palestine, Jordan and Egypt, and as soon as we spotted a tent on the horizon, we knew that we would have a shelter, a fire, and a meal for the night! Here and there, we stopped to help out with agricultural work. The hospitality and generosity of all these people was extraordinary. We then continued on to the Sahara. There I stopped in front of the great sea of sand: I had arrived. You couldn't go a step further. There was the absolute contrast between the total aridity of the desert and the abundance of oases, and this ideal that I cherish of food-producing agriculture, which perhaps we would call permaculture today, with the mixture of olive trees, orange trees, date palms, and lots of small fields at the foot of the trees... And I said to myself: "Either you stay here, or you return to Europe and you try to learn something seriously, to play your part"....

At a party at Emmaus

So I took up "serious" studies. I was 24 years old. I sat the entrance exam to Strasbourg School of Decorative Arts and I was accepted. And I found my way into studying. Until then, I loved painting, I loved writing, but at Arts-Déco, I understood that I could combine texts and images and that this would recount more than each of them individually... And fairly quickly I dropped painting, because I felt the constraints were too heavy. I couldn't get the right distance. I was too busy thinking about how to represent things, and I couldn't get to the question of what to represent. So my transition to photography was beneficial. And then I discovered that artistic practice could be a way to continue travelling! I began following game rules that I invented myself to explore a closer environment. I would hitch rides to go off and meet people and places, or I would decide to explore what was hidden just around the corner....

Pierre Mercier was important to me. He practiced teaching as an art in its own right. He often referred to Robert Filiou. It was thanks to him, among others, that I started doing talks with slides, like storytelling performances. But it was for different reasons, also thanks to a storyteller I had listened to at a party at Emmaus, who told stories from Mongolia, with little paintings on wood to illustrate his story... I realized that it was the lightness that interested me, being able to go to people with a box of slides and stories in my head, that weighed very little. It was in keeping with the ascetic ideal that I always had, to live with

little, to look for the essential, not to take up too much space... I had tried to make big photo-prints on Dibond panels, but I quickly realized that the idea of having to sell them was as overwhelming to me as the idea of stockpiling them at home! And that I liked speaking to people directly and looking at them more than hanging things on the walls.

I graduated in 2003, accepting the fact that I wouldn't show any finished or saleable items: I manipulated objects, images, and told stories. Moving back and forth between two poles, on one hand in the form of personal travel, sometimes alone, sometimes to meet others, and on the other hand in the form of group workshops, which I started running, first in a day hospital, then in a hostel just next to our school. I met other travelers who had other experiences of space, of wandering, of the city, strong experiences. We developed different ways of inscribing their stories in the city: signposts, slabs on the ground...

At Sonacotra hostel in Strasbourg

These two threads, the lines of personal travel and the things that came out of the encounters, began to merge in what I called *Plans de situation* or site plans. The year after I graduated, I got my first paid job, a residence in Sonacotra hostel in Strasbourg. For several months, I walked the corridors of the hostel, knocking on all the doors, collecting testimonies, with the idea of recounting them. Sometimes I took photos, portraits, or even pictures of objects in the rooms, to capture the way in which the places were differently occupied by people from the four corners of the world. They had stories that were sometimes light or funny, sometimes dramatic, sometimes tragic, all of which spoke of the precariousness and fragility of things. It seemed important to me to listen to them, because I saw both my personal future as precarious, and society as a whole as very fragile, as if caught in a system that was heading for disaster. I felt that these people were pioneers, that they were experiencing situations that concerned us all.

Reproducing these encounters took on a somewhat monumental scale for the first time, with an hour and a half of stories learnt by heart, images screened onto the facade of the hostel at nightfall. I had a basin of water and between each story, I would wash my face, as if to change characters. Most of the Sonacotra residents did not know each other, so this moment was also intended as a way of sharing stories. Of course, I had reread and given everyone their story before sharing it. People were usually quite proud of them. And several people I met had told me about having had a situation in their lives which they later lost. I had gone to the land registry to photograph a map of the place for the poster of the event and on the piece of paper were the words: "*Plan de situation, 1/1000*" (site plan 1:1000). A site plan is the most accurate map of a place, with the limits, boundaries, and the forces that govern the space... And I thought, that's what I'm trying to do, to situate myself and things - to question human situations in a geographical context. And I said to myself, after the site plan on a scale of one to a thousand, we'll have to do two to a thousand, and so on! My work's cut out for me!

