

# Between political friendship and tactical optimism

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## Between Political Friendships and Tactical Optimism trans in conversation with Léopold Lambert

On our screen we see Léopold sitting in his office in Paris, in the cradle of his magazine *The Funambulist*. On his left a wall with an organised chaos of blue, yellow and green post-its—notes on his next book. Behind him a slatted frame leaning against a red wall—maybe a hint of his soon to come move to Philadelphia.

TM Since 2015 you are the editor of *The Funambulist*, a magazine discussing how the built environment influences the political society. In two years you have published 15 issues discussing crisis, conflicts and inequalities. You are independently curating the content and organising the funding. Where did you find the passion to found the magazine?

LL Where do I find it, I'm not quite sure, because obviously a passion by definition is something that goes through you, but I guess the fuel of that passion comes from the social interaction that I'm having with the people I work with. I feel we're so limited in our own disciplines. At first I thought it was something that was really proper to architecture to be in this very narrow world but then I realised that it is the same for every discipline. Once you get out of this little world and apply what you got from it to something larger, in conversation with people who have been looking at things from different perspectives, it's profoundly enriching and humbling and it makes you want to pursue that more in depth. At the beginning I was amazed that people from other disciplines would even talk to me, to be honest. I grew from it, and I wanted to give space to these conversations, that's where first the podcast and then the magazine emerged from this.

If we then talk about the political aspect of this passion, which is the same thing and a different thing simultaneously, I guess it comes from outrage really, absolute outrage about both the historical and the contemporary conditions of profound inequalities that we are observing around us. In the case of *The Funambulist* we have an intersectional look at those conditions, so we are trying to look at several regimes of dominations based on gender, race and social statuses in their

broadest possible meanings. And if outrage is a motor, we are not anywhere close to be done with it, since things are not going so well—that's a euphemism!—but I guess we will get back to that when we talk about optimism.

TM Do you have an ambition or an ideal that you are encouraging with the magazine? Is there a political conviction that you are fighting for—is there an endgoal for your work?

LL Not really, not in the way that you just reformulated the question. There is no end goal as in «ok I think we've worked well and now we're done», especially since it's not a magazine where we have put a lot of effort in defining what revolution could look like. It's more a magazine that is wondering at how resistance looks like. I suppose though that something we are trying to do more and more is also to be, what I call «constructivist» or «optimistic», in the sense that I will define later. Insofar as we should pay attention to the various struggles that are being led and the positive aspect of it, not necessarily to change things. Even the very fact that they exist and that they are operating, to me is something I get a lot of energy from. So perhaps the magazine has not given enough space to that, but we are trying to improve on that by including three or four opening texts in every issue that focus on one political struggle in the world and pay homage to these positive forces.

TM One of your main aims is to make the magazine accessible to a maximal diversified readership. What are your strategies to achieve that?

LL I guess it depends on what we mean when we talk about diversified readership. The first one I can think about is very simple, acknowledging that this magazine is written in majority by people who teach in universities



or are doing research, or a PhD, or even students, but people who are involved in one way or another with the university. So for me it was very, very important that each article is readable to people who have never been to university or who have never studied any sort of social science. So I really invite contributors to not capitalize on their academic references and write as if they were journalists. I usually explain that they are talking to people who might not have read Michel Foucault or Judith Butler, but who will totally understand articles if they are curious about it and if the tone is set right. So that's one type of diverse readership we are looking for. The geographic aspect for us is very important as well, even though we have to acknowledge that a majority of readers live in what we may call the global north. The geographies described throughout the magazine are, however, not reflecting this trope and we count many articles written about situations in the Middle East, North and West Africa, South and East Asia, and more and more to come in Latin America. In terms of social background we're also trying to have the magazine accessible to all, so going back to the geography we're trying to sell the magazine for half price or two thirds of the price in societies (pretty much anywhere except North America and Northwestern Europe) in which the current price would be way too high. And we never refuse to anyone who sends us an email saying something like «I'm sorry, I really like the magazine but I just cannot afford it,—I'm particularly curious about this issue, would it be possible to have it?». The money that is made with the magazine is for the magazine to keep existing, it should not be an obstacle for people. If we mean diversified readership in the usual meaning of diversity in western societies, our editorial line tries to dismantle mechanisms of whiteness, of maleness, of heteronormativity. This also makes the magazine address an audience that understands the violence of these mechanisms or that is keen to know about it.

TM You are trying to gather opinions from all over the world, deliberately not prioritizing the western world. How do you find contributors?

LL One of the assets that I had when I started the magazine was that it was the continuation of the blog and the podcast that had allowed me, very luckily to meet and talk to many people. So I started with a really great network of people who could write from their own context about their own context, because it also touches questions of legitimacy as «who gets to write about what»? I don't necessarily mean to make rules as in

«only someone who lives in Cairo can write about Cairo» or «only someone who experiences structural misogyny or racism can write about feminism or decolonial struggles», but there is a bias towards the idea that it would make for a much more powerful and useful piece if someone has what I would call «incarnated legitimacy», rather than the legitimacy that we too often see in universities where the most disincarnated knowledge (the supposedly «objective» knowledge) is the most valued knowledge. Sometimes we end up making calls for specific papers that we think would work well with the particular topic, but most of the time we do manage to find contributors very organically. Very often we choose the topics for any next issue already with a few contributors in mind, that we would be happy to work with.

