

DIY Activism

An interview with Ivanka Annot by Anja Groten

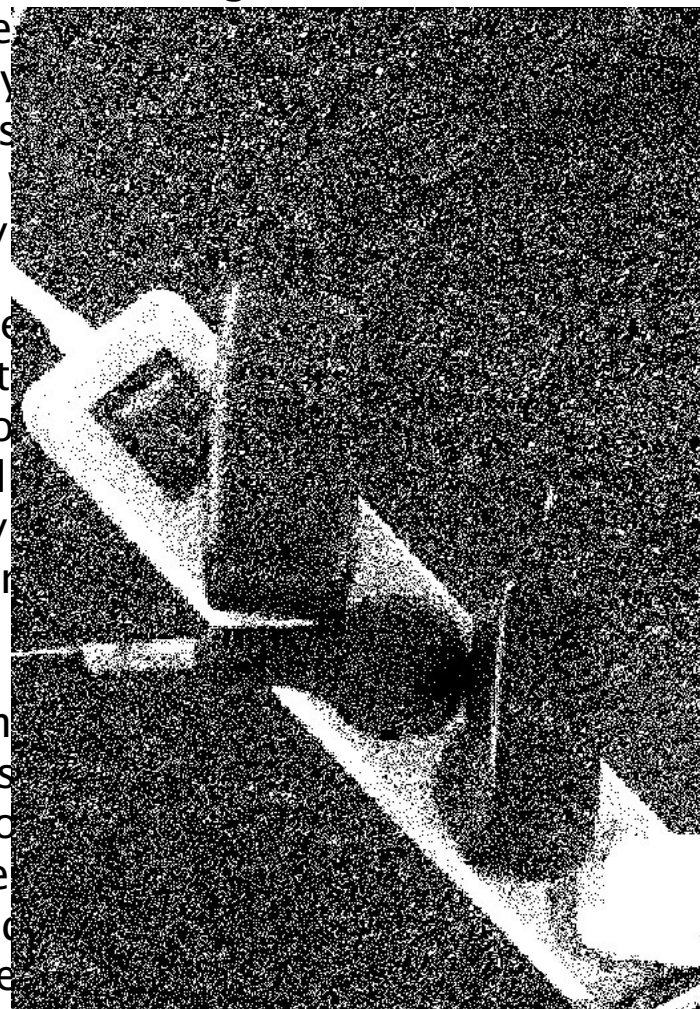
One of our H&D founders, Selby Gildemacher, met artist Ivanka Annot during the month-long art camp Entre-Nous located in the experimental settlement in Frederiksoord, NL, last September. As H&D had been exploring what it means to be reliant on the systems of big corporation and how to change our dependency on these systems, Ivanka's practice has been influential to us. We were excited to meet her again to discover more about her life and work and how she combines the two in an inspiring way.

Anja: To give some context to how you developed such an autonomous practice, could you tell us about your background? How did you grow up and end up making the work you make now?

Ivanka: Art school fixed everything for me! It taught me that I could shape the world. That's the biggest message I got. I was suddenly that made me critical of society. I realized I could affect my surroundings. Through my actions, I started thinking about how I could change things and how this vision differs from reality.

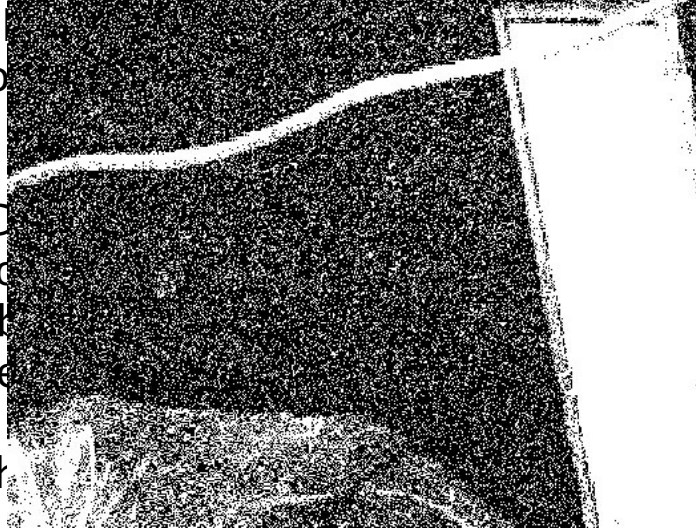
It quickly turned into more of a critique that I developed over the years. I didn't want to do something I didn't want to do to get something. I was a house owner who doesn't need the dollhouse. It felt terribly unfair that that's the way these little spaces that you pay rent for.

