



Tranchée Alexandra Engelfriet

THE FOREST HAD BEGUN THE SLOW WORK OF reclamation, grasses and wild flowers covering the bare earth of a year ago, softening the lines leading into the trench but its rawness still hit me with a shock; all the movement of the work, from the struggle of the bitter fight to the tenderness of nursing touch, stood there petrified in its greens and greys and reds; a monument bearing mute witness. I walked through barefoot, the recent rains ankle deep, emotion caught somewhere between curiosity and a nameless unease, between an impulse to run and the urge to look closer, to touch this cauterised skin, scar tissue slowly fading back into the forest.

The project was commissioned in 2013 by Vent des Forêts, a 'contemporary art space under the open sky' in La Meuse, a department in the Lorraine region of North-Eastern France, near the city of Verdun. Vent des Forêts was established in early 1990s at the initiative of six villages all bordering this forest. For Pascal Yonet, the Director, the ethos behind the project is one of encounter between artists, local people and the lived landscape in the process of making and engaging with works of art. Tranchée became one of around 90 works visible from the 45 kilometres of tracks through the forest,

all in various states of disintegration or integration, depending on which way you look at it.

Tranchée marks the culmination of a sculptural practice Alexandra Engelfriet has been developing over the past *twenty* years. Described as a 'true mud person', she works with huge bodies of clay, using her body as a tool with which to form and sculpt. Her work leaves a profound, visceral and unspoken sense of relation; body and

Article by Marc Higgin

work leaves a profound, visceral and unspoken sense of relation; body and clay giving and receiving, forcing and suffering, setting geological time-scales against the breath of the human body. As an anthropologist interested in the relations between landscape, materials and the practices of art, I was enthralled by the sheer physicality of Engelfriet's practice, the seriousness of this play that clay affords. She kindly agreed to have me work as her assistant and 'anthropologist-in-residence' on the project.

It was not hard to find the site when I arrived at the beginning of the summer. The forest had been cleared to bare earth in a rectangle 50 metres deep and 10 wide. Fabrice, the son of one of the local mayors, had already dug most of the gently sloping trench that spanned the length of the clearing and would be both site and approach to the work. Engelfriet sent me a rough plan of work by email – dig the



trench, cover the walls of the middle 10 metres in clay, sculpt the walls, construct a kiln around it, fire the clay to ceramic and, finally, deconstruct the kiln – but the scale of it and scale of the work to come took me totally aback. A month later, 25 tonnes of clay were delivered on 10 pallets, soft bricks wrapped in metres of plastic. Engelfriet and I and a rotating team of helpers began several exhausting

*Facing page: Tranchée (Completed).
Above and below: Tranchée in Process. Photo by Estelle Chrétien.*

days' work moving all the clay, wheelbarrow by wheelbarrow, brick by brick, to cover the steep sides of the middle 10 metres of the trench. With the walls covered, Engelfriet got to work sculpting the clay. She worked rhythmically over the course of four days, slowly forming the clay with her entire





Above: *Tranchée (Firing).*

Facing page: *Pascal Yonet inside Tranchée.*

Photo by Guillaume Ramon.

body. The force of her feet and knees and elbows punching and pressing the clay was palpable even from a distance but there were also smaller, more delicate, movements; a gentleness in how clay and body accommodated and responded to each other's force and touch. Engelfriet was so absorbed she barely seemed to notice the photographers, filmmaker and gaggle of curious visitors watching her. Later, we talked about how her practice is exactly in this absorption, in this relation taking form between experience and earth; a relation that transforms both. Speaking of an earlier project working with Dutch river clay she said, "Clay can give you the feeling of being pulled into it, sucked away out of existence. It can go as far as being an experience of death. That project was called *Dust to Dust* and I was at that time mourning the death of a friend. But the experience became more universal and it felt like kind of caring for the dead of old battlefields."

This experience of moving deeper into the earth, both a mourning and caring for, was central to the work of *Tranchée* for Engelfriet, a trench dug in a land where the first world war is a living presence. A process by which the clay became skin, insides on the out, folded between the coldness of the earth and warmth of the living.

