

# Twenty-four Hours at the Grandhotel Cosmopolis in Augsburg. Stories of Work, Migration, and Collectivity. Silvia Converso and Frédéric Bron

*The Grandhotel Cosmopolis is located in the core of Augsburg; however, our taxi driver does not know the place nor how to get there. He was probably searching for a new luxury hotel but definitely not thinking of one of the most innovative social art projects in a former old people's home, an infrastructure hosting migrants as well as a hotel run by volunteers, migrants, and artists. The first significant impression is the red carpet laid out down the stairs to the street. It's a first clear statement: everybody is indiscriminately welcomed with open arms. Entering the lobby, we already get a glimpse of the genuineness and the atmosphere of GHC, of how the place is organized. In a very natural way, we feel immediately at ease. As Sibil and Susa, artists and two of the many managers of the hotel, show us around and introduce us to the people inhabiting the hotel, we further gain other remarkable impressions which allow us to understand the complex nature and the philosophy of the GHC.*

"The GHC is a living organism with up to 150 living beings acting weekly in it and with it", as Sibil explains. "Those 150 biographies evince/contain an extreme diversity: from Tchechian baby to Swabian grandmother, from illiterate to scientist, from passport to sans papiers, from traumatized by war to people enjoying an alternative cultural space. Thereby the organism is pumping in a high frequency caused by a great density of events and it needs a preparedness for responsibility and sensibility to keep the organism stable."

One can immediately feel that all the components of GHC are equally part of this polyphonic organism and, as such, actively operate in this

aesthetic process that homogenously models its community through the arts. As Susa adds, "the activity in GHC is shaping an aesthetic by using creativity to develop an attitude into a lifestyle, to find the least common denominator of compassion to form a common base of consciousness. We are not working together for a certain output or product but to establish a field in which this organism can grow into a structure that it is not to collapse in the future."

We find this aspect truly fascinating, as we could, in fact, feel it and see it all over the place from the beginning. So we ask them what does 'work' mean in the context of socially engaged art, for instance, in a structure like GHC?

"(It is) an ongoing process, a state of consciousness" as they put it:

- Being aware of the whole structure and circumstances while acting in the present situation.
- Creating space.
- Facing the individual skills and linking them.
- Detecting symphonies of harmonies.
- Detecting symphonies of conflicts.
- Listening to them.
- Composing the compromise.
- Understanding the structure of an organism and caring for it.
- Recognizing the needed positions in it.
- Filling them. Implementing this organism in bigger organisms.
- (like: the city, economic system, law system).
- Dealing with all-out responsibility.
- Letting the unexpected come.

Considering the unique nature of this hotel and their managers, we ask Susa and Sibil to describe a typical working day at GHC, with respect to what they personally do there.

**Susa:** Getting up very early, completing emails in silence. Drinking coffee in the lobby, meeting incoming hoteliers, starting to talk. Having meetings—scheduled, unscheduled, urgent ones. One-to-one-meetings, group meetings up to 30 people. Answering phone calls meanwhile. Topics: recording needs, providing support for specific sections, structuring the organism, connecting people, defining the house, communicating this definitions to outside positions (foundations, universities, civil services) playing solitaire on my laptop to have mental holiday, meditating, transforming the constantly changing surface of the organism into a familiar space. Looking for a shared language and common values. Thinking about material and immaterial values. Dreaming of beauty and giving it a form. Also: having lunch with all the others.

**Sibil:** Entering the house, drinking coffee in the lobby. Meeting other incoming people, marking topics. Looking for the woman from Afghanistan asking her how she feels today and if she wants to cook with us. Changing clothes. Going downstairs in the kitchen. Having an appointment with other cooks or waiting if someone else enters the kitchen to take part in the (cooking) process. Being flexible. Developing the daily menu while checking what we have in the cold store, what requests we have in the team, checking competences. Cooking while balancing the group, balancing the menu. Eating lunch together. Cleaning up the kitchen. Changing clothes. Having meetings with clients, other working groups, helping to coordinate the kitchen. Developing financial schemes for the gastro. Taking part in GHC offers like the listening circle. Leaving the house for picking up a falafel. Eating in the atelier. Writing emails, designing concepts. Talking to people I meet on the floor. Visiting the girl on the 3rd floor for a cup of tea or having a look at what she learned at school. Leaving the house.