My partner has had much influence on me. We share a lot of ideas. We decided to minimize expenses to start living with the lowest expenses. We were diving for our food and we moved in together in Groningen, which is also a collective. We discovered how easy it is to do things on your own somewhere. We started by going to the



that was left over. We found so much to do in the hallway of up to 12 people. Then we found out so we started a restaurant! It has been

We created this place called The Free Café. It was a socially-engaged work of art. We co-created it. We were the instigators but not the only ones. There was a group of people that was eating, preparing food, and handing the food out. The clubhouse out of all types of wood with the wrong angle make one right angle!



Without prior knowledge, we just started DIYing because we felt the urge to see what it could bring. More and more we were realizing that we were working towards a totally anti-capitalist vision. If you start taking small-scale actions, talking to people, working with people, then you're suddenly doing it. That strengthened and energized my artistic practice.

Anja: What is your method for acquiring skills to do all these things? Are you interested in a certain technique and then you dive into that alone? Or, do you want to create a project and as it develops you figure out the skills that are necessary for its production?

Ivanka: I see my art practice in two parts. One of them is doing the prefigurative politics. This means that you create what you want to see happening in the future. Instead of protesting to what is happening now, you prefigure it. You give it a shape, you make it happen, and then the rest will follow. That's most of my work.

The Free Café is prefigurative. Only by creating this free restaurant have we been able to work on a next level plan that we now have a piece of ground and permits for; it is called De Wandeling. De Wandeling is a plan to use a piece of the local city park in Groningen and turn it into an edible permaculture jungle with a social center for the exchange of knowledge, skills, and free food.

De Wandeling means literally The Walk. We chose this name because we'd like to conjure up an image of nature and focus and learning, like the taking a walk in the woods. It's still in process, but in the meantime, I've built my own house out of local straw and loam. The house will be proper enough to pass laws for new types of construction

that can last for 50 years. For me, this is prefigurative politics.

These prefigurative works are all about acquiring skills to be able to reach the goal. It's not like "Oh, I'd like to cut a window. Let's cut a window!" It's more that you need to make sure that you acquire the knowledge and experience necessary to make the project possible.

For example, we had to make a formal permit request for De Wandeling. I'm from the art academy and I have no knowledge of this sort of procedure. Together with my partner, we read all the construction laws, everything about sustainable technologies, DIY methods, local materials of which we made 3D and 2D detail drawings, and made construction calculations. We handed it in to the municipality and it was good! In one year we took this education full on – we did a Google-search crash course for architecture to be able to reach the goal of getting this permit to make a tiny non-capitalist and socially-inclusive society in our city.

That's one approach that is very practical. My other works mostly go into art spaces and galleries and residencies. For these works, it's more about acquiring theoretical knowledge and reflection. I'm very much inspired by queer theory, for example. Topics that inform politics, like nationalism and borders, are what interest me.

In this sense, these different lines of work have opposite approaches. But, they are both determined by my environment and what I want to influence.

Anja: And you call both of these practices work and not life?

Ivanka: I call it all an art practice. I see my art practice as my life and my life as my art practice. I don't distinguish something as art if it's in an art space. It could equally be in my garden. When I'm building a house with a hundred people who also learned these skills and started living in the house next door, this an art practice.

Anja: I saw a very beautiful drawing of yours, it was of a vehicle – something like a car – but it looked also like a bike.

Ivanka: I had this dream of a bicycle camper with a dual purpose. First, as a solution for transporting large loads of food from one location to another to give it away for free, without having to use fossil fuels. Second, for it to function as a bicycle camper just big enough for two

people to sleep in. It would sustain itself by using solar energy and filtering rainwater. Then, I got thinking on how to outfit this thing to go completely undetected. Camouflaging it and coming up with ideas to heat it without it showing heat radiation.

I was playing with a sort of preparation scenario. What if shit hits the fan politically. With right wing populism and with the Sleepnetwet, the law that allows national and international intelligence services to tap, store, and forward all digital and telephone communication, I felt that my way of life is more visibly put in a far corner of politics. Who knows what happens when you are accused of being a dissident.

I ended up not having the time to undergo building it. I still have all the parts though. I hope one day somebody knocks on the door saying, "I'd love to build it with you," and then I'll go for it.

Anja: Do you think that there are people out there that think what you do is threatening to them and to society?

Ivanka: No, not right now. But I do think that this could change. I feel that the new shift in politics is not that you're shifting the politics, but that the politics are shifting you. I feel that I've been pushed in this very extreme corner when in actuality I'm just a person who wants everyone to have a good life.

Anja: Would you call yourself a prepper?

