

TIMELY LESSONS OF THE VILLAGE SQUARE

ZOË PAUL AND LAURA HERMAN IN CONVERSATION

HOW DO PEOPLE COME TOGETHER THESE DAYS?

Zoë Paul's work consists of elements and motifs that—whether at a domestic or community scale—convey an essence of belonging: fountains, bead curtains, ceramic tea cups. She employs inexpensive, general-purpose, low-tech materials and techniques, such as clay, weaving and drawing, that pertain to a small-scale economy and are used to meet daily life needs. The impulse is not to simply celebrate pre-modern living and traditional craft, but to complicate our relationship to progress. Paul's exhibitions—including her ongoing project *La Perla-Perma Kraal Emporium*—offer a framework to reconsider age-old objects' abilities to connect if handled with care and attention and examine the value of the communities that produce and activate them.



Solitude and Village installation view at The Breeder, Athens, 2016. © Zoë Paul.
Courtesy: The Breeder, Athens. Photo: Nikos Koustenis



Her, 2018. © Zoë Paul.
Courtesy: The Breeder, Athens



Top - *Land of the Lotus Eaters*, 2018, *La Perma-Perla Kraal Emporium* installation view at Spike Island, Bristol, 2018. © Zoë Paul. Courtesy: The Breeder, Athens. Photo: Guido Moretti
Bottom - *La Perma-Perla Kraal Emporium* installation view at The Breeder, Athens, 2017. © Zoë Paul. Courtesy: The Breeder, Athens. Photo: Nikos Koustenis

LAURA HERMAN

During documenta 14 in Athens in 2017, I visited the Breeder Gallery to attend a performance, which I missed, as I suddenly found myself kneading and rolling little clay beads at this long table while engaging in conversations and drinking tea. We all didn't know what exactly we were participating in, but that didn't seem to matter. This is where I first encountered your work.

ZOË PAUL

Yes, the Breeder Gallery invited me to make an open studio on the top floor of their building during documenta 14. For me, the studio is an incredibly private place, so I appropriated elements of my studio, which was also my home, to create the bead rolling situation, presented as exhibition at *La Perla-Perma Kraal Emporium*, a project that addresses the way I work, and is very much based on conversation and community. Even though it was in the building of a commercial gallery, the space had a much more domestic feel to it. It had previously been a restaurant (the Breeder Feeder, designed by Andreas Angelidakis) and a place to host artists on residencies, so it had a kitchen, a bar, and a sleeping area as well as a small terrace. I used this domesticity by placing marble tables like the ones in my studio to the gallery and used this situation as a way to break down social boundaries, of which there are many in the art world, so people could almost be anonymous, and their hierarchies destabilized. I wanted to create a platform where a museum director would be sharing an activity with an art student, for example, while neither of them would know who the other was. So, you're right, the project was about spending time together and connecting people, with no agenda other than what was presented.

LH

The title of the ongoing project, *La Perla-Perma Kraal Emporium*, refers to your upbringing between Greece and the UK with South African parents, but also speaks to more general concerns that run through your work. Could you explain a bit?

ZP

The title is quite cryptic, and became the starting point for conversations to flow and to spawn off all the things I had been thinking about in relation to the project. *Perma* relates to permaculture; *perla* means "bead" in many languages; *kraal* is also a word for "bead" as well as a group of habitations in a circular formation in Afrikaans, which stems from the Portuguese word for "corral." Having grown up between Kythira in Greece and then Oxford in the UK, with South African parents who had fled the apartheid regime, these three elements are quite important to me. Finally, *emporium* comes in because I am fascinated with how human civilization created the social sculpture that is money, which was invented around the same time as writing and agriculture—it was necessary for trade. The word *emporium* is derived from the Latin word, which stems from the Greek *em* (being with, or on) and *poros* (passage or voyage), and *emporos* (merchant). The exhibition happened in a commercial gallery during documenta in Athens, which seemed to attempt to set itself against the commercial world, yet all of these exposures rely on vast capital, and I felt like it's something we should talk about. There is a complicated relationship to money in the art world. I wanted to be transparent about the project being held in a commercial space, but also present this element of trade as an integral part of interaction within communities.

LH

Like money and trade, permaculture is a system or design that can lead to a thriving and healthy ecology or community. How do its principles inform your practice?