TM You call your contributors «political friends». What are «political friends»?

LL That's the best word I found, it's not a perfect one, but at least for many contributors it's a fairly accurate word, because we do end up becoming friends to a certain degree. I think rather than trying to give an exact definition of «political friends», what I can say is why I do end up calling them «political friends» and why all contributors are to a certain degree «political friends». I believe in the idea of working with people you get along with, which sounds like a very silly platitude, but I think it is not that obvious, in particular with people who did not choose who they are working with. I think there is a deep need for this kind of work, there is a deep need for forms of benevolence, for forms of mutual kindness. The political agenda that we are trying to push should really be reflected both in the content and in the way it is being produced. Also because all this work, from the person who has to write and the person who is editing, requires quite a substantial emotional labour. It varies depending on people and I don't feel every day I need to make this effort personally, but I know that it is definitely there. I think that only if there is this sort of kindness or positive emotion that is involved, this enterprise can thrive and continue.

TM The topics discussed in *The Funambulist* are often complex social injustices. What's love got to do with it?

LL That's the toughest question, but I also understand that it is the most relevant question for your particular issue. I think love can be political. I really do believe that. And I think that's maybe the concept that we need, versus all the terrible things concepts like «tolerance» have been producing. Until about



10 years ago, tolerance was still a commonly used word. I think it's a horrible word. It's like when we talk about racism, we are asking people to tolerate each other—how horrible is that? So love, without being too religious about it, love might allow an alternative to that, not so much in terms of *«love thy neighbour»*. Instead of quoting Jesus, quoting Édouard Glissant, the Caribbean philosopher and poet that I absolutely love, who talks about the right to opacity in our relationship to others. The right to opacity is basically the idea of being able to empathize with someone else, without being able to understand this person, and accepting to love not understanding this person rather than fighting for a universalist reading of each person, trying to find the common link. My differentiation between the concept of political love, that I would like to pursue, versus the Christian Caritas so to speak, is that Christian Caritas does not add degrees. It's *«love thy neighbour»*, don't debate and don't negotiate whereas the empathizing love, that perhaps Glissant invites us to think about, even though I don't think he ever uses the word love, has to do with differences of degree. We don't love people in exactly the same way, but if there is this bottom line of benevolence, I think that there might be a political program behind it. I want to be clear that this concept of political love is not a call for *«non-violence»*. We cannot afford this in times of neofascism, but perhaps that this concept of political love can help us make a difference between the structures of neofascism or coloniality's violence and the people who are agents of it.

TM You call yourself an emotional optimist. What do you mean with that?

LL I am convinced that there should be a drastic differentiation between optimism and hopefulness. I'm not hopeful, quite honestly. I have a lot of troubles thinking of myself or thinking of the world in 10 years from now. I'm not necessarily apocalyptic but somehow I sincerely cannot believe that the world will be the same in 10 years from now. I just think that optimism refers to trying to find emotional solace in what is being done by people who are incredibly inspiring and incredibly creative in the way they resist to these forces of negativity. Insisting on looking at that does not necessarily mean that things are changing for the better, even though a small part of me thinks, that what we might be seeing right now is a swan song of fascism. But I would not be able to argue for that in any possible way. On the contrary, this form of optimism is resolutely attached to what is being done; it is tangible and

it is what keeps us going. The adjective *«emotional»* attached to it refers to the solace it might provide when facing the many reasons that could push us to be pessimistic. It's a political strategy to adopt this way of thinking; for this reason, we could call it *«tactical optimism»*.

TM You invest an incredible amount of time and engagement for the magazine, the blog and the podcast. The love for your work requires a lot of conviction. Are there things you had to sacrifice for that?

LL Rather than answering this question, I almost want to turn it around and say: what are the privileges that make me able to do all this work, regardless of the time and engagement it requires? I think this question is very important because we live in the age of the start-up where we are being fed with the idea that everyone can be entrepreneur and everybody can *«achieve their dreams»*. My socio-economic status or background allows me to start a project without being scared of its failure because I know I wouldn't end up sleeping in the street; is a big privilege. The confidence it requires is another one. Where does confidence come from? Quite often, it comes from the reliance on a system that never failed us. Many people are smashed down by capitalized logics are prevented to do what I'm doing, because they are not being given the right conditions to be able to even start something like it.

TM As architects we are designing environments that encourage specific behaviours. How can love be a tool for architects?

LL If I believe those two sentences are linked together, I certainly do not believe that architecture can create love, if that's what you had in mind. I don't know if I would say that designing environments encourages necessarily specific behaviours, the way I usually frame it is that it organises bodies in space. Love in all that comes handy as a weapon for the same reason that we talked about earlier when we were talking about friendship. I think perhaps love can be a way for architects to renounce as fully as possible the exercise of power in their practice. It is a very hard thing to do, because architecture is a discipline that is inherently carrying this type of power as I write a lot in my work; yet, there can be some significant efforts put by architects to circumvent this intrinsic power architecture develops on bodies. I really believe it.

This interview was held via Skype between Léopold's office in Paris and HIL Höggerberg in Zurich on the 16th of January 2018.