The very centre of the life and activities of GHC is the kitchen, especially at lunch. Every day on the menu there is a different type of food, be it German cuisine prepared in the Syrian way or Persian food cooked by the refugee guests at GHC. It constitutes the get-together par excellence of all the activities happening there, the moment of exchange in which the people working and living at the hotel

have the chance to comfortably interact and spend some time all together.

We sadly came too late to experience this moment; however, we could get some of its taste for dinner. The Persian food they cooked was just amazing. Yet the thing that struck us the most was the jovial and warm atmosphere: we all sat together at a big long table and interacted with each other. We were sitting close to Djamel from Morocco, who told us about his life, his travels, how he came to discover GHC and what he does there. We found this exchange with him while having food together really insightful and enriching. All this felt like the magic ingredient that gave the perfect taste to the dinner. Maybe this exactly what GHC is about: an aesthetic process which satiates all the senses and, in this regard, the kitchen properly personifies its core.

Djamel's story and experience at GHC is truly interesting. He's 42 years old and has been living there for fifteen months where he works as concierge.

**Q:** How long have you been here?

**Djamel:** I have been staying at the GHC for fifteen months.

**Q:** Where have you been before?

**D:** I was travelling, you know, I'm a vagabond. I was in Spain, Italy, Serbia, Hungary, Greece, and many more Balkan countries.

**Q:** Were you searching for a job, better living conditions, or simply for happiness?

**D:** No, this is the way of life I chose, I have to move. My mother is a vagabond, too; she was a nomad, and I like to change after a couple of months.

**Q:** Are you here alone or with your family?

**D:** No, I'm here alone.

**Q:** Did you specifically decide to come to Germany?

**D:** No, I did not decide to come to Germany. I was just on transit through Germany, but then I ran into a police control and they forced me to stay. They put me into jail, took my fingerprints, registered me, and put me in a home for asylum-seeking persons. Now I can't travel anymore because they would bring me back if they control me.

**Q:** Would you like to move on?

**D:** I think with the migration problem we have right now, Germany is a strong country and has more abilities to offer help.

**Q:** So do you feel welcome?

**D:** Yes, in all ways I feel secure, especially economically.

**Q:** Do you share your experiences with the other migrants here at GHC?

**D:** Not so much, but I propose it to some of them.

**Q:** Are you in touch with your family, with your brothers and sisters?

**D:** Last time I was in touch with my mother was two years ago. It's difficult because every time I talk to her she cries, and it's hard for me to endure it. She wants me to come home but I can't go home now. My two brothers and my sister are also staying in Europe, but they are legally here.

**Q:** How do you spend your days here at GHC?

**D:** I'm kind of a housemaster here, a concierge. So I'm here to help, to get things fixed when there are problems with electricity, the sanitation, or when something needs to be painted, and sometimes I have a job or work to help other people outside of GHC.

**Q:** Do you think the GHC can help you to find a job and to integrate you better in the society?

**D:** Yes I get of lot of support from GHC and some propositions for different jobs. But in the first place the GHC offers me a kind of psychological support. It offers me a place where I feel at home, also thanks to the other people here. They help me also to get a work permit, but then again I will need to do a formation.

**Q:** How would you describe the GHC in your own words, what would be your definition of it and what does it represent to you?

**D:** For me it's the best example for a functioning integration, it works very well, like a prototype of how integration should be with the phenomenon

that is happening right now. We should try to apply it to the 'real society'.

**Q:** What is it that makes this programme work? What makes the difference?

**D:** Outside we need to find a way to avoid xenophobia and make citizens feel safe with us and the other way round.

**Q:** How does GHC reach that aim to make you feel secure? What is the difference?

**D:** Well it's the colours, the languages, the differences; it's like a mosaic. This diversity gives me this secure feeling.

**Q:** Do you think the artistic approach of GHC in the way they are organizing and shaping the workshops, the daily duties, the cooking, the music, and the communication is a key factor for the functioning of GHC? And is this integration of art important for you and does it bring people together?