ZP

Permaculture is a form of farming where a diversity of plants grow together and support each other. I'm really inspired by the farmer and philosopher Masanobu Fukuoka, who challenged the multinational agriculture industries since the 1930s in Japan and around the world to propose a biodynamic way of farming—a holistic situation where plants, people, animals, and climate cohabit, and which yields more crops without any pesticides or fertilizers. I make the analogy with communities in the sense that the more variation we have, the healthier the community or ecosystem. For me, permaculture is the opposite of agriculture, which adopts the same divide-and-rule mentality aligned with colonialism and subjugation. In regard to my practice, I have a very slow and meditative way of

working—rolling little beads, weaving, working in clay. For me art making is like farming: you need to be tending your works all the time. I also scavenge. The grills that I weave on are discarded industrial grills, and the clay I use was collected from the cliffs on the island I grew up on. Now, I have expanded my resources, but I always try to think of ways in which art or objects relate to communities, and how we live together with art.

LH

Your work engages with material culture and ordinary human activities like weaving, ceramics, and farming, yet it also unpacks craft as the transfer of knowledge and ideas—a form of communication that demands attention and negotiation.

ZP

Weaving, ceramics, and permaculture all have a connection with the earth and the climate through their materiality. The progression from raw material to crafted object relies on time, space, and trade. While craft is often seen as less important than theory and academia, there is a lot of research in my practice, which manifests as objects and activities. I use material culture as a platform to put across big ideas in a simple way that people can relate to through feeling and instinct rather than through rules. Art is a form of communication, and I think it's important despite geographies or socioeconomic limitations for people to feel connected with the objects I am creating. I'm interested in how we can imbue things, events, or experiences with meaning.

LH

Along those lines, I'm interested in how you work with found and manufactured materials (for instance the found refrigerator grills) and how these materials relate to shifts in our social world.

ZP

Before the refrigerator, people had other ways of preserving food or sharing it communally. Climate and trade really influence how cultures develop. In warm countries like Greece, people shared food communally, before it could go bad. The emergence of the refrigerator allowed people to keep food individually, which, along with stringent health and safety regulations, changed how the community functioned. For me, the interesting question is how people come together and whether we are becoming more homogenized thanks to appliances and regulations. I started making the fridge grill weavings in 2012, when I left Greece to study in London. This was the time of the Greek economic crisis. The effects were horrible, but at the same time there was a sense of mutual support. The first weavings I made were titled *Mazeuvie*, which means "to gather or collect" in Greek. In a weaving, one line can't exist without the other, and the whole image is made up of many threads and lines supporting each other over the skeleton of the discarded refrigerator grill.

LH

Your work is characterized by an eclectic, transhistorical set of references, from classical mythology to ancient agriculture, and nowhere does it appear to make a strict distinction between art, craft, and technology. Which basically loops back to the ancient Greek understanding of *techné* as the umbrella term that covers technical skill, magic, perfection, expertise, invention, and cunning of the hand.

ZP

Every material sits in a specific conceptual framework. When we look at a piece of ceramic, it's not just a piece of ceramic. It embodies everything that ceramic can be or has been—it has a history and a future. I also never make anything with the idea of it being new or contemporary because I simply don't believe in progress, in the sense we keep repeating ourselves to some degree. For me, art is about communication, not competition or shock. I want to make people think about and refer back to their own experiences when they engage in my work, and take something away with them. Part of creating the activity for bead rolling is to find a way to slow everything down, to allow people to spend more time with each other and the artwork. Objects become residues of the performance, talismans of the collective shared experience. Craft—or *techné*, to use the Greek terminology, which I indeed think is more apt—relates to our physical engagement with objects.

LH

Over the last decade there has been a renaissance of craft and material culture among artists, designers, and Western society at



