

nautonomat operating manual

a draft design for a collective space of 'nautonomy' for artists and their friends
Raqs Media Collective

0. nautonomy

Nautonomy is more than autonomy. It is nautical, voyaging and mobile. Nautonomy re-articulates and re-founds the 'self-organizing' principle inherent in what is generally understood while considering the idea of autonomy on the recognition that the entity mistakenly called 'self' is actually more precisely an unbounded constellation of persons, organisms and energies that is defined by its capacity to be a voyager in contact with a moving world.

1. nautonomat

A Nnautonomat is a craft of autonomy. It is a vehicle, a scenario, a loose, changing, evolving protocol of doing things together and sharing time, ideas and testing a few visions whenever necessary. One way of thinking about such an entity, which could be a space, or a method, is to conceive of it as a space-ship of the imagination. The nautonomat piloted by nautonomonauts is itinerant and can 'pop-up' in different spaces, and occupy different lengths of time in concordance with the increasingly mobile working lives of people in the arts, and their friends. Its primary features can be replicated and adapted in different contexts and situations. It should be possible to 'find' all the physical objects necessary to make up a space for free, or for next to nothing by asking people to spare what they no longer use. Nautonomonauts may also act in response to invitations to produce situations and processes for specific educational, social and political contexts. Public Institutions may also be squatted, occupied or reconfigured openly or in stealth for a term to harbor an nautonomat. Books, computers, projectors and other equipment should also be sourced, as far as is possible, from existing resources in a given location. Consumables should be sourced from within public institutions when possible, and by pooling in resources otherwise. Every asset in a space for mobile autonomy must come from a commons constituted for it, and devolve back to that commons when the time comes to move on. And it must move on.

2. location

Site the nautonomat within a context whose primary purpose is not the hosting of gatherings and conversations - let the practice of conversation be a surprise as much to the uninvited, the invited, the bystander, and to the settled. This is sited epiphytically on to the structure of a festival, biennale, university or institution, in the annex of a museum, or in a clearing within or adjacent to a library, or any space that has been recently transformed or is in transition - say a factory that has been de-occupied of its management, or a recently liberated detention facility. It can also be anywhere filled with promise.

3. orientation

Find a location that can be seen (as far as is possible) from different distances and vantage points, (from above and below if possible along with just from the sides). People should be able to stay at a distance, observing, without having to feel scrutinized, and then, if they so desire, find ways to get closer, and perhaps even enter and participate.

4. exit / entry

Choose an enclosure that has more than one entry and exit. So that everyone does not have to come in and leave through the same door. This makes it possible for people to accept different degrees and reasons of involvement in the nautonomat. Not everyone needs to come to this process with the same set of expectations and desires. Different routes and a flexible protocol of permissions for entry and exit make this seem natural. Emphasize corridors, vestibules and unexpected passages and doors that link the nautonomat to its wider surroundings. Make sure this happens in terms of the architecture as well as the dramaturgy of the nautonomat.

5. time

Develop a flexible practice of how to share time in the nautonomat. Make sure that no person or group become the 'landlords' of the facility. Some people may want to be there everyday, or on most days of the week, with a certain regularity. The greater stability of their tenure does not entitle them over others. Many may come in only for scheduled conversations and events that happen at definite intervals. Still others may want to drop in and out on their way to other places. They may want to spend time by themselves, doing (or not doing) things, reading, having non-intrusive conversations with others, or making things with other people, by design or by accident. Cultivate routines of meeting, doing things together, reading, writing, drawing and conversation but make room for randomness, and the stranger, at the same time. Let the nautonomat inhale surprise and exhale familiarity.

6. furniture

The minimum requirements for a gathering in an nautonomat include things to sit on (sofas, cushions, stools, armchairs and chairs of different kinds, ottomans, rugs and carpets), at different levels, (and on different kinds of surfaces) so that the eye can wander. The furniture should be easy to get up from if necessary. Make sure that the furniture and the surfaces are comfortable, but not too comfortable. Short naps are fine, but the nautonomat is a space-ship of the imagination, not the first class retiring room in a railway station.

7. not this, not that

Avoid also the spatial echoes of a board-room, a hotel or airport lounge, an office, a class room or a doctor's waiting room. These are spaces that kill thought before it can even germinate. Remember, also, that the nautonomat is neither a studio, nor a gallery. If anything, it is more like an orbiting club-house or a common-room, a space for conversation, repose, experiments, disagreement, observation, reflection, play, sleep and joy.