***Plans de situation* in Sélestat ... and elsewhere**

At the hostel, there were stories from all over the world that intersected in one place, but later, I wanted to travel in all directions myself, from any point. But how to determine it? Actually, I was pretty confused when I got out of school. One day, I met Pierre Mercier again, who said, so you want to work? Go to the DRAC, the FRAC, call them on my behalf... and the doors opened. The Alsace FRAC in Sélestat, was managed at that time by Pascal Neveux. He told me: "We are interested in stories about the territory". So I decided that this small town and this FRAC were "any point" from which to start. And for six months, I went there regularly, I set off from the FRAC, I looked at everything around me, I knocked on all the doors. On one side, there was a canoe and kayak club, where I met a gate judge. On the other side was a toothbrush factory that was planning to relocate to China. Next to it, a street market. I tried to understand it all, I met the mayor, the police chief, the beggar on the corner, the workers rebuilding the street, etc. and each of them took me somewhere else, and everything ended up coming together with so many short circuits in every direction in my head that it made my head spin. I told people: I'm trying to give a talk about everything, following the example of Sélestat! To present the second *Plan de situation*, I had a slide show with the screen next to me and on the other side a white panel where I started by drawing a cross: "Let's imagine we're here". Then as the encounters progressed, I drew a map of the city on the panel, developing it by geographical proximity like an association of ideas, or sometimes hopping from one area to another.

In *Plans de situation*, I take people through a labyrinthine terrain, but if there is a theme, a common thread, it is really about orientation: how to situate yourself, with, at that moment, the need to reconsider all the hierarchies of discourse... not wanting to decide which place is worth visiting or not, which words are worth listening to and transcribing or not - I tried to observe people and things with fresh eyes and ears.

Quite quickly, in parallel with Sélestat, the *Plans de situation* followed on in a fairly random way - as I didn't want to choose - with new invitations: one to Collioure, in the Eastern Pyrenees, in 2005, which resulted in a book with stories about the border and its passages, smuggling and immigration... And then in Quebec, with the history revolving around the still recent land appropriation by colonists, which led to an exhibition and catalogue. And I have a fifth *Plan de situation* that was never completed, in Languedoc, on the development of makeshift dwellings, the conflicts between State regulations and all the people who try to cobble their lives together...

***Plan de situation* in Marseille**

In the summer of 2006, I followed the mother of my daughter who came to Marseille for a year for a field study in ethnology. And I wondered how I could have lived anywhere else! I felt like I was in the center of the world. In the Panier district, I climbed onto my roof,

and looked down at the sea, the city, the hills: I could tell that I was in the center! And I saw Pascal Neveux again, who had become director of the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur FRAC, and was planning to move to the La Joliette district. Pascal Neveux asked me if I was interested in working on this neighborhood. Yes, I was interested, but I didn't really know how to proceed: I had already given a talk on *everything*, I couldn't see myself doing it again! So I thought, what if I tried film-making? That was it, *Plan de situation* number 6 became a documentary film. During the years 2007-2009, I filmed a part of the Joliette district, where the Euroméditerranée project was levelling everything to build offices and banks - and at the exact spot where the FRAC was due to set up, there was an inhabited house with an eviction order on it. The inhabitants resisted but were forced to leave. I went to ring their doorbell: it wasn't easy because I was being paid by the institution that was about to move in and replace them. But it was precisely this situation, the fact of being caught between two stools, that interested me. I spent almost three years filming this block of housing as it gradually disappeared, the people who were leaving, those who were arriving, those who were staying, the workers who were demolishing it, the developers who were watching all this from their offices right in front of them... it was like a puzzle, with pieces that didn't fit together properly...

Video-mapping: Aida, Palestine

Palestine was still in my mind, ever since my long stay there ten years earlier. Because on one hand, I had this desire not to choose, to accept the randomness, on the basis that there are things to see and hear wherever you go, and on the other hand there were still themes and places that were close to my heart, to which I wanted to give importance. I've gone back and forth between these two positions quite a lot. And what mattered to me was very much related to notions of space, appropriation, occupation, borders, etc., and for me, Palestine was a central point in this story. For ten years, I had known that I would go back there one day. So for three years in a row, I applied to the AFAA (the French Association of Artistic Action), but it never worked, and in the end I thought, I'll go anyway, I'll pay for the ticket. That was in 2008. I spent three months in the Aida refugee camp near Bethlehem and made a film based on maps drawn by the camp's inhabitants. Basically, it was supposed to be a *Plan de situation* too, but finally the title I kept was *Vidéocartographies : Aïda, Palestine* (Video-mapping: Aida, Palestine). I used a very traditional animation film technique, with a wooden frame in paper-board format, with the paper stretched over it and a marker drawing that can be seen through this screen. I asked people to draw their camp. Some were used to drawing, others weren't. At the beginning, it was a question of telling stories about nearby areas, the geography of the camp, then recounting where we can go from there, where we can't go, but how we do it anyway, with incredible detours, waiting at check-points, or from below, through pipes, or from above with ladders: this daily resistance to occupation, to preserve a minimum amount of freedom of movement, which is vital. And I came across incredible

storytellers... And the fact of only showing these map sketches of a country of which we have seen so many images that they have sometimes become clichés, it seemed to me that it provided a fresh look. And the maps clearly show, beyond the history of the people, how it is the places themselves that are bruised.

