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The Chair: An Interview with Emmanuel Guy (photographs by Steve Leroux)

Steven S. Taylor
Editor-in-Chief



Emmanuel Guy was selected as the inaugural Heather Höpfl Artist in Residence for the Art of Management and Organization conference in Bled in 2016. Over the course of the conference, Emmanuel set up shop on the terrace where the conference attendees took their breaks and built a chair. Included here are pictures of the finished chair and an interview with Emmanuel about the process.

OA: *In your application you wrote "I propose to design and build in situ a chair – or bench – using locally available wood and/or recycled material as needed. ... Through the entire process, I would build on exchanges with attendees about tools, techniques or aesthetics and symbolism and therefore translate some of the energy of the conference into a functional art piece." Could you reflect on how you feel the energy of the conference is reflected in the chair you made?*

EG: *In Bled, my workshop was set up right on IEDC's terrace. That meant I was working in the main meeting point of the venue. As I had hoped for, participants did not*

shy away from questions. Their most frequent entry point was my hand tools: questions on how the plane works; exclamations at the quality of the finish it creates; remarks on the dedication needed to stick to a hand tools only approach. A few participants took a special interest and stopped by regularly to keep a close eye on the succession of steps each related to its own tool. So aside from actually pushing the rip saw, I probably spent most of my time discussing tools and the techniques they require or impressions they leave. I even had interesting chats about the colonial narratives of these organisational artefacts of the past: the saws I had with me were indeed stamped *Sheffield* or *Philadelphia*. At the time, I thought of



these exchanges as pleasant distractions, but as I study the finished chair I can see that these preoccupations had a clear impact on my creative process. The iterative fundamental woodworking process of dimensioning, then surfacing wood and finally cutting joinery is indeed very apparent in the end design; more so than in my regular work.

This is so in part because the large joinery work also results in the natural edge left on the two pieces making the seat. Aesthetically the main feature of the design is those two natural edges jointed face-to-face but held slightly apart by large dowels: forming a striking river. It is a clear reminiscence of my wanderings in Ljubljana (the river port capital of the country) as well as hiking the gorges of the Mostnica just before the start of conference itself. The whiteness of the freshly planed ash with the darker natural edge is also a reflection of colors of the Julian Alps. The angles of the local church steeple were worked in the back-rest of the chair. This is definitely a *Slovenian* chair and a work about embeddedness. Was this an

overarching theme at the conference? How art can help people in organizations connect and gain a sense of belonging, something organisations themselves seem to struggle to provide in our times? It is certainly an impression I got of it.

Finally, the chair nods to the dancers' inspiring presence at the conference. Working with a particular twist in the flow of the grain, I added at foot the one of the back leg trying to encapsulate the *ground and elevation* leitmotiv in dancing.

OA: You ask the question, "How art can help people in organizations connect and gain a sense of belonging?" This was your first time at the Art of Management and Organization conference – did you feel like you belonged? How did the feelings of belonging or not belonging effect your process?

EG: Although it was a first experience with AOMO, I immediately felt warmly welcomed at the conference. It definitely had an impact on my process. During my initial talk at the opening of the conference, I presented pictures of my art and was struck by the attentiveness it generated. As I set up to work, came the *tool connection* and the interest to chat and share about technical process and beyond. This worked to strengthen hand tools as a comforting zone in my process working in situ and spurred my desire to share about it. So I think we can safely argue that how the fundamental hand woodworking process is staged within the finished chair also comes from the spontaneous sense of belonging I felt.



I was also immediately comfortable with the wider geographic setting to the conference. I want to be cautious not to over interpret and certainly do not claim to fully grasp the complex national identity of Slovenia after such a short time there. Yet I saw there many dualities that spoke to me: it's definitely Slav but with an unquestionable Mediterranean touch. In Bled and at IEDC, I also got a sense of a strong connectivity with European metropolises within a powerfully distinct rural landscape. This echoed my own national identity of French speakers in North America as much as my life story constantly arching over disciplines and practices.