**D:** Yes, it is also a part of the integration. You can, for example, play any instruments you would like to play. Art in a way takes the tension out, and it relaxes the people. And encounters with artists are easier, they are more open-minded; they welcome us, and you can connect to them. There are artists at GHC but also other artists come from the outside to visit us here.

**Q:** Does the contact with artists inspire you and do you come up with your own suggestions?

**D:** Yes, I also had the opportunity to organize some meetings.

**Q:** In relation to that valorisation through the participation to the work here and also to the artistic side, how difficult is it to maintain your dignity being here, though in a place of encounter, but in a way not completely part of the society and having the status of a refugee?

**D:** Well, I'm in contact with artists, but in fact I'm not an artist. I'm just doing the job of a housemaster, but at the same time I participate to art projects or political discussions and that's how I started to integrate at GHC. Art also protects me, it's active, if I have problems I'm surrounded and people help me.

**Q:** You explained us that you arrived here by chance. You were walking through this area and then you heard some music and you just followed the red carpet that leads to the GHC. Do you think you are now privileged compared to other migrants?

**D:** You know, within the refugees the sensibilities and wishes vary a lot. I tried to bring refugees from other places to the GHC many times. For example, I invited them to concerts or events. But even they knew they could stay, they didn't. I told them it's a relaxing and safe place. So for me it works and the GHC is the right place, but maybe not for another migrant.

**Q:** How do you see Germany today? Does it correspond to the place you were expecting?

**D:** I never thought about Germany, I was on transit so I had no expectations. But today I think that it is the country that procures me with the highest hopes because it's a strong economy and also secure in other ways. So it's the right place for me and for other migrants. It's a stable situation for me, and in a country like this I can envisage a future. Maybe one day I could have a family and through that a sense. In many other European countries, like Greece where I stayed for several years and where I saw the corruption, the situation is not comparable to here and very precarious. Germany is a much more transparent country.

**Q:** Thus, it's the country that triggers the intention of having a family?

**D:** No, in the first place it's my age. I'm 42 now and the vagabond life needs to come to an end one day. I need a stable and more settled situation.

**Q:** And in the future, in five years, where do you see yourself?

**D:** I think in five years I see myself at home.

**Q:** Where's home?

**D:** Morocco. But I don't know what the situation will be. As Arabs we don't really know freedom. After the revolution there might be a civil war and then you have to choose a side. If you don't choose, you have to go. And as I don't want to be forced to choose, I prefer to be away but one day I would like to go home.

**Q:** Do you think you could feel at home in a country like Germany?

**D:** Hm, yes, I could imagine that. But we need some more transparency, we need more rights like the right to work and the right for education, then I can imagine that I could be one of them and develop a feeling of being at home. With the actual migration situation and so many new migrants, I think Germany and other European countries have to change the education system. It's an evolutionary process and it has always been like this. It's necessary to adapt the system a little bit. To go with the evolution is to acknowledge these emerging changes of this generation. It's about the integration of the children of migrants; it's not about changing German culture but to adapt the educational system a little bit. Then the next steps will happen naturally.

One of the many workshops offered at GHC is called "Emotion Room". We are invited to participate with migrants and staff members to this community procedure, which is a regular part of the collaborative alignment or the daily flow. The participants sit together on the floor in a darkened room, only illuminated by some candles. The woman leading the session explains the rules. It's possible to pipe up by taking a little bag with stones that lies in the middle to express oneself or just deposit one's emotions and thoughts of the day. But it's also possible to take the bag and simply remain quiet and through that ritual get silent awareness from the others. I felt at first hesitant to participate, as I feared getting involved in some kind of esoteric circle I might not be comfortable with. But then after a moment of silence, during which everyone was staring into the candlelight, a Syrian girl starts to talk about her impressions of her first Christmas in another town away from her family and about her concerns of wanting to ask things all the time. I suddenly feel that I'm entirely within this circle and these shimmering faces that were foreign to me just moments ago start to look familiar. Another girl starts to talk about language issues and misunderstandings and one participant after another takes the bag and explains in a very confident and disarming openness his emotions of the day. Overwhelmed by these insights into the lives of people facing harsh situations, I feel a strange desire to at least share a similar experience and not an emotion that seems ridiculous compared to their situation. But then I dig a bit deeper and grasp the bag as the last one to share a thought about expected changes and new engagements I'm aspiring to. At the end, the leader of the

group thanks everyone and reminds us that confidentiality is part of the “emotion room”. The light is switched on, and the faces disappear. Some of them were seen again during dinner, like Andre, for instance.

