

## Stefano Cagol and Angelique Campens in conversation

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'In conversation. Stefano Cagol Angelique Campens'

ArtBrussels Debates 07, Brussels

Angelique Campens:

Welcome to the conversation and book presentation of *Harajuku Influences*! First of all I want to introduce Stefano Cagol, sitting next to me, who is an Italian artist.

Stefano Cagol:

We are here! I want to show you a selection of works I did last year. We'll start with the *Bird Flu Vogelgrippe* project...

AC:

...that you ended at the Berlin Biennale as an off-site project by which you made your work be known!

SC:

Yes! That's true!

AC:

The present publication is in fact a summary of Stefano Cagol's last year projects where he made a research on contemporary influences, physical and mental ones, positive and negative ones: all his latest projects deal with the topic of influences.

The same points of influence are nowadays everywhere, we are continuously influenced, easily influenced as a mass, not only as single beings by passions, politics, religion, sex, art, reality TV shows...

Stefano Cagol asked critics and curators (David Elliott, Stefan Bidner, Andrea Lissoni and Roberto Pinto) to write on the various influences for his publication *Harajuku Influences*. I wrote the essay "Manipulated Environment" for this book. The text is about ecology and manipulation, like for example in genetics: I think this is one of the biggest influences with

which we have to deal now. But I don't want to go further on the present theme, because you can read the text on the publication or read it on-line on the web site of Stefano Cagol...

Now we will show you some videos of Stefano's last works. In the meantime since the book is on the topic of influences, I will ask him some questions on influences.

SC:

What you are watching on the screen is the beginning of the *Bird Flu Vogelgrippe* project. It was supported by the Civic Gallery of Contemporary Art of Trento... and there are some good news because next year this city, my city, will host Manifesta! But the project was supported also by other two public spaces: Museion, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Bolzano (the other neighboring city hosting Manifesta), and Kunstraum of Innsbruck.

We started by van and we traveled to the core of Europe. Trento is nine-hundred kilometers from Berlin and we stopped at different sites: sometimes they were tourists' resorts, some other times very symbolic sites, historical places. We stopped once at the Zeppelin Tribune in Nürnberg!

Every time a strong connection was triggered by the place to the writings on the van, the labels with the words of the title of the project. From inside the van came a loud sound of birds chirping: in fact when we made this project we were right in the middle - here in Europe - of the completely crazy scaring fear of being caught by bird flu.

Finally *Bird flu* is a metaphor for all the influences; the great majority of influences is artificial as much as the fear of being affected by bird flu was artificial and built by the media; sometimes influences are true sometimes they are not, they are of the body and of the mind. At the moment the bird flu has spread as much as last year, but media decided not to speak again about it, they didn't create the fear and so the problem doesn't exist for the people: it's a media manipulation, media and money manipulation, to go back to the title of your text, Angelique.

AC:

How can influenza create a hype, for example the one of bird flu?

SC:

The general fear against bird flu was so strong, but at the same time for me so ironic. Everyone went crazy because all the people, humanity is like birds, like hens!

AC:

... battery chickens! As mass, not individuals!

SC:

Yes, sure!

AC:

Why did you work on influences? Why did you start the “flu” word?

SC:

I started to work with propaganda tools to think about the mechanisms of media and their influence on us. That is why I started using badges with the “flu” term, as well as others. In fact during our trip by van we stopped and distributed for free to everybody small badges with combinations of words with “flu”: not only bird flu, but money flu, sex flu, war flu...

We could make this combination with everything!... fashion flu, beauty flu, pussy flu, ass flu...

AC:

But what about Harajuku in the title of your book? Can you explain us the meaning of the combination of this name with the influence word?

SC:

I think that every day I undergo a different influence!

Harajuku is a place: it's in Tokyo.

It is a very interesting place, central, full of young guys dressed like manga. It's strange! It's a very manipulated environment!

I lived in Harajuku Street for one month in 2004 and I think that place highly influenced both my work and my way of thinking. Now it is a part, a piece of my work and of my mind, of the sum of influences that build my work and my mind.

In the meantime what you are watching on the screen is our stop outside Museion in Bolzano. We parked in front of the building for several hours and children passed by... it's as if the van was full of birds...

AC:

Maybe you can show the meeting with the truck along the highway...

SC:

During the trip a lot of random, casual things happened.

The one I'm showing you was a very interesting meeting! We were on the highway, pretty close to Leipzig, not too far from Berlin. And we met a van with a big plastic chicken on top: it was a “chicken van” and we were the “chicken flu van”! So we tried to follow our “friend” for twenty minutes, and on the van there was the German slogan “Nimm mich!” meaning literally “Take me!”

AC:

Can you show and explain us other parts of the video?

SC:

Maybe Berlin?

AC:

Yes! The part of the Berlin Biennale where I saw your work!

SC:

We parked in front of the Kunst Werke...

And there is an anecdote about fear, because on the day after our arrival in Berlin we found in the hall and on the first page of the town newspapers the news of the first case of bird flu in Berlin: "Vogelgrippe in Berlin" was the title, everywhere! There was only this case, only one and so – I'm not sure, but... – I think it was an effect of the project, because it happened exactly on the day after the project...

(a little bit of champagne...)

In front of the Kunst Werke there were a lot of people, it was a big event with people like birds! While inside the Kunst Werke and all around we distributed the badges with the "flu" combinations.

AC:

You were there only for the opening, am I right?

SC:

Yes, it was only for one day!

AC:

But the van stayed there for three days...