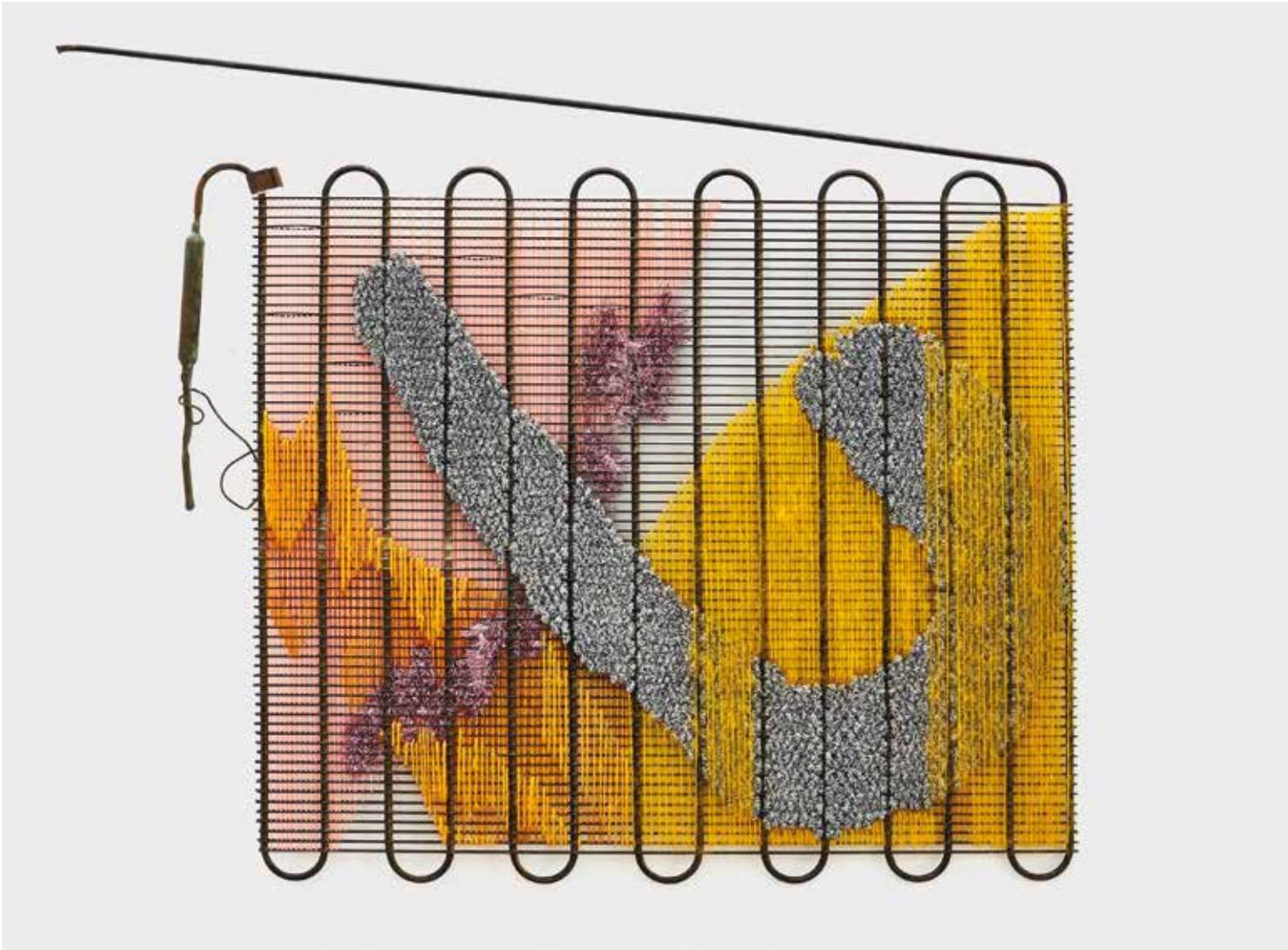


Wild Wolf, Man and Fish installation view at Hospitafield, Arbroath, 2018. © Zoë Paul.
Courtesy: The Breeder, Athens. Photo: Ruth Clark



La Perma-Perla Kraal Emporium installation view at Spike Island, Bristol, 2018. © Zoë Paul.
Courtesy: The Breeder, Athens. Photo: Guido Moretti





Top - *Untitled*, 2017. © Zoë Paul. Courtesy: The Breeder, Athens. Photo: Nikos Koustenis
Bottom - *Untitled*, 2018. © Zoë Paul. Courtesy: The Breeder, Athens

large. This resurgence, spearheaded by thinkers like Richard Sennett and Tim Ingold, is often rooted in a critique of standardized production processes; logics of normativity, uniformity, and efficiency; and practices of reverse engineering. Yet oftentimes these critiques risk falling into either a folklorist moralism or a nostalgic conservatism. How do you combine tradition and artisanal symbolism with innovative ideas, and how can craft processes address challenges in today's society?

ZP The first bead curtain I made was titled *The taste of a cosmopolitan shepherd with an excellent long term memory* (2014). The character of the cosmopolitan shepherd is quite important to me because he merges the ancient and traditional with the technological and cosmopolitan. As with permaculture, I think different temporalities need to coexist, and needn't be mutually exclusive. As much as we try to standardize, there is always some event that catches us off guard and can lead to paths more interesting than the path of progress we blindly follow. After having watched *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) by Werner Herzog, I stopped believing in progress because the archaeological team couldn't understand why the animals depicted on the undulating cave walls had so many legs or horns until they illuminated the cave with the equivalent of flickering firelight. At this point the drawings became animated, manifesting their incredible sophistication—it was like cinema.

Likewise, with the bead curtains I start off with a small sketch of a figure, then start pouring beads on the floor and sorting them to get the forms and shading of the figures. It's very similar to a digital sharpening, but we do it manually because every bead is unique. The end result is a hanging mosaic. From our technological perspective the beads look like pixels, yet it took six months to produce *The Land of the Lotus Eaters* (2018). I didn't realize how much movement and presence it would have until I saw it hanging at Spike Island in Bristol. It's a work that really needs to be experienced. You move around it and see the figures and their shadows moving.