Personal bonds form rapidly when individuals share a common burden. I came to the conference after a frustrating two-year term as head of my Department – austerity inspired measures leading the continuing impossibility to fill numerous professorships allowed to our sector, my motivation for accepting the administrative role in the first place. Beyond differences in art practices or academic specialities or levels of advancement in career attendees seemed to share

such frustrations at current organizing of academia. Sense that their organizations were not nurturing their belongingness but rather denaturing the true sense of their work or just using performance metrics that do not do them justice. While the chair is definitely not a denunciation piece, it is probably a comforting piece in part due to heart felt solidarity in front of shared frustrations.

OA: *You suggest that the chair is a comforting piece. And of course, for us at Organizational Aesthetics, chairs are comforting and have a special place in our heart (we feature a different chair on the cover of every issue), so why a chair in the first place?*

EG: Chairs are wonderful! They are everyday objects, yet a distinct symbol of power. But for those who are wondering: I did not know of Antonio Strati's riddle before putting in my proposal. So my choice was not primarily based on chairs' qualities as organizational artefacts. In the world of furniture making, chairs are special as well. They require incredibly strong joints to resist the racking from the repetitive sitting down getting up motions. Yet to be practical, they must be light so components should be thin. To be comfortable they must fit the human



anatomy; compound angles are frequent in chair building. For all these reasons, they are widely recognized as challenging endeavours for woodworkers. But it is for their aesthetic nature that I love chairs. To be comfortable, strong and stable a chair must be balanced from all points of perspective. This is very different from most cabinetry work where you usually have a front face: a flat surface where the artisan will seek to frame his/her most eloquent demonstrations of craftsmanship. This is impossible with chairs. When designing one, you really must think in three dimensions. As they are of human proportions, chairs have then a natural embrace that immediately calls upon its viewers. Chairs are definitely the most sculptural type of furniture. I feel we must see chairs – even those of the most common styles – as utilitarian sculptures. It is while making chairs that I realised I was drawn not only to craft, but to art. Indeed, my first publicly-shown creation was a chair. The idea of my proposition was really to offer my process up for viewing; therefore it had to be with a chair.

OA: *Your proposition was to complete the chair over the*

course of the conference. On the last day in Bled, all parts were cut out and we could see the overall design but we needed to ship the lot to your workshop so it could be truly finished. Did that change your process or the final design?

EG: Even with if my design choices were always made keeping in mind the need to speed-up execution, designing and building the entire chair during the conference was probably overoptimistic from the start. Given the thickness and density of the wonderful slabs of local ash, it was outright impossible for me. So the opportunity to work on the chair in the proper set-up was the occasion to turn-in a fine piece truly show casing my process. I thought nothing of it at first: just finishing some details with the luxury of being able to choose from my whole tool-set. Yet, the change of environment meant an all different energy ... My perception was altered. Glue lines that felt quite acceptable executed on a table wannabe workbench while chatting about tools as organizational artefacts were suddenly not so satisfactory. Slight imbalances between backrests and front legs began to bother me. So I had to constantly re-immense myself in my souvenirs of the conference to stay true to the design elaborated in situ. I did use the electrically-powered band-saw to rough-out the last back-leg. The electric jointer was put to contribution for duplicating a front leg which had poorly located knots and cracks – good thing I had some extra wood shipped to me. Nonetheless, all the joinery, final shaping and surfaces finishing were done using the same tools I had carried to Slovenia. I used them to refine the overall chair as I would have done given more time on site. But I left-in numerous imperfections that I would not tolerate in an entirely shop-made piece. I like to think managers might see it more as a metaphor of organising that way!

OA: *It feels to me like there is a very complicated relationship between the instrumental requirements of the chair, the aesthetics of the chair, and the craft of making the chair. I think there is similar complexity in organizations, although the instrumental seems to often dominate. How do you see the relationship and how do you find the balance?*