SC:

Yes, it's true: we parked there for three days, but the action took place only on the day of the opening. While the length of the entire trip was of one week: starting from Italy, stopping in Bolzano, Innsbruck, Munich, Nürnberg, then Berlin and back.

AC:

How did the Berlin Biennale react to your project? Since it was an off-site project...

SC:

I think it was the most interesting off project in Auguststrasse!  
Massimiliano Gioni and Cattelan, the curators, were informed and they told me it was ok!

AC:

But did they know in advance about it? Or did they discover it there without knowing about it before?

SC:

No, we sent the project to the office of the Kunst Werke and they put it on the VIP program of the Biennale as the unique special project of the 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Now we could “go” to Ghent!

AC:

Yes. I invited Stefano afterwards for a show there in a... *zoo logical* garden. And there he showed a “bird flu fridge”.

SC:

The installation in Ghent was actually the second part of the Berlin project: not with a van, but with a fridge. I’ll show you just three minutes of the video...

AC:

In your book you asked critics and curators a series of questions on influences. Now I would like to ask you the same questions.  
So... what are you influenced by?

SC:

Flu... flu! I think that an artist now has to fight every day with the art system: the biggest flu is represented by curators, galleries, museums. While in general – as it goes for everybody – by politics, religion, money!

AC:

In the book, the dialogue with the curators is like an interview and they all speak about mass media. And you Stefano, are you influenced by mass media?

SC:

For sure! The opposite is impossible! You have to live on a island somewhere! With no television, no mobile phone, no computer, no internet...

AC:

What I would like to do is to ask you the question you asked critics and curators in the book, that is if artists are influenced by critics...

SC:

I'd rather ask powerful people... and I think that artists do not have a lot of power.

Probably the situation has to change a little: in the art system artists have to become part of the system. Because now everything is decided by curators, by a small number of people.

We could say something also about *Zoo Logical*, the exhibition in Ghent we are watching on the screen...

AC:

No, I think it's not necessary because we are in Belgium now...

SC:

Ok, so now I'll show you in a moment another project I made after the one in Ghent. Just two weeks later! I went directly to Singapore and I did another work like *Bird Flu*. Something like a twin project.

It was the only Italian presence at the first edition of the Singapore Biennale, as well as an off project, but it was an official satellite event completely supported by Fumio Nanjo, the curator of the Biennale. I was also helped by the Italian Cultural Institute there and worked together with the ICA – Institute of Contemporary Art of Singapore to develop it.

On the same days of the opening of the Biennale in Singapore there was the meeting of the IMF – International Monetary Fund and we went around Singapore with a small van with labels with the words "Power Station", while the van played national G8 anthems and anthems of the Asian area. It was a very interesting mix: you have for example Vietnam and the U.S.; all the countries of the area are ex-colonies. And now they are becoming the most powerful economies in the future! And theirs is a very clear idea to become extremely powerful! Thus the East against the West ...

On this occasion we made a new series of badges with the combinations of the power word: first money power... In fact power is another type of flu, a very strong one.

AC:

Can you tell us more about Singapore?

SC:

Singapore is so interesting because it's a very interracial, international, multi-ethnic place. You have Little India, China Town, you can find a lot of

different people, cultures, languages together. And we did go everywhere!. We stopped in front of the business center – Singapore is an important economical Asian center – and then we went to China Town, to the fish market.

AC:

What were the reactions of people?

SC:

Very different from the ones usually triggered by *Bird Flu*! People didn't actually understand what was happening. It looked like a political meeting... with anthems, flyers, badges... But they showed interest in it...

Now I'll show you some shots of the different stops in Singapore. This is the Laos national anthem. We were in front of Wall Street and you can see the business guys all in their white shirts.

AC:

In the meantime I would like to ask you another question you asked curators and critics. Which are for you the most spread influences nowadays?

SC:

The biggest? It is politics. It decides for everything. For ecology, for money... and it is connected with international power. It "is" everything.

Talking about power, I'll show you the most influencing stuff! It's the latest version of a work I started six years ago. I think the content is very clear... the stars and stripes flag...

AC:

In your book I saw your children drawings... with a lot of flags! You started your project on influences quite soon!

SC:

I was five years old. I worked a lot of times with flags, but I also started really early to draw flags everywhere. I think it is very important for me to understand why I'm so attracted today by flags. In a drawing there is the Cold War, instead this is like Berlin with the wall... the Americans, the war...

AC:

And there? What is this drawing on the left?

SC:

I don't know, I cannot remember!

AC:

I have a last question for you. What is art influenced by?

SC:

Art? For me art is life! Art is a big influence! For me it's the only way to live; it's not easy, but it is beautiful.

At the same time you have to live, to work very close to the art system. As I told you before here is the system of galleries, museums, critics. This is the same for every artist... even if when they start all young artists have a very romantic vision of art. But at the end art is business, also for the artist: you have to live, you have to sell. It's different.

At the beginning artists also have a romantic idea of the importance of aesthetics; what is important instead is to have a strong message, to try to say something! Like in my video of the stars & stripes flag...

AC:

Can you tell us about your next project on flu and identity?

SC:

The one in Tokyo?

AC:

No, I'm speaking about the simulation you showed me of the project for the gallery in Chelsea...

SC:

No, I'm afraid: I showed it only to you, but it's "top secret" for the audience...

You have to come to NYC for the opening and there you will see the project...

AC:

Ok, ok, Stefano! We will be there!

Would you like to show us another video?

SC:

I don't know, I think we can stop here.

...now you can take a look at the book!



AC:  
Ok. Thank you!

SC:  
Thank you and to all for coming!