It was time to build the kiln. *Tranchée* brings Engelfriet's sculptural practice together with her growing passion for the possibilities using fire to

transform clay. Her first experience of woodfiring kilns was at a residency at the Guldagergaard ceramics research centre in Denmark and it marked her deeply. She began an apprenticeship of sorts with Torbjørn Kvasbø and then Thiébaud Chagué, learning the art of building and firing wood-burning kilns, out of which developed a series of experimental kilns at her studio in France that served as the prototype to this project. The actual building of the kiln came together organically, almost miraculously, over the three weeks of the project and the work of many different people: Engelfriet and the Vent des Forêts team, but also the participation of local people and the enthusiasm, skill, equipment and materials they brought to each working day, from diggers and angle grinders to lovely lunches and wine. Chagué, who happened to be working on a project at nearby Bar-le-Duc, joined us and brought his extensive experience of building large-scale ephemeral kilns, without whom the entire project might have come unstuck.

In answer to my asking why they gave so much of their time and energy to the project, people spoke about the gratification of seeing their effort and skill becoming part of the work, of the exchange that changed the work of art and their experience of it. As an anthropologist, I could not help reading how this art-as-event (as a kind of emergent ritual and as an enduring work of art) brought out and made visible these social and material relations with a power allowing new social, physical and emotional connections to take form and persist in this place.



The kiln began with the roof; assembled from steel panels to which three layers of ceramic fibre had been attached by a process of tufting using hundreds of porcelain buttons made by Expressions, a local arts association. Then came the front of the kiln, rising from the irregular floor and slope of the trench, using a mix of refractory brick and cellular concrete. Rather than months, the tonnes of clay inside had only four days to lose water, so we began the fire that we would keep for the next seven days, the white humid smoke slowly evacuating the moisture inside. There was some cracking and falling pieces but, on the whole, the clay withstood the hurried treatment amazingly well. While the drying fire burned, the back wall and chimney were built over the next three days using brick and cellular concrete. The first chimney had to be rebuilt because Chagué, alerted by a photo a friend happened to have sent him, phoned to voice his concern that the exit hole between kiln and chimney would be too small. Rebuilt, the chimney gave us the draw necessary to begin growing the fire. Over the course of three days, two nights, we went from 250°C to 850°C on the eve of the last night of the firing.

There were about 60 people – most of whom we had gotten to know over the previous weeks – milling about and watching 10 of us desperately feeding a fire that had flat-lined somewhere between 850°C and 900°C. The kiln seemed bloated, constipated, with lazy oily flames slowly snaking their way through. Everyone was doing something different, talking through more and more desperate options, no one keeping quiet except Engelfriet who sat

watching the fire. At some point in the early morning when most of the spectators had left, she turned and said the kiln needed to find its rhythm again; we kept stricter time, feeding the back side stoke hole first, moving towards the front and repeating, the fire began to breathe again. Slowly the air being sucked in through the vents became a roar and the heat grew and grew, the planks of pine fed into the fire exploded into flame before they had even touched the glowing pile of embers, the flames twisting through and up out of the chimney into the night sky, the clay slowly turned from an incandescent yellow to a strange icy white painful to look at. I have always loved fire, but fire at this intensity is a truly astonishing thing – its heat metamorphosing the soft sediment clay into stone, into ceramic, in the process transforming us. I was beginning to understand the look in Alexandra Engelfriet's eyes, in Chagué's, when they spoke about fire. We battled on to the light of dawn; the digital pyrometer had died sometime in the night but the cones still visible in the front read between 1200° and 1250°C. After closing the kiln down, we drove back through the early morning fields. It seemed as if a blanket of heaviness had been lifted from these hills.

Marc Higgin is a Doctoral Candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen (<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/profiles/r01mch11/>).

A video has been made of this project by French filmmaker Estelle Chrétien (<http://vimeo.com/70952187>).

(www.alexandra-engelfriet.nl)

All photos by Alexandra Engelfriet unless noted.