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As told to Ruby Brunton, 1997 words.

Tags: Writing, Curation, Process, Beginnings, Inspiration.



On enjoying the process and not worrying about the outcome

Writer and curator Jeanne Graff discusses how she came to accidentally write a book, how writing is a way to be aware of your surroundings, and why it's OK to not know what you're doing or why.

Jeanne, you're speaking to me from your family home in Lausanne, but you recently moved to New York City, correct?

Yes. I started going to New York a lot in 2013. That's also the same time when I started writing, more or less. I had an art space in Lausanne and one in Geneva, and I started going to New York because an artist I was working with, Ericka Beckman, who had a big studio in downtown New York, saw that I needed more freedom. Maybe also some distance. She said I could come to her studio and live there. That's how I started going to New York a lot. It was that summer where I met many people who are very important to me.

I've been rereading the novel you just published, Vzszhhzz. There seem to be some different spellings making the rounds. Some with lots of Js.

The spelling isn't so important. The title comes from the name of the restaurant in Basel that I mention in the book, you can't pronounce it, something like Vhhhjjjzzzzz. We use it as the title for a sort of moveable art space. The artist Mai-Thu Perret made its pink neon sign, which we used on the flyers for these events we organized. It also became the cover of the book. There are artists who are close to me, with whom I do shows or organize things, and most of them are in the book. So Vzszhhzz is the title of the restaurant we made up in 2014, which became the theme for these events we had in Basel, New York, Paris, Milan, Beijing, etc.

The book takes place across multiple locations, as you were writing it while traveling around a lot. In what ways does traveling interfere with your work? In what ways does it influence your work?

The thing is, I never planned to write a book. It happened by accident, actually. Because I was doing this show, the restaurant, Vzszhhzz. The first one was in Basel. I was looking for an art space that matched the way we were living as artists. And we were traveling a lot. I was looking for a venue to organize exhibitions. Because I was really tired of having to pay rent, having an art space, doing a show every six weeks, being stuck in this framework, etc. So I started to think of an architecture that is not still, that would better fit the artists' needs, and give them another frame, also in terms of time. So we wrote this text with the architect Sony Devabhaktuni from EPFL Lausanne and Hong Kong University. For example, I wanted to show Sylvère Lotringer's movies. So we organized it in a theater, at the Anthology Film Archives. The second event we made was with Anne Dressen and Anne Imhof. We were organizing a group to work on a show at Le Bar and instead of writing a press release, I wrote a short story about the boxing lessons we were taking.

That summer, I met Sylvère, who was giving a talk in Paris. I didn't even know about Semiotext(e), which is now my publishing house. We went to hear him giving a talk and I was very impressed by what he was saying, so at the end of the talk, I asked him to sign the book—Schizo-Culture—which is something I never do and I've never done again. He gave me his email address, and we've started exchanging emails. And then I sent him the first short story, which he liked, and he said, "Oh, you should write more! What's happening next?" So I started writing more of the short stories when I was traveling, and at a certain point, they became a book.

So meeting him was another of your encounters with chance?

Yeah, it wasn't planned. But also, I never really plan what I'm going to write about. It's more that I'm trying to be aware all the time about what's going on. When I see something that I want to write about, I take notes and write it down. The things I choose to write about are very precise. But if it's planned, it doesn't work.

You are an astute observer. A lot of the anecdotes in the book really allow the personalities and lives of these characters to shine through without a lot of interference from the author. It feels like you're showing us these people's lives, not just telling us about them. What is the role of observation in your work?

It depends. Some chapters are more composed, and some are less. Because it's also about the language, and about how people speak. For example, the first chapter was in French. And because there are many people who couldn't understand it, I then translated it into English. I wanted it to be fluid for the reader, for someone English-speaking, but for it to still sound like my own language.

Is that why you decided to translate it yourself? So that it would have more of that "this-is-how-I-speak" quality?

I translated the book with John Kelsey. So many people speak English and it's not their mother tongue. You have a kind of vulnerability and a distance when you speak a language that is not your first language. I wanted the book to be easy to read. I would never like someone feeling stupid because they haven't understood something. You can say important things in a simple way.

What do you think is important to take into consideration when you're telling the stories of real people, as opposed to making up characters?