LH Speaking of *The Land of the Lotus Eaters*, could you talk about the fluidity that marks your work? Visiting your exhibition at Spike Island, or any exhibition of yours, is like entering a whole new world born from a "flow" of improvised making rather than a clear plan or design, from the fluidity of the clay heads and beads over the sound of a water fountain to the fluid lines running through your painting and exhibition designs.

ZP When I make exhibitions, I think hard about the architecture of the space, the flow from one element to the next, and how as a whole they all hold themselves together. I imagine how I would inhabit the space, how I would greet people who come to view the work, what would make them feel comfortable, how the artworks in the space would be activated. It's all very planned, even if it appears spontaneous. In *La Perla-Perma Kraal Emporium*, the Greek herb company Daphnis and Chloe supplied teas, which were served to people from ceramic teapot-head sculptures when they entered the space, creating an atmosphere of hospitality. At Spike Island, *The Land of the Lotus Eaters* was framed between columns and fit harmoniously with the dimensions of the space, leaving a comfortable yet intimate space for the viewer. *Sebil* (Public Fountain, 2018)—which is named after the Ottoman word for a communal water fountain, often constructed by a local philanthropist as a gift to the town—was placed in the middle of the four columns. In warm countries where water is scarce and precious, the water fountain is a place for cooling as well as for community and gathering. A sculpture is an object that should push

you around a space, divert you through its physicality in relation to your own. These last months, I've been exploring the mural painting a lot more. In particular, the way that colour changes our perception of space.

LH Your work not only responds to specific architectures, but also investigates different types and scales of environments: domestic space, the village square, the natural world, the mythological realm. How do you connect these different settings?

ZP All these places have in common a human element of community and activity. Within every community there is violence but also hope, and I try to scale them to bring out the essential elements. When I made the show *Gossip* in Lausanne in 2016, I re-created the situation of communal washbasins and looked at women's work or labor. There were two basins, one at each end of the gallery, with double-faced fountain heads spurting water. Then on the floor were raku-fired, blackened and burned hands rising up holding little shards of obsidian rock. The show was in darkness at night and only lit with small LED lights, and in the day filled with natural daylight from the windows. The exhibition changed its feeling depending on what time of the day you visited. At Spike Island, the space with its columns was a temple, but with its fountain also a village square or a cave.

LH What will you be working on in the coming months?

ZP I'm really excited to start working on a solo show for La Loge in Brussels opening in April and also to make the third edition of *La Perla-Perma Kraal Emporium* at the Garage museum of contemporary art in Moscow in March. I'm starting a new project around game playing as a way of connecting people. While I was in Scotland, I went to the beach with another artist and his kid, and we played a game by drawing circles in the sand and throwing pebbles into them from a distance. I want to explore this shared activity with no other purpose than spending time together, as well as continuing my research into raw glazing that I started in Scotland. I'll be showing the first of these hoop works at Marfa gallery in Beirut in September as part of a group show curated by Mari Spirito, titled *That Is Water, That Is Earth*.

Zoë Paul (1987, London) grew up between the Greek island of Kithira and Oxford, having South African origins. She now lives and works in Athens. After finishing her undergraduate at Camberwell College of Art, she completed her MA in Sculpture at the Royal College of Art, London. Selected shows include *La Perla-Perma Kraal Emporium* at SPIKE Island, Bristol, 2018; *La Perla-Perma Kraal Emporium* at The Breeder, Athens, 2017; *Equilibrists* organized by the New Museum, New York and the DESTE Foundation, Athens in collaboration at the Benaki Museum, Athens, curated by Gary Carrion-Murayari and Helga Christoffersen with Massimiliano Gioni (2016); *Solitude and Village*, The Breeder, Athens (2016); *Unorthodox* at the Jewish Museum, New York, curated by Jens Hoffmann and Kelly Taxter (2015).

Laura Herman (1988, Brussels) graduated from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College and serves as a curator at La Loge in Brussels. She is editor of *De Witte Raaf*, a bimonthly art journal distributed in Belgium and The Netherlands. She has curated exhibitions and events including *Natural Capital (Modal Alam)*, an exhibition and online publication produced in the context of Europolia Indonesia's Curatorial Award in Bozar (Brussels, 2017-18); *Third Nature* at the Hessel Museum (Annandale-on-Hudson, 2016) and *Definition Series: Infrastructure* at the Storefront for Art and Architecture (New York, 2016s). In 2019-20 she will be curating the 12th Satellite programme at Jeu de Paume in Paris, CAPC musée d'art contemporain in Bordeaux, and the Museo Amparo in Puebla in Mexico.