

*It is up to the artists as much as it is up to ordinary people to practice and give life to a possible future cultural integration and not up to the various powers to decree that it to be so. To assert the urgency of an integrated culture from the top of the pyramid of the hierarchy also accelerates innovation in the dominated culture despite that culture`s own internal tempo. The results are likely to benefit a not-always-very-pleasing process of world cultural globalisation, because in the process of acceleration, yet again, it will be the cultures of powerful countries which have the most chance of coming out on top.*

*The following short texts illustrate my exploration, my conscious movement around that cultural interface that is New Caledonia.*

Text No 1

Text written light-handedly No 2 Ouvea July 1999

Here, all is incomplete; the house I am in, where I am going to sleep for just one night, is finished. The cement walls are polished and smooth, but unpainted, none of them are painted, except the four inside walls of the bedroom, the owner`s bedroom, not the one he has given me. In the main room, the sitting-room, the electrical circuitry has been installed in accordance with the new standards; white ducting perfectly sized for its purpose, thick for the main switchboard and thinner for supplying current to the ceiling light, from which hangs just a bare 60 watt bulb! No lampshade. Everything is in place around the windows and even the wooden frame is painted, the handle is on, except that three panes of the eight are missing and have been replaced with squares of cardboard temporarily taped in with liberal amounts of brown adhesive tape. In one corner of the kitchen, some cartons full of ceramic tiles have been stored with the tiles still in the half-open boxes, whereas they should have been laid already. And there are some shrubs which haven't really been planted, some trees which have been there for a long time right in front of the house from before the owner`s time, a dilapidated plastic chair is an unstable support for some leftover structural timber intended apparently for a future veranda. So everything is incomplete but totally bearable.

Here then, just a few steps away from an immense beach, some 15 km of unbroken, smooth fine white sand, perfectly untouched except for an occasional dinghy pulled up on the beach and this beach gives onto the lagoon stretching out for an untold distance well beyond the horizon, and almost within touching distance, all that incompleteness. Almost well-ordered incompleteness, of virtually all at the island`s buildings, because I realise that this house shows the same features as their gardens and fences built in such a way that no-one really notices their existence, from the half-painted classrooms with half-fixed ceilings and all along the roadside I see incompleteness, no signposting to the airport which still has no public toilets worthy of the name. Why?

So as to say that over and above the bare minimum, material things should not demand of people

more effort or money than necessary, otherwise this would be detrimental to the time and energy to be spent with other men and women in the community. One must preserve the time and the strength of being together, the desire to merely talk about what you should do today, this very day, 20th July 1999, discussion, a pretext for living together, almost side-by-side, and always knotting the threads of conversation, friendship, heart and spirit.

Nicolas Kurtovitch

Text No 2

Her where I am

Text written light-handedly No 14

Here where I am, where I grew up, my land was nothing but a bit of cement, a bit of tarmac. Under my bare feet then no earth no mud no dust when it was dry, everything clean, smooth neat and easy to wash, concrete and from time to time the floor squeaking, which is old and splintering, but which is soft and grey and which we haven't polished for ages.

In the yard, the all-wood house was located right at the end of the street and the yard stretched out behind it, it could have been made from beaten earth like most of the houses in this old neighbourhood that for reasons of cleanliness, hygiene and easiness we would have claimed also modernity, it has been clumsily paved over with large concrete blocks 1 meter square, therefore in this yard the cement has easily and completely replaced the earth. Sometimes the join between the slabs is far from perfect and while at the beginning nothing dropped into the gap, after a few weeks wild grass started coming up where it shouldn't have where a few square centimeters of earth still survived. Nobody thought of pulling up these weeds and so much the better because my feet could still get lost there and wonder between the slabs to find what was missing, something soft, something damp, something gentle something surprising and something changing.