Ivanka: No, not at all. I'm not busy with those things. I think it's a very passive reactionary way of finding the things coming towards you and getting ready for it. I see it completely the other way around, to create what is around us. This is my artist practice and my life – creating changes that I am not undergoing.

Anja: What role does material play in your work? How do you select what you work with?

Ivanka: As uncaptalist as possible. For example, I am building a small sustainable house. Most people would go to the nearest eco-construction website and order everything there, but most of those products are produced in questionable ways. They come from far away with odd materials that aren't locally grown.

It's a combination of uncaptalism, but also I try to find the autonomy

to go completely DIY. If you can go to a farmer and ask for straw, do it! It was the farmer closest to me who was farming wheat with the right kind of straw for my project. If a bit further out you can dig out your own loam that can make the basis for your house, then do it! I think in these sorts of practices are huge accomplishments.

I would really like it to come straight out of nature as much as possible in construction.

Anja: Do you also reuse materials?

Ivanka: Definitely! My house is built on legs, raising it 50cm off the ground. Those legs are 15x15cm and I got them from a furniture maker who had collected them over the years when he was throwing away his other leftover pieces.

Anja: You were talking about working with your partner and I saw there are a lot of co-creative projects you are involved in. What kind of collaborative forms are you interested in exploring in your work? How do you collaborate? How much do other people play a role in your work?

Ivanka: It depends whether I work for an art space or not. If it's for an artspace, it's usually solo. I almost always conduct travel research to explore other initiatives. Almost every work I have made has been informed by other people in that sense.

Whenever it's more collective work, then my main principle is self-organisation. In this case is often still initiated by me, but it ends up being a co-creation of everybody. It's a very interesting balance, between coming up with an idea and starting it with a group of people. You set a framework that can be determined by the self-organisation within the small group. There comes a point where the framework is set and then there's an invitation to a bigger group so that 50 or 100 people can join.

When you actually practice self-organization you realize that even though everybody has as much input as the rest, there is first always a framework that has been determined by the first people. In this way, there is a hierarchy when it comes to policy and determining those kind of things.

The De Wandeling initiative has to be the legal entity called a

foundation, but only in name. In practice, though, the initiative is completely self-organised. De Wandeling is an foundation because by law we wouldn't be a legal person otherwise. And we must make it a legal person in order to be able to sign a users agreement with the municipality and formally apply for a construction permit. So, the foundation is the only legal shape that allows us to have a fully horizontal hierarchy and forgo on money, a bank account, paid membership, or any form of ownership.

I find it very problematic to set up a legal person. One reason is because a legal person in the Netherlands has more rights than most people anywhere else. That's due to the fact that big corporations are political entities and have privileges over actual humans. Even though I hate it, we had to make De Wandeling a foundation in order for it to function.

Anja: Is De Wandeling creating a cooperative model?

Ivanka: No. We're not an cooperative because there is no ownership to be shared and no set participants.

With the foundation, we have our own framework in which we do not use money. We don't receive it, we don't hand it out. People can't pay donations for the food or any activities.

A foundation with no bank account is not able able to pay taxes, though. We don't have income so we don't need to pay income taxes. But, we are constructing a building and every building, once finished, is taxed. This has turned into a legal battle. I have had to go into the city council to fight about it.

The issue is that if you do a permit request, you must pay a fee based on X% of your construction costs. We shouldn't have to pay this fee because our construction costs are zero!

In legally setting up this organisation, we found a way to not have bank account, to not use money, and to not have ownership, despite being in use of the material.. There is no owner, just use and exchange. We recycle everything.

This has never been done before in the Netherlands. Doing the legal battle at the city council made it very obvious how much tension there is between DIYing and the policies of municipalities.

How to implement one in the other makes you wonder if you shouldn't be going totally off the grid. But, how big can you grow if you are not registered? De Wandeling is a work that has been made for everybody. I want hundreds and thousands of people to come in contact with it. You can't do that if you're a little thing on the fringe of society. The fringes of society also often become owned by the people that reside there. And that is closed: private, not public. We never went down that road because we want to be public.

Anja: All these struggles seem to inform your work. I think it is very generous, because we could say that you are sacrificing your life and investing your time in figuring these things out. This is what some imagine escaping when departing from neoliberal capitalist systems – to not have your life consumed by the work you do. There is an information pool developing from your work, though, and many people don't have the means to do this kind of work and they don't know how they could. How can you share these findings with even more people?

Ivanka: We said that we would stop The Free Café because we got as far as we wanted. But, some of the other organizers said they didn't want to stop and so it continued in a different location. That's something that became autonomous and that is completely self-informed. I have no contact with them. The Free Cafe became a model that could be copied.

