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the desert, the glacier and the superstructure Séverin Guelpa

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Séverin Guelpa

MATZA – 10 years of field research, experimentation, and collective art investigation

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Taking the form of three- to four-week immersions as well as exhibitions, MATZA is an artistic manifesto founded in 2014 by Swiss artist Séverin Guelpa. It is based on the conviction that artists play a decisive role in understanding and analyzing the complex environmental, social, and political issues facing the world today. In its artistic projects, MATZA gives pride of place to scientists and experts in the field, as well as to the people who live in the regions it explores. The forms of collective intelligence that emerge from exchanges between artistic sensibility, academic knowledge and know-how learned through contact with the field are the foundations of the artist's project, to which is added a passion for exploring little-known, often extreme or still threatened territories.



MATZA Edgeland, Cieclea, 2023

Through MATZA, Séverin Guelpa initiates artistic projects, both collective and individual, that revolve around investigations of the territory, with a particular interest in the capacity of communities living there to develop forms of vernacular intelligence in close contact with the demanding territories on which they often depend. Learning from these situations is, in essence, the spirit of MATZA. Since 2014, nine sites around the world have been invested that have brought together communities of artists and scientists to work on environmental issues such as drought, melting glaciers or the depletion of the sea's resources. To date, MATZA has worked in the Mojave Desert in the USA from 2014 to 2017 (MATZA Amboy), on the Aletsch glacier in Switzerland from 2016 to 2018 (MATZA Aletsch), on the Kerkennah Islands in Tunisia in 2017 (MATZA Kerkennah), as well as on two Swiss sites under construction or conversion, the first in Meyrin in 2019 (*Superstructure*) and the other in Lausanne in 2021 (*Bivouac*). Several exhibitions have also accompanied the project over the years. Since 2022, in association with the Edgeland Institute, MATZA has been looking at the new forms taken by the social contract between inhabitants in urban contexts strongly marked

by issues of security, digitalization and surveillance.

By confronting extreme and often difficult regions, MATZA seeks, through collective experimentation and the physical effort involved in each stage, to rethink our relationship with nature, with others and, more broadly, with the world around us.



MATZA Edgeland, Genève, 2023

The matze, a tool for democracy before its time

The name MATZA comes from the matze, a tree trunk that was torn up and moved from village to village in the Upper Valais (Switzerland) as early as the end of the 15th century, in order to mobilize the inhabitants around a common cause. Once convinced, they would then drive a nail into the trunk as a sign of rallying. Echoing this tradition, a primitive form of direct democracy and popular petition, MATZA reflects the urgency of the radical changes awaiting our society and the exploration of new ways of living together.

MATZA 2014-2023

In July 2014, Séverin Guelpa and his wife Anja Wyden Guelpa were traveling through the American West. Halfway between the Mojave Reservation and Joshua Tree National Park, along Route 66, they came across the village of Amboy. It was the realization of a project that had been simmering in the artist's mind for several months. The idea was to set up expeditions that would bring together artists and scientists to explore two exceptional ecosystems: the desert in California and the glacier in the Swiss Alps, Anja's native region where the couple spend much of their rare free time. Amboy is owned by Albert Okura, known as "chicken man," a Japanese-American based in San Bernardino who made his fortune in roast chicken and is an unconditional lover of Route 66. Albert Okura was intrigued by the artist's intentions, and made it a condition of the site's availability that Séverin would first spend two weeks

means to live in the remoteness of Amboy.

Séverin Guelpa returns to Amboy the same year, in the middle of winter. Here he creates a first series of installations in the motel's bungalows, a project entitled *Golden Smile, Salty Tears* (2-16.12.2014). In August 2015, the first collective stage of the project takes place, entitled *Dryland Motel Lobby Lab* (24.8-20.9.2015). Swiss artists Ariane Arlotti, Séverin Guelpa, Jérôme Massard, Marie Velardi and architects Guillaume de Morsier, Valentin Kunik and urban planner Matthias Solenthaler take part of it.

The third stage of MATZA Amboy takes place from 16.6 to 7.7.2016. Entitled *Undergrounds*, it includes the participation of artists Maxime Bondu, Séverin Guelpa, Katharina Hohmann, Delphine Renault, filmmaker Frédéric Choffat, architects Leopold Banchini and Daniel Zamarbide (Bureau A) and urban planner and geographer Thierry Maeder. The five inhabitants of Amboy are involved in the experiment, and local artists are invited to share their experience. As in previous years, an on-site exhibition follows the residency.

In November 2016, the *Undergrounds* exhibition takes place in Geneva, Switzerland (Bâtiment 76), bringing together a significant number of the artists and architects who participated in previous editions of MATZA. The exhibition includes the participation of Ariane Arlotti, Léopold Banchini and Daniel Zamarbide (Bureau A), Maxime Bondu, Frédéric Choffat, Laurence Favre, Katharina Hohmann, Séverin Guelpa, Valentin Kunik, Thierry Maeder, Jérôme Massard, Guillaume de Morsier, Emmanuel Mottu, Laurence Piaget, Delphine Renault and Marie Velardi.

From May 13 to June 10, 2017, the *Dryland 2023* project is being organized in Amboy in collaboration with the University of Arizona at Phoenix (ASU), Professor Marco Janssen and artist Adriene Jenik. 8 art and anthropology students are taking part in the experiment (see text by Mr. Janssen).