EG: I definitely see many similarities in the complexities of chairs and organizations. However, my chair making does not represent organizations in one important way. I alone control the entire process: no difficult group decision-making, no time-consuming mobilization of an entire team, no communication challenge – at least during production. Yet balance is critical and not easily found. My first step is to establish priorities: am I creating an aesthetical piece of furniture or a functional piece of art? At the conference I was to make a single chair with a symbolic message; so aesthetic was clearly the main goal. Then another important duality of my process comes to light: craft versus art. I usually start with a craftsman's approach: go to the matter itself. In the case of the Slovenian chair it meant taking a real close look at the two slabs of ash I had to start with. They were lived-edge, the edges being formed by the natural outside of the trunk (not by a saw line). These live-edges were not straight but waved in a nice flow highlighted by a matching grain pattern. So my first decision was to identify the two nicest sections in the curving edge and cut them to seat-length. I flipped them to bring the edges face to face and this further highlighted the grain pattern creating a striking *river*. I committed to making this the central visual feature of the design. Then I went back to requirements to keep the sculpture functional as a chair. Identify straight-grained sections of sufficient length to elevate the seat sufficiently so that an average person's legs form a 90 degrees angle under the knees when sitting-up with her feet on the ground. Likewise you have to consider the footprint: it should roughly fit a square drawn on the floor – or at least an equilateral triangle – for the chair to be sure-footed. Then my creation cycle went back to aesthetics to establish the proportions the backrests made by the prolongation of each back leg. The idea of working-in the angles of the near-by church steeple fit both visually and conceptually with my central feature for the seat. Last in the design process, I returned to craft considerations choosing shapes and joinery that would provide reasonable strength but remained reasonable to attempt given the setting, tool set on hand and timeframe of the conference. So in the end balance

comes from constant alternations between instrumental requirements of the chair, the aesthetics of the chair, and the craft of making the chair. Much like in organizing I suppose.

OA: *So what are the bigger lessons here? What did you learn, what do you take away from this process?*



EG: My process, as any, is an ongoing lesson in itself. Yet, the chair design and building process that I demonstrated is relatively well run-in for me. So the conference was primarily an occasion to self-observe; to share and to collect reactions and reflections. I sent in my proposition to AOMO with the idea to explore how much further I could bring my woodworking towards an established practice in contemporary art. The experience was energising and certainly encouraged me to pursue the endeavour. After Bled, I had the opportunity to take part in a three-day residency during our regional craft fair in Rimouski where I live. Along with a talented percussionist, we worked with the creations of a glass artist and a metalsmith to build in situ an improvisation table. I was also selected as one of four artists to participate in a creative lab at *Caravansérail* – a regional centre for visual arts. The project brings two digital artists with two artists with backgrounds in craft to

reflect on folklore in contemporary arts. We had a rich week of exchanges and conceptualisation at the beginning of the year and now we are producing pieces to turn an old ice-fishing hut into a thought-provocative collective installation that will be shown next summer. These opportunities reinforced the impressions I took away from the conference. They provide me the occasion to work with young professionals with formal academic training in arts, which is not

my case. Each time, the interface of wood craft techniques; visual and symbolic explorations appeared a rich and pertinent field of artistic investigation. So the biggest lesson for me so far is: I have indeed good material in hand, now I want to dedicate serious efforts and required time to deepen that explorative practice.

I had in mind a second underlying question coming into the conference. Can I merge, or cross-feed in anyway, my academic and artistic practices? Having kept them relatively apart until then. I was aware of the metaphoric parallels between art and management, the conference was certainly the occasion to enlighten this even more clearly in my mind. But I also take away from my discussions a strong sense that the relation can be more profound. From my self-observation, I came back even more convinced that the creative process is very similar in both my artistic and academic production. It is just the materialisation of ideas that truly differs. So I don't know which direction this will take yet. I have the privilege of a sabbatical year coming in 2018. From the start, my plan was to dedicate the most of it to a reading program in order to reframe the theoretical foundations of my institutional analysis of shipping policies. Now, that reading program will certainly include a fair share of contributions in organizational aesthetics!

About the Artist

Emmanuel Guy is both an artist and an academic. As an artist, he began as a woodworker. He established a practice working with restored antique hand tools to produce one-off functional furniture pieces with modern aesthetic. He is gradually transforming his work towards installation using traditional woodworking techniques to produce wearable, kinetic or interactive sculptures. Guy is a professor of maritime transportation at Université du Québec à Rimouski. His academic contributions explore the influence of immaterial dimensions such as discursive strategies and institutional culture on the evolution of shipping policies.