As I said, it wasn't planned. When I was first writing these, I was doing small books for these art events. I was making them for my friends. Juliana Huxtable, for example. When we met, I wasn't a writer and she wasn't a writer. It was in 2013, in a club. We were both going there alone. She told me her story and that's the night we really became close friends. I was so touched by her story that I wrote it down and I gave it back to her—like a week later—in the form of a small book. Her story is very interesting on another level because of who she is. And it's also about power abuse, sexuality, and... I don't want to explain it too much, but there are many layers. Every time I write about someone, first I send it to the person and I ask if the person likes it. And they've always said yes. So, yeah. It was natural for me to do this. Also, recently Juliana wrote about me, which is a beautiful gift back.

In the book there's a lot of discussion of dinner parties, attention to ingredients, the desire to feed each other, and to feed other people. I wonder if this focus on nourishment resonated with me because while I was living in New York I often felt very undernourished. I'm curious about where your attention to sustenance and feeding people and dinner parties comes from. Why do you think that we artists often neglect these acts of care and self-care?

Everybody that reads the book focuses on different things, so for you it's the food. That's very personal. There is this moment in Milan with the World Expo. I wrote about that because I think the food is a very important part of the world. The weather, how you look at the sky, how you look at the waves, how you look at food—that's a very important part of our lives. So I write about it.

I loved the scene with the fondue dinner in New York where one guest eats a little too much. It got me thinking about cultural difference with regards to food. When I was living in France briefly, the musicians would play a show, and then after the show a meal was ready for the the musicians to eat. I have a friend in Paris who is an actress and they do the theater play and then afterwards they have a meal. I'm curious about your view on the differences and similarities between these artistic communities that you've been involved with in Europe and in New York?

Well, it is different. And sometimes it's good to be in that position when you don't understand, because it makes you humble. And there are still things, like the way people act, that I don't understand sometimes. Or things that I think are rude. It's about just being in that position where suddenly you discover that things can be different.

You seem to be interested in finding these unlikely exhibition spaces. How easy is it to obtain these kinds of spaces for your projects, and does that vary depending on where in the world you are?

It also depends on who I meet. Some spaces are very small and simple. And some other can be much different. I met [architect] Massimiliano Locatelli and he was moving his office into a church and we thought that we should do something there. For the artists, the acoustics are very special. Maria Callas recorded there. For Stefan Tcherpnin, as a musician, to play there it was just amazing. It was also amazing for Anne Imhof, Mai-Thu Perret, and John Armleder to perform. Then I made this small book for the show that talks about the church, and about traveling, and about the food. But, again, without thinking I was writing a book.

You have recently begun reading your work publicly. What do you enjoy about performing, versus the more solitary act of being the writer or curator?

I like it a lot. And it's very important for me. I've been practicing reading [aloud] with Jim Fletcher. Because it's something I wasn't comfortable with before. You know, as a writer, you're very lonely. Or it's silent. And that was very important for me, to hear my voice, to read my book aloud and to share it.

It's a moment when you can actually connect with the audience, because obviously when you write, and someone's reading it in a different location, there's not that connection that you get when you're actually standing in front of the audience reading.

Yeah, to share it with the audience. It's also strange for me because, as I was recently telling Juliana, I wrote the book only for the people that are in the book.

Your approach to work is very exciting to someone like me, who gets very stressed about the end goal all the time. You seem to be more like, "I'm just gonna try this for a while and see what happens." You come

across as very open.

I think I share this with Sylvère a lot, this way of thinking and observing, and being very open to just, like, "Let it go." You know? But I also stress a lot sometimes.

How do you manage to balance all of your distinct projects and still find time for all of the things that you're doing and still eat well and exercise and observe nature?

I actually work very slowly and I spend a lot of time doing nothing and thinking. I've developed my own kind of technique of observation. And for me it's completely okay to not know or understand exactly why I'm doing something at a certain point. Maybe I'll figure it out a few years later.

Jeanne Graff recommends:

Reading books edited by Semiotext(e)

Dancing to Juliana Huxtable's music

Hiking with Peau de Phoque in the mountains

Inventing new recipes, like salads and sandwiches, and sharing them

Name

Jeanne Graff

Vocation

Writer, Curator

Fact



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