MATZA Edgeland, Medellin, 2023

After this last collective stage in Amboy, Séverin Guelpa turned his attention more directly to the situation on the Navajo and Hopi American Indian reservations (*Forgotten Land*, 2017), then to the community of Fort Mojave, which will be the subject of a film shot by the artist in 2022. In 2019, as a continuation of the work undertaken in Amboy, Séverin Guelpa is invited in residence by curator Bernard Leibov and Boko House in Joshua Tree, where he participates in the Joshua Treein. He regularly returns to the region to work. In 2021, he was invited to take up a month-long residency in Los Angeles at the Building Bridges Art Exchange (BBAX) gallery, a stay that culminated in the exhibition *Nature of Providence* at the same gallery from 5.9 to 30.10.2021. Since then, he has regularly spent time in the region with his wife Anja, a part of the world from which he builds bridges to South America and its deserts, including the Atacama Desert in Chile, from 2019 onwards.

In parallel with the American experience, MATZA is launching the first stage of its mirror project

September 2016 (5-18.09). Also entitled *Undergrounds*, the expedition includes Swiss artists Emmanuel Mottu, Laurence Piaget, Marie Velardi and Laurence Favre, as well as architects Valentin Kunik and Guillaume de Morsier, alongside Séverin Guelpa. A large part of the group took part in the first stage of MATZA Amboy in 2015, thus living the imagined mirror experience. This first expedition will be followed in 2017 by *Anticipating the Extreme* (28.8-10.9) with artists Maxime Bondu, Gaël Grivet, Séverin Guelpa, Jane C. Mi, Mick Lorusso, Delphine Renault, Laurent Tixador, Alexia Turlin and Sabine Zaalene. Once again, mountain guide Philipp Zehnder, accompanied by François Perraudin and Stefan Jossen, guided the participants up the glacier to the Konkordia hut (2850m), the project's place of residence, as well as the public, who came each time to take part in the vernissages on site. The recipe on the glacier is based on the same ingredients as in the desert. A remote site preceded by a two- to three-day climb. Rudimentary working and living conditions, based on what you can carry in your rucksack, and two weeks' dormitory accommodation in a high-altitude hut, a place where you're usually just passing through. Unlike Amboy, where you can always escape by road, there's something even more restrictive about the mountains: the challenge of sharing space, and therefore promiscuity.



MATZA Edgeland, Nairobi, 2023

In 2017, Séverin Guelpa was invited to exhibit at the Ferme Asile art center in Sion (CH). He decides to present *Radical Biotope*, a large-scale installation that diverts water from a nearby river into the exhibition space. At the same time, he invited a number of artists who had participated in MATZA Aletsch to present a work based on their experience on the glacier.

It was also in 2017 (27.3-15.4) that Séverin Guelpa organized a MATZA stopover on the Kerkennah Islands in southern Tunisia (MATZA Kerkennah 2017). The project lasts three weeks, two of which are spent on the islands working alongside fishermen, mainly around the issues of overfishing at sea. The participating artists, Maxime Bondu, Tom Boegart, Moufida Fedhila, Séverin Guelpa, Mouna Karray, Wissem El Abed, Nathalie Rodach, Sabine Zaalene and architect Karim Ben Amor, from Tunisia, France, Belgium and Switzerland, then exhibit the results of their work at the Musée national du Bardo in Tunis from April 15 to May 7 of the same year.

In 2018, the third and final stage of MATZA Aletsch runs from August 27 to September 9. It includes artists Laurence Bonvin, les Frères Chapuisat, Maëlle Cornut, Séverin Guelpa, Maxime Lamarche, Sandrine Pelletier, Eric Philippoz, Valentino Pini and architects Pierre Cauderay and Louis Méjean.

In 2018, Séverin Guelpa decided to repatriate the MATZA experience and apply it to closer, more urban territories. At the end of the year, this led to an invitation from the owners and architects of an impressive cooperative construction project in the municipality of







Fantôme d'une ville sortie de terre avec l'avènement du chemin de fer,
Village presque abandonné sous cinquante degrés.
Fantasme, mirage peuplé par Hollywood, la grande fabrique de rêve.
Rêve de peupler le désert, le Far West, terrain des conquêtes de l'Ouest
Un chemin de fer qui passe sans plus s'arrêter. Fin de l'activité.
Soleil permanent, eau salée, terre aride,
Route 66, une station-service, une poste et quelques cabines de motel en rade.
Amboy, désert de Mojave, USA.

Le désert.
Espace indéfini des possibles,
Lieu des utopies, point de départ des projets les plus fous.
S'installer dans le désert,
C'est rêver d'une autre société,
De faire différemment communauté.
Land art, *Double Negative, Complex city, Architecture, Arcosanti, Integratron*
Le bac à sable infini de la création, de l'expérience sensorielle,
Contre-culture, idéal d'un renouveau, idéal de liberté.
Station essence, eau en bouteilles plastiques, air climatisé,
le mirage et sa complexité.

2014.
La portière s'ouvre, le mirage devient palpable,
La brûlure insupportable de la lumière, le sable,
La chaleur que les tôles des toitures amplifient,
Le mirage devient un lieu clos extrême.
Flore aride, faune qui se terre.
Sous l'accablement de la brûlure du ciel, naît peu à peu
La distorsion.

Les distances ne sont plus les mêmes. Elles se relativisent.
Fata morgana, vision, rêve.
Tout s'allonge. Flotte et gondole immuablement. Tout est allongement.
Quatre-vingt-dix kilomètres pour trouver de l'eau.
Distorsion.
La chaleur déforme l'espace et le temps.
Une fois la frontière entre Amboy et le désert dépassée,
Une fois que l'on est hors du mirage de la climatisation,