Andre is a shy calm guy with a warm and sweet smile. He’s from São Paulo, Brazil, 32 years old, as he tells us. His grandparents migrated from Japan to Brazil. He’s been living in Augsburg since March 2015. He has a really interesting story and we asked him to tell us more about himself.

**Q:** Why did you come to Germany and did you come by yourself?

**Andre:** When I was 15 years old, I went to the U.S. to get my high school education. From that moment on I realized that I wanted to travel more and learn about other cultures, as this experience really opened up my mind and my way of thinking about the world and people. I lived for several years in the U.S., but after a while I decided it was time to move on and get to know other places. An opportunity arose to work in Argentina, where I met my wife who is German. At first we were travelling through South America doing volunteer work. After that, we decided to live in Cordoba, Argentina, where we ended up staying for almost five years. For different reasons we decided to move out to Germany, and since March of this year we have been living in Augsburg. At the moment I’m learning the language in an integration course dedicated to migrants and refugees. My wife comes from Augsburg originally, and all her friends knew about the GHC. As I heard about the concept, I decided to pass by and to see if I could do something there. My intention was to work in the office, as it is what I usually do. I worked developing intercultural programmes like volunteer programmes, internships, exchange and study programmes. The GHC was interested in giving me an opportunity but they said that I first had to work at the bar to get an impression of how it works and to get to know the people that are living and working here. Then you start going to meetings and you learn step by step who is doing what, as there are so many people involved at the GHC.

**Q:** What is your impression so far of GHC? How would you describe it in your own words?

**A:** Hmm, I think it’s difficult to describe it in words. What I can say is that I feel really good here. I feel that the people who work here have the same vibe. And it’s a very strong experience to see people

arriving here with their heavy experience and what it means to help. I would like to do more and get more involved but it’s a process.

**Q:** Do you think the GHC is some kind of utopia that just works here due to the specific makers of GHC who realize this project with so much passion and engagement?

**A:** I think it could be adapted to other places, but it depends on the people who are involved. I’m sure there are many wonderful people like the ones here that would put the same effort into a project. Until now I did not learn how they manage everything, but I will talk now with Susa. As everyone does a lot of things, I don’t really know how planned it is but it works. It’s a kind of flow.

**Q:** Do you think it works because it is related to an artistic process, that art is part of the daily life? Is the fact that artists are the makers of the GHC a key factor?

**A:** I’m not sure what kind of art it is exactly but everyone that works here has art inside them, in the way they do things. It could also be a non-artist but somehow things happen in an artistic way. And this experience is also what happens now for me. Not everyone can do something amazing with art, but it’s a part of the way to proceed and to interact. It’s a lot about the people working here. From the ones who live here, some are involved with arts but most of them are not. A lot of people living here also have psychological support, everyone takes care of each other. I worked once as a volunteer in Peru in a village that was destroyed after heavy rainfall and floods and the families were on the street living in tents. These people needed psychological support to deal with the situation. If I talk to some of the people here, I realize that the experiences are so completely different from what we can imagine. I don’t get too deep during these conversations because it’s so sensitive. So I’m here to participate and collaborate without being too aggressive or too direct.

**Q:** Going back to the relation to art. We had the chance to visit the “Emotion Room” and we were impressed by this session. One could say it’s all about the artistic view, the way you cohabit; the way you deal with each other and talk to each other. It’s a creative way to process. Would you agree to that?

**A:** I think it’s important to try different formulas because everything is relevant in the process of

helping. I don't know if art is the key point but it definitely helps, not only the people living here but also the ones working here. The importance of being in contact with all the different realities that come together is something I also learned in Peru, where being close to the people that were going through all these difficulties was not only good for them but also for everyone else. That's what I meant with art, not in the typical sense of art that one might think of, but the art of living and helping each other with different ways and considering the contribution from everyone, because everyone has something to share. So it's also a social aspect, with energies coming through all these different perspectives that are somehow used for the processes. Here, I keep meeting awesome and different people all the time, and I'm very thankful for that.