8. eyeliners

No one should have to sit too close to another person, because it is important that everyone be able to see each other, and turn to each other in conversation, nor too far, because no one should have to strain to speak or hear across a vast distance. Eye contact is key. Avoid flat, even, illumination in space of conversation. Provide for shadows.

9. provisions

There should be a few choice books close at hand, to browse, to provoke a thread of debate, to slake curiosities. Have especially poetry, picture books, aged books, some philosophy, some parables, a few polemical tracts, a long monograph on things that no one knows much about, atlases, lexicons, aphorisms, time tables, manuals, and a few books that are impossible to describe casually. This should be a growing library, with books attracting the gift of other books. Over time, the books should attract annotations and insertions. It should be possible for an astronomical atlas to gather a note featuring a line of poetry, not necessarily about stars, or a recipe for soup in outer-space.

10. objects

A few odd objects can also be collected and kept - stones, bits of shaped wood, sea-glass, shells, fossils, tools and instruments, balls of thread or wool - things to hold, weigh and consider, things to think with, if any one is so inclined. Avoid figurines, dolls, toys and anthropomorphic objects unless absolutely necessary. Let the crowd grow and not get drowned by familiar icons, fetishes and totems.

11. tools

Furnish the 'work area' with different kinds and lengths of paper, pens, pencils, brushes, ink, stamps or different kinds, stencils, stamp pads, scissors, tape, glue and other things necessary to make drawings, collages and mind-maps. Find ways to articulate the tables as surfaces to work on as well as provisional platforms for display.

12. copy

Make sure that there is a xerox machine and/or a printer somewhere in the vicinity. Copying, cutting and pasting together are important ways to generate a 'commons' of ideas, images and textures. Repetitions, layers, palimpsests and patterns thicken time in the space for mobile autonomy. Time cooks us all.

13. tracing

There should be lots of tracing paper. Tracing is way of keeping thoughts and ideas alive and mobile.

14. projection

There should be a space on a wall to project thoughts and images, just as there should be a few contiguous surfaces tacked on to walls, that can be used to assemble and display notes, drawings, lists, and anything else that comes to mind. Ideas, questions, observations, connections, must be materialized, as far as possible, through diagrams that represent the looping histories of conversations, through drawings, through annotations and figures of all kinds. Keep a simple video monitor close at hand, so as to run videos on loop for extended periods of time. Let some things stay constant, and let others change.

15. beverage

Beverages must always be served. The making and serving of a drink is crucial to having people feel welcomed, and in ensuring that the roles circulate over time. When circumstances permit, the beverage can be a moderate quantity of distilled or fermented spirit. Otherwise, something suitable to the weather, warm and invigorating, in autumn or winter, such as tea in any form or colour, or cool, like a sherbet, in the summer, will do just as well. Sipping produces a necessary silence, because no one can sip and speak at

the same time. This makes listening pleasurable. Ingested, the liquid loosens the tongue, and this makes for better conversation. Thirst needs no translation.

15. flows

Curate flows of things that can be done and witnessed in the nautonomat. This should include collective work, but also leave time for people to work on their own, and at their own pace. Make time for specific discussions led by one or two people on a theme agreed upon previously, and ensure that at least some of the time, these discussions are not related to ongoing 'projects'. There can also be interviews or curated conversations, readings, screenings and collective audition of video material and audio recordings that anyone want to share. Avoid the tedium of the 'artists talk'. Invite people to try out ideas, raise questions, air speculations and posit scenarios. Avoid descriptions, reports, promotions, put downs and other tried and tested narrative tricks. Script nothing, document everything.

16. purpose

The nautonomat's shifting experiment is the rediscovery of conversation and collective learning as a art form. Nautonomonauts gather to discover things they did not know about themselves and their own practice in the company of others, and to reconfigure the question of the centre and the margin, in life, art and work. The nautonomat's orbit take it out further towards the margins and edges of established domains, so that the sighting of worlds becomes a commonplace activity.

[The proposition of the nautonomat and these preliminary notes towards its possible operation are distilled from the experience that Raqs Media Collective had with students and faculty of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence and Brown University during the course of 'A Myriad Marginalia', an open seminar designed by Raqs within the painting department at RISD (with Dennis Congdon) at the RISD Museum in March-April 2015]