

↗ Session 3 (1990–1991)
Interview with Mark Kremer
by Lore Gablier
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Lore Gablier: To begin, could you briefly introduce yourself and elaborate on your decision to apply for the École du Magasin?

Mark Kremer: I have been working in the art field for thirty years as an art writer, a tutor, and a curator (mostly as a freelance). In 1988 I had finished my university studies – art history (major), film history, theatre science, literature science and Italian (minors) – at the UvA in Amsterdam. In the last phase of my studies, I was offered a small job at a platform for experimental video, sound and film in Amsterdam: Time Based Arts. I did this for a year and then I became assistant at Gallery Swart. Riekje Swart was an inspiring personality but after three months I said: Bye bye! I was searching, eager to join the art world but I didn't see the way nor my place. Then Saskia Bos, director of De Appel, gave me a hint. During my studies I had been an intern at De Appel. She suggested I should check this new École out. There was a neat brochure in her office. To apply you had to submit a "projet professionnel". I did that and was invited to come to Grenoble for an interview.

LG: What did you expect from the École?

MK: To be in the centre of contemporary art, meet people and exchange. I wanted to be in the heart of the tornado. My idea was quite romantic!

LG: And so you ended up in Grenoble. There, did your expectations come true? How was Grenoble and its artistic scene at the time?

MK: It was an amazing and overpowering experience. But Grenoble and the local artistic scene felt a bit opaque. At the very start, we met local players. Ange Leccia was teaching at the art school. We visited students and a number of artists living in Grenoble. This did not leave a big impression. And after that, there was no follow-up. Soon we began to make our travels abroad. This was very demanding and we lost touch with Grenoble. Our connection with the local scene became informal – after all, many art students and young artists were working with the technical crew of Le Magasin.

LG: And what was your relation with the art center itself?

MK: The programme of the École was a bit separate from that of the art center. But of course, there were overlappings. We encountered the artists who exhibited there, e.g. we had extensive talks with Matt Mullican and Vito Acconci. And we did our part in the preparations of the center's exhibitions, with technical and communication jobs, e.g., for the first show

in the center, curated by Adelina von Fürstenberg, of Gino de Domenicis. Adelina also organized many informal dinners at her place in Grenoble, where we as the students would cook with her, and eat together, often an enlarged company with artists or writers who were friends of the house. This was a social experience, warm and enriching.

LG: What were the relations within the group? How would you organize?

MK: We were four art historians all with working experiences and coming from different countries: Grazia Quaroni from Italy, Pascale Pronnier from France, Mark Kremer from the Netherlands, and Frederic Montornés from Spain. Then there were two artists: David Renaud was living in Grenoble and Annick Doherty had a Swiss/French background. At the start our situation was open, the atmosphere was inquisitive, it was a field of positive tensions. But it was not easy to cross barriers and understand one another. We began to organize ourselves, practically, when the work on our catalogue and yearbook began; the yearbook was our initiative and it was a record of our travels which also had transcripts of conversations or interviews with a selection of the professionals that we met over the year.

LG: Could you tell me about the project that you developed as a group?

MK: We were working with three themes that our travels, visits of shows and artists, and discussions led us to. 1: Painting seen as an enlarged concept that can encompass other disciplines. 2: The resistance-factor of an artwork. 3: Private and public elements in art. We saw these themes reflected, in a more generic way, in the work of the artists that we chose and with whom we collaborated: Michel Aubry, Jårg Geismar, Perejaume, Andreas Slominski, Richard Venlet and Bernard Voita. They all made new pieces for the show.

LG: How did you organise as a group? How did you experience this coming together?

MK: It was difficult, trial and error. The first three months we were thrown into deep waters. We had many meetings and made extensive travels. In this period we were also expected to work for ourselves. Study and prepare for meetings. There were the dinners at the director's house, discussions into the night. We were approached as professionals who would find a way to work as a group. After three months the scales tipped and we were expected to come up with results as a group, a first tentative idea for our exhibition.

LG: At the time, Adelina was both the director of the art centre and the École?

MK: Yes.

LG: What you describe is a principle of independent study, with at its core self-organised research and encounters with art professionals.

MK: Yes. It was both an individual and a collective thing. People like Pier Luigi Tazzi or Denis Zacharopoulos or Jan Hoet would come to Grenoble and spend one, two, or three days with us. We had sessions during which they would either give a lecture or talk about their work and their experience.

Tazzi gave a presentation on Documenta V. We really had some time to spend with them. This led to some really special moments, sometimes.

LG: It's interesting when after brainstorming, you start framing a project. It's very organic, and also very difficult to point to the moment when the transition is made.

MK: Well, that shift was hard to make. We were offered a lot, so there was a lot for us to process. We had to navigate between solitary work and the collective effort. Meanwhile, each of us also had to consider an internship in an art institution of our choice, either in or after the programme's 10-month period would end. I went to PS1 in February 1991. This happened thanks to the network of Adelina, who was friend with Alanna Heiss.

LG: Was the internship mandatory or more like an opportunity?

MK: It was a splendid opportunity; everybody wanted it!

LG: You met with a lot of professionals. In what way did these encounters influence the development of your own project as a group?

MK: Our final project was pretty straightforward and it was a correct presentation of six artist positions. With most artists, new pieces were being produced and this was exciting. The work of Andreas Slominski for example was great! But in essence, we as a group of curators were confused: we didn't find a strong *modus operandi*, hence the exhibition got stuck somewhere, there was a lack of interaction between the works and the six positions.