The experienced intimacy that occurred within this group impressed us in an almost unsettling way and offered us a better, more concrete understanding of terms like collaborative or dialogical work for the creation of inter-human relations. We also gained a more clear comprehension of the concept of art as part of social practice or "social sculpture", which is a description with different significations and which is also preoccupying the makers of the GHC. On a more personal level, this experience and being confronted with inequality affected us and made us reflect on responsibility as professionals, but also simply as humans. Maybe this is one of the basic elements that make the relations at the GHC work. The processes have a community effect on people and cause them to relate on a level of equality, no matter the situation in which they find themselves.

To conclude our twenty-four-hour stay at the GHC, we asked Susa and Sibil how they would inscribe this project in a more theoretical discourse about socially engaged art. Grant Kester differentiates between collaborative, dialogical works, and projects based on a scripted "encounter". Curator and art historian Claire Bishop identifies projects with an author to guide participants on the one hand, and de-authored procedures that aim to embrace collective creativity on the other hand. To sum up the activities, she settles on the term social collaboration. What is their position in relation to these propositions?<sup>1</sup>

"We don't think that Kester and Bishop represent two different approaches to a collective process but two different stages in the process of the collective Grandhotel. The Grandhotel started with

strong guiding figures that channelled an idea for a collective in which many can participate. Other figures started to implement this idea in a collectively sustainable structure and provided the womb for the collective to grow. Once the structure is provided and defines positions according to the needs, talents, and abilities of the individual members of the collective, the group has found a common script and the internal code. The guiding figures can then re-dive into the collective ocean from where they emerged. The Grandhotel is in the middle of the process of taking "the artist" off the stage. And we assume that other stages will follow.

Maybe the Afghan woman would give you a different answer."

### Captions

1 Grandhotel Cosmopolis: The bar and foyer, 2015. Photograph by: Silvia Converso.

2 Grandhotel Cosmopolis: The kitchen, 2015. Photograph by: Silvia Converso.

3 Grandhotel Cosmopolis: Dinner, 2015. Photograph by: Silvia Converso.

4 Grandhotel Cosmopolis: Guests and managers at the dinner table (second from right is Djamal), 2015. Photograph by: Silvia Converso.

### Notes

1 Grant Kester, Letter to the Editor, *Artforum*, May 2006.

Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents", *Artforum*, February 2006.







**Susa Gunzner** (b. 1966) is a sound artist who lives and works in Berlin and at Grandhotel Cosmopolis in Augsburg. She works in the laboratory Grandhotel Cosmopolis at the interface between global nomadism and transporting society into the 21st century. She investigates the relationship between the individual and the collective, and material and immaterial values. In collaboration with Sibil Sattler, she develops strategies to spread the quality of the heart to perforate stiff systems.

**Sibil Sattler** (b. 1976) is an artist, textile designer, and cook who lives and works in Berlin and at Grandhotel Cosmopolis in Augsburg. She observes and transforms traditions and cultural patterns. She explores the nourishment of a future society regarding the formation of cosmopolitan groups, current collaboration and the worldwide quantity of food. In collaboration with Susa Gunzner, she develops strategies to spread the quality of the heart to perforate stiff systems.

**Frédéric Bron** (b. 1970) is leading partner of two locations in Zurich, the alternative music club Papiersaal, and the multi-purpose space Folium. He is currently studying at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK. His curatorial emphasis is in art in the public space and in socially engaged art practices. For his current project "SummerLAB", he is researching the engagement of art in the representation of migration in the public discourse. For this project, Bron also considers the experiences and results of the work of Grandhotel Cosmopolis.

**Silvia Converso** (b. 1985) is a cultural producer with a solid background in literature and a keen interest in architecture and socially engaged art. She completed studies in languages and literature, focusing on the interdisciplinarity of arts. She worked as project coordinator for the major festivals of arts and literature in Europe (international literaturfestival berlin, Hay Festival in Hay-on-Wye/Wales, Festaletteratura in Mantua). In particular, she was actively involved in the programme of the Festivals in Prison, organizing lectures and cultural activities with inmates. Since 2013, Converso has been living in Zurich. She is currently studying at the Postgraduate Programme in Curating ZHdK and works as a communication consultant for art and architecture and as an independent curator in the field of socially engaged art practices.