For De Wandeling, I think we're at point zero. All we have done is the procedure. We have pulled a lot of knowledge and experience for the project, but also for other people that want to do similar things. How can you bend the law or find some loopholes in it, how can you convince your local politicians?

We talk amongst each other, and I talk to other initiatives too, to eco villages. When we can, we share the knowledge that we have gathered and people can build their own projects.

De Wandeling will become a big hub for exchanging knowledge, experience, and ideas. The Free Café was centered around food, which is only a means, not an end. It's a means and it's extremely relevant, but what we really want to create is a place where people come together and where all of the elements of DIY construction and self-organisation can be shared.

Anja: In a way, each project is a start for another project.

Ivanka: It ended up this way because we had the entire framework for De Wandeling written out 5 years ago. We sent it to the municipality because we had to collaborate with them to get a piece of land and to get the permission on ten different accounts. But, we got an email saying they didn't know what to do with this. So while we waited, we did The Free Cafe.

It was thought up to be a six months-long project, just to show them that this kind of initiative is possible. We had no record of having done anything this ambitious before, so I can imagine that they were not ready to support us. Groningen is getting interested, though, and they are starting to talk among different departments of the municipality.

This experience taught us million things that I'm very happy to have learned before going into De Wandeling.

Anja: Would you consider yourself an autonomous artist or an autonomous maker, even though at least part of your practice is realized with many people and within government systems to have greater reach? Is it possible to really be autonomous?

Ivanka: Yes, definitely. I have always defined myself as autonomous. That was the one insane urge I had before going to art school. To be autonomous. Not in the sense of being without collaborations or collectivity. And, not in the sense of being individualistic. Rather, to be autonomous is to choose your own structures with which you want to comply. It starts with the luxury of being able to think in these terms of choice. It's definitely a privilege. In that sense, I have a very privileged background where I have had the luxury to have choose autonomy.

Anja: One of your works is a reaction to *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac. You mapped the trip from the book it into a European setting. I was fascinated by the project's employment of scales and borders and accessibility. This book has been read widely and it carries this dream of being on the road and off the grid. It has this romanticism as well as naivety to it. Can you tell us more about why you put this trip into a European setting?

Ivanka: I really don't like this book! I'm very critical of Kerouac. I think he must have been a very narcissistic, woman-hating pig. That's the

type of dream that is 100% privileged in a way I don't find socially beneficial or exploratory. Let's take a van and travel around the world. Let's go to pristine places where nobody has been yet and ruin it with our presence. I think this is a very Western way of thinking, that you can go everywhere and you can be king wherever you go. That you'll be able to fit into any place because your passport will bring you to any place you want to go. That's why I made the work. To be critical of this kind of understanding of going off the grid.

Anja: Do you travel a lot yourself?

Ivanka: I do travel a lot. But when I do, I usually hitchhike, stay at peoples' homes, and visit other initiatives that are awesome in some way. I would never fly to a forest of Peru to rediscover a tribe that does ayahuasca.

Anja: Is there any organisation that you declined to work with?

Ivanka: In a way, the municipality. We asked them for their collaboration and have worked together on finding possibilities. When we gave them our 80-page proposal, they offered us a sum of money. They were up to subsidize us. But, in the end we saw this as them owning us. We still collaborated with them, but on our own terms by refusing their subsidies and their ruling. We are not working with money and donations!

Anja: What are your most low-tech and hi-tech works?

Ivanka: The most low-tech is the one that I ended up making at the art camp, Entre-Nous. I used wool from this local sheep herd and felted it into a bed. I specifically used ancient Mongolian techniques to do this, techniques that were born outside of Western civilization and that are still mostly performed outside of Western civilization. Here, it's not worth it to felt your own felt bed because for 5 euros you can buy a futon mattress in a shop.

Traditionally, the technique is to have a horse pull the wool behind her, but I did it myself. I pulled the wool behind me while walking circles around the camp. I wanted to emphasize how this kind of making is outside of the structure of Western society.

The most hi-tech work was done when I was still an art student and had just come from studying neurosciences and biology. I made really

big red and green trust lights and an ICG reader from active electrodes that would read all types of brain waves.

I made a program that filtered the alpha and beta waves, which say something about your state of mind being stressed or being relaxed. The program made the colors pop – red if you had a stressful brain response and green if you were relaxed. I collaborated with Het Noord Nederlands Orkest and a modern dance group in Groningen on this too. They would do performative art and I would ask somebody from the audience to sit in this very big dentist chair and their brain waves would be read right then and there. Their responses were translated into different colors of light. The dancers and the musician could see the responses to their performance in real time. The work created a dialog between the performers and perceivers.