Alternatively, I can mention a project that we didn't pursue. This started with a discovery David Renaud, who had noticed the echo of a Robert Gober piece – a leg sticking out of a wall – in a detail in Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. The idea was to make a black and white reproduction of the painting and insert a Gober sculpture! While the group saw the Bosch painting on a trip to Spain, I was in London on an assignment to write about the work of Goldsmiths students. But the group had this experience and was excited! Many of us thought we should pursue it. There were good theoretical considerations for such a choice, and it came out of enchantment! But it was very late for a change of our course. In the end, we stayed with our initial project as we had already reached out to the artists...

LG: Where did the exhibition take place?

MK: One artist showed in a gallery space, one in the auditorium, and four in La Rue.

LG: And there was another exhibition taking place in parallel?

MK: Yes, it was an exhibition by Patrick Tosani.

LG: Did you stay in touch with your fellow students?

MK: At the beginning, yes.

LG: It would be interesting to understand how the École was perceived at the time, and what

idea on the figure of the curator was conveyed?

MK: At the time the École stood out. It was privileged and was seen as such with all these top professionals coming in and its educational programme in sync with current discourses on art. It was in part tailored after the Whitney programme but that was New York. The École had a unique position in Europe. Maybe at the time, it was followed mostly by professionals in France and the surrounding countries. Jan Debbaut, however, director of the Van Abbemuseum, came for the opening of our exhibition. Also, we got a visit from Teresa Gleadowe who in 1992 started the first UK-based MA in curating at the Royal College of Art. And two years later, the curatorial programme of De Appel would start.

Our programme “underplayed” the notion of the curator. We were described as future “mediateurs de l’art”. At the service of art and artists. There was an implicit notion that you could get to the next level, but only after spending a lot of time trying to understand the artist and his “world”. I think this was an important element in the pedagogy. There was immense respect for a curator like Harald Szeemann and no real expectation that the next Harald Szeemann would come out of the course. I remember that towards the end of the year there was anxiety among us, about our professional future. We were happy for others when some of us were invited to work in art institutions. Others would go their own way.

LG: Do you think that a programme such as the École influenced the way curating has evolved over the years into maybe a more independent figure, or as a researcher figure?

MK: Yes. Much more prominent today is the idea that the curator has a voice that can be transmitted via various formats. I have met many artists who are genuinely interested in a curator’s view and seeing that view expressed in an exhibition. There are also many ways in which artists and curators can collaborate. For me, it all starts with the question of how to make contact, how to share thoughts, and meanwhile work in parallel trajectories.

LG: What are your thoughts regarding the relevance of such a programme today?

MK: The programme instilled respect for elders. That was important. We were really sensitive to that – although we also rebelled against the idea! For example, we had many meetings with Denis Zacharopoulos, an “old school” teacher who would lecture us about the canon and institutions and who was really knowledgeable. Regarding the professional relationship with artists, the working model transmitted to us was open and sensitive to a human aspect. It acknowledged the man in his/her circumstances. We were encouraged to connect with artists, start conversations, just talk. And our programme felt like virgin territory. It felt like we had the time to still find out what role would suit you. Today this time doesn’t exist. Today’s curatorial programmes are highly specialized – they form a field of theory on their own – and the people who come in are very aware of how this is tied to the overall competition in the art world. The programme of the École was re-developed by Adelina von Fürstenberg and crew, and today it talks to me about basic human skills and values, e.g. the meaning of meeting someone and having an exchange! I’m very skeptical of today’s specialisation of the curator’s role. We should consider the value of

unlearning... The programme in 1990-1991 points in that direction! Many people whom we met were very generous, sharing their thoughts. Jean-Christophe Amman, then the first director of the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt started a whole kind of discourse after we asked him how he saw the work of the young artists that he had bought for the collection. He said: "The present situation is so confused that each artist has to conceive themselves as a concept, an idea. And I think this is interesting as in that moment a bit of the youth of the young artist disappears, it becomes less important." The context of this thought is of course an art world that is always on the lookout for the next young artist...

LG: The fact that it is just a small group also allows having a different type of relationship with a guest: it becomes much more intimate, which is quite a privilege.

MK: Yes, it was a privilege.

LG: At the time, which institutions were parts of the École's network?

MK: The external contacts were mostly based on individual relations. Adelina's network was huge and always many people came to Le Magasin openings. Before being the director in Grenoble she, of course, had been director of the Centre d'art contemporain in Geneva which she also founded. When I had my interview, there were people from Paris, from the Rhône-Alpes region and from Italy, some gallerists, directors of art centers, a philosopher.

LG: How many people were in the jury?

MK: 11 people? Including Fulvio Salvadori who was close to Adelina. It was a great jury.

LG: Tell me, how did the École influence your career?

MK: The experience of the École brought me much closer to artists. But there was still a long way to go. My first move after the École was to recollect myself. I chose to focus on my writing. I wanted to find my voice and so continued to publish articles on artists and exhibitions including some at Magasin that had left a mark. It was my way of connecting. Here, Pier Luigi Tazzi was an influence. He was very knowledgeable but he also pointed out the limitations of a rational approach. We all understand art through intuition as well as desire. For curating and art writing you connect with art and artists and this offers you ways to connect with yourself anew. The core of what was being transmitted to us at the École was something else, and it was an ethical understanding of what it means to work with an artist. There was a strong notion of the artist as a human being, someone with needs and desires and talent, and the privilege of what it means when you as a curator can work or collaborate with this person. An idealistic notion, something worthwhile to consider.