I did a first edit on the spot, so I could screen it and leave it to the people there. When I got home, some friends said: send your film to film festivals. But to register it on the festival sites, I looked stupid: director: Till; camera: Till; sound: Till; producer: Till; distributor: Till... It didn't seem right, but I finally sent it to the FID (International Documentary Film Festival) in Marseille. And it won an award in 2009. And from there, it did a big tour of the documentary festivals... and to this day, it remains my "hit"!... I am regularly asked for it for screenings or exhibitions, and I have put it online for free like the rest of my work, and if people have money, they pay something if they want. But this film was an experience that I really took as a gift, with the feeling of something that went beyond me.

A documentary tale

In the following years, in Marseille, there was another important step with *Plans de situation* number 7, which took me to the outskirts of the city, where I was already walking quite a bit, but which I then needed to experience more from the inside. And this happened, from 2009 to 2012, thanks to collaboration with the Théâtre de la Cité, which is very active in documentary work. They offered me the chance to work in the northern districts, in Consolat-Mirabeau, which is a kind of non-neighborhood, composed of several housing estates, gypsy camps, a small industrial area, the motorway that cuts right through the middle, the railway that cuts the other way: a small sample of the urban mess of Marseille. A few years after Sélestat, I felt ready to return to an oral form, quite different from the previous ones, and which was really about storytelling. I called it a documentary tale for the first time. There was no longer any screening of images, only a story and a map, which I drew on the floor with chalk as the story grew from my encounters. It was first performed on the spot, four nights in a row, with chairs on street corners or in little squares. People from the neighborhood came, and a few people came from outside. And unlike the talks I used to give in the past, I had now become a character in the story. Before, I had always tended to ignore my position as observer, I tried to be a neutral surface. But here, for the first time, I was in a terrain where I was really not expected, that is, the doors were difficult to open, where I came across a lot of mistrust in the street, I was seriously made to feel that I was an intruder, they were waiting to trip me up... and sometimes I managed to overcome that and there were encounters and wonderful stories, and other times it remained painful. So I felt it was important to include myself as a character: the one who goes to see others, who wants to understand how "men live"... "is this how men live?". So the tone of the tale is much more personal. I could adopt that tone perhaps because I was more mature too: I was maybe more able to stand back and talk about myself as if it were someone else.

It's a story that I told a lot later and that I still like to tell, the stories of these neighborhoods have been told in different places, in theatres, art schools, in other suburbs, in village squares and even in a storytelling festival!

To finish with the *Plans de situation* series, there was an eighth one two years ago in the Paris region, in Clichy-Montfermeil, with the Ateliers Médicis. Again, a tale for a public space, but instead of a map, I built a cardboard model of the whole neighborhood whose story I was telling, and we saw it being built and then demolished and then rebuilt little by little... For the moment, I don't know if there will be any more *Plans de situation*, even if I've long dreamt of finding THE *Plan de situation* that would take me the rest of my life.

Collective farm in Rome

Meanwhile, there was a year at the Villa Medici in 2013-2014. It happened at a time when I was starting to feel like I was at a turning point. I was beginning to feel that I had seen enough of the world to know that it was not working as I felt it should... It became more urgent to act together than to stick to contemplative work, and I also wanted to work more independently than before, that is, I no longer wanted to depend on public money. I always felt restricted somehow, even if I was given a lot of freedom. For example, going to poor neighborhoods and gypsy camps and being paid to visit people who are penniless was hard for me. These were issues I had been thinking about for some time. In 2011, I started to come across collective groups that were experimenting with anti-authoritarian communism, and I joined the movement to occupy public squares with *Les Indignés* (the Outraged) which was a moment of political awakening. The importance of spending nights on end talking, on an equal footing, with strangers on the street, to find out what we are searching for together - but also the question: if we still want to be here tomorrow, in the meantime, how do we manage for food? I wanted to do my part in these situations. And I remembered that I had already had this intuition in my youth, when I was working on farms, that one day I would be a farmer and an artist. It seemed like a great balance to me. And among the issues that preoccupied me about the politics of space, there was this sentence proclaiming that the earth must be for those who work it... that has always touched me deeply: I wanted to be part of those who work it.