A few days ago, I walked close to this house which no longer seemed inhabited, where I had lived for a few years during my youth, far from my own family, but not in any way abandoned, I met a man who was waiting on the pavement, which is now perfectly straight and flat, with street lamps. dustbins and a clean gutter because it is regularly cleaned. That man! What was he dressed in!? Strips of cloth, it looked like, with old patched up clothes picked up from the heap that the Catholic Relief refused to take in and left outside the main door of their store a few steps down from the cathedral, not exactly over-dressed but sufficiently dressed to be able to stand on the street corner without running the risk of being arrested and in his right hand alongside his body he held a scruffy faded jute bag which must have been brown at one time. The bag hung from his shoulder by a few pieces of intertwined string. The tip of a bushknife poked out of it and two or three sticks, or what I thought were sticks, but after thinking about it they must have been taro plants. I'm sure he was smiling, not the beam of a clown or a moronic television presenter, but a barely perceptible smile but a definite one.

This poor man was happy, content by what awaited him at this very early hour. I knew where he was going, I did not know what his exact destination was, but I knew which place he was going to; the field somewhere out behind the street, behind the houses and their yards on the hillside, where men and women after clearing the land planted their root crops. The prospect of soon being in his field, a familiar place, beautiful and warm, surrounded by the bushes, the flowers and the large green banana leaves, the wild mimosa, the promise of contact with freshly-turned soil, around his ankles, all this filled him with happiness. His happiness reached me, that happiness that I could feel just by exchanging

glances because I was familiar with it myself firstly many years ago, when after my little toes, as if they were pulling me behind them, I completely disappeared between the cement slabs in the yard and now today by the random influence of friendships, I walk through several hundred meters of forest to one of those still-wild gardens.

Text started at Do Kamo at 3 pm

Finished at Galleria at ten past five on 17 09 1999

Nicolas Kurtovitch

Text No 3

Text written light-handedly No 13

Somewhere, hanging from a nail on the side of one of my bookcases, I have a slingshot made by a young man whom I know well. I don't know how he made it and I'd be quite incapable of making it work, but it is very familiar. I often touch it, because of a young man himself who is far away and I miss him and it is almost him, almost his body and also because of the material the slingshot is made from. At the beginning it was a big piece of banyan skin, about 50 cm by 30 in size, but the general shape, although roughly rectangular, wasn't straight in any way. The skin comes from the bark of the roots of the tree and still looks plantlike, with many wrinkles of varying depths like on an old man's face worn by the years; it's neither yellow nor orange, rather a colour in between the two, the possible name of which I do not know. It is not smooth as a piece of silk could be, it is rough as if it had been thrown on the ground after being peeled off dirty from the root and blown on: there is something of this earth still on the skin. I imagine that this is how it got its rough texture but really I don't know. The young man spoke with the young woman who gave it to him for a long time. He wanted to know everything about where it came from, how the root was chosen and wanted to know if it was chance that decided the quality of the material or whether the choice was a very careful one; he also wanted to know everything about the way it was extracted and what she would have wanted to do with it. He wanted to know what people of her clan usually did with them and whether women alone were entitled to prepare the bark to make it look like this. He had so many questions to ask. I did not listen to the answers, they remained alone for two long hours while I contented myself with the shade of the banyan tree.

She must have told him all about it, told him what it was possible to say in such a short time. When he joined me, I understood from his happy face that he knew about the skin, what it was. He knew about the metamorphosis of the banyan bark after being cut up and prepared, becoming an almost human skin. The young man knew exactly what he was holding in his hand. His determined attitude, just a few words to tell me about what had been said, in a detached way, no explanation on what he was going to do with it, as if he had no plans. Everything in him suggested that he considered his day as being complete and that he was expecting something quite different during the hours we still had to spend together.

This young man has now gone and left me his slingshot. He has patiently cut in the skin into several strips and from the strips made string which he has skilfully woven together. To make what I call the palm of the slingshot, a place which resembles the hollow of the hand, where you place the stone you wish to throw, he used a piece 8cm by 2, the smoothest possible one. The really surprising thing is that this part of the whole thing concentrates all my attention on it, all my interest, all the mysterious strength that I grant to this banyan skin, as if I guessed that by uncontrollable magic what had been one of the buried roots, now pulled from the earth and transformed, was going to project into the heavens all the desires and wants of that young man.

Nicolas Kurtovitch