All this was pretty clear to me when I went to the Villa Medici. I found a collective farm in Rome, near the edge of the city, an old legalized occupancy of public land, and I worked there one day a week. I spent the rest of my year writing a book, a big book, full of stories and pictures, a fragmentary attempt to sum up my experience of the world to date. A way of concluding what I had tried to do so far, to allow me to take this new turn. It's called *A propos de quelques points dans l'espace* (Regarding some points in space).

Professional Certificate as Agricultural Operations Manager

When I returned to Marseille, I left my lair in Le Panier to settle in a collective area with land, in a small corner of the northern districts. We have created a large collective, militant garden there over the past four years, called the Chiendent (quackgrass) vegetable garden, because there was a lot of quackgrass...! The garden worked in exchange with Manba, the autonomous support collective for migrants in Marseille. Sometimes there were many of us there gardening. At the height of it there were about ten adults and three to six children living on the spot. The garden lasted four years and this year we have to leave it. The Chiendent is still looking for somewhere to replant its roots.

In the meantime, I did a year of agricultural training, a basic course called “Professional Certificate as Agricultural Operations Manager” with the option of “goat breeding”. Before that I had worked for a year as an employee tending and milking at a goat farm near Marseille, in Septèmes, very close to the northern districts. And now I have just settled in La Crau, near Arles, with friends I have made in recent years, in a collective farm that belongs to the Longo Maï movement. The “Longo Maï European Cooperative” has 10 collective sites in various European countries that work together. And so now, that’s the challenge: to work on agricultural production within the collective with time set aside to capture fragments of the world in my own way. Fortunately, Longo Maï is visited by people from all over the world and with very different backgrounds and commitments. Maybe one day I’ll be able to find ways to tell some of the stories I’ve come across here.

Of the order of a gift

Ever since I was an art student, I’ve never felt comfortable with the idea of being a professional artist, although I was very happy to earn a living for a few years from these activities. The words “I am an artist” have always been difficult for me to say. There is always for me Joseph Beuys’ idea that every human being is an artist and if some people call themselves artists, it implies that the others are not. Even the word “art” is a problem for me today. There are *the arts* and some are more recognized than others. But Art... throughout the 20th century, the artists who interest me wanted to break down the boundaries of what was called “art”, so I think we should stop using this term, if not we just revert back to what they were trying to eliminate. Or else, it’s often seemed to me to be something of the order of a gift, as I had felt in Palestine, a form of grace that descends on you at some point but that you cannot control or appropriate. Being paid for it has almost always struck me as a misconception. Even if I am grateful to all those who have paid me, who may still do so... because creating things while living off agricultural work is obviously difficult!

A shepherd's trail in the Alps

I was already working as an assistant goatherd near Marseille, three long days a week, I had time left to work on this garden and many other things, when Nadine Gomez, the director of the Cairn in Digne, invited me with some insistence... I told her what I was doing and she said "If you want, we can have you meet some shepherds over here". And so from time to time I went up to Haute-Provence, and met the shepherds, past and present. I had two wonderful encounters, one with Marcel, who must now be 94 years old, and who will therefore soon have lived a century of life in the mountains, at a time that is hard to picture. He found himself working as a shepherd all by himself at the age of 13, because his father had gone to war. He has long lived outside capitalism and the industrial world and he still looks on today's world with a sense of disbelief. I wanted to keep track of his story and inscribe it in the landscape, creating and developing a trail, which is the one he used to use to follow from his village to the sheep pastures on the hill, a trail that had got a bit run down after a new trail had been created. So we reopened the trail, we marked it out, and we put out plaques recounting fragments of his life story, which resonate with the places we pass through. There is always a form of metaphor, from the mountain path to the path of life.

The other former shepherd was Charly, who, at one point, had told me about all the names of places in the mountain that were being lost, because the younger generations related to them differently or never went there. Many of these place names were not on the existing maps. So I went back to see him with some big sheets of paper, and he drew me his whole mountain, writing down all the names he knew. It concluded with an exhibition and the public inauguration of the trail in 2017, just before I left for agricultural training.

And in a way, I started training as a continuation of that experience, as I did the course in Digne. At that time, I was attracted by the prospect of one day having a herd of goats in a collective in the hills of Marseille. In Marseille itself, on the Plateau de la Mûre, there are a thousand hectares of scrubland belonging to the municipal domain. And it's very interesting to be at the edge of the city, because there are still fallow fields, slopes, old quarries where there are a few deciduous trees growing... in Septèmes too, it's the friction of the herd in the city that I liked. It hasn't materialized so far. Which is all right. But it's obviously the anarchistic side of goats that attracts me. They don't care a hoot about land ownership!!!

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