It's my Birthday
Stéphane Noël (CH / HK)

Concept
Everyday, it is someone's birthday, so why not find these someones and invite them to share the joy with other persons they would maybe never meet otherwise.
This one-night event is a social sculpture made for and with the citizens of Saitama, a night to remember, a birthday like no other.

Artistic Statement
I would like to design a project to be deployed in festivals that allow for the involvement of a more varied population than the strict audience of the performing arts, which is often very homogeneous. I wonder how to transcend the different socio-cultural categories (gender, skin colour, age, social class, geographical origin, sexual orientation, etc.) in order to bring together and touch a group of people who have nothing in common.
My intuition led me to look at this question in reverse, namely what would be the thing that would bring together people who were completely different from each other in a neutral way. I thought that the date of birth (day/month) is something ridiculously arbitrary: it is a fact true enough in our daily lives and at the same time something over which we have no control and which does not depend on any other socio- cultural factors.
In a way, by merely focussing in what we share (a random date), we might look more at what we share and less at what differentiates us.
I would therefore like to try to define a method, some formats, and performative elements that would achieve this goal and offer a simple moment of inclusion, generosity and care in the sometimes isolated context of contemporary arts.

Elements
It's my Birthday is more than a single performative event, it is the coming together of people from the whole city, or region, independently from their interest in arts.
Of course, the main event remains the day of celebration where people are physically present, acting together and for one another. But before his festive moment, It's my Birthday should infiltrate the city and social media, slowly building up towards the final celebration.
In that sense, there are different forms and temporalities of outputs that will signal—less and less subtly —the grand finale.

Context & Preparation
The project finds its place within the context of a festival but starts well before that with an open call, which is relayed in newsletters, through social medias and in the media.
Through this call, people whose birthday take place during the festival are invited to register—or to register a friend who has their birthday then—via a simple online form.
After the cutout date, we identify the evening with the most registered birthdays and choose it to be the party date; from this point, there will be one group of exact birthday people ("X") and another one of almost birthday people ("A"),
which are also divided in subgroups for each festival day.
We then invite all the participants to join the birthday party on the given date, while simultaneously preparing the programme of the festivities. One part of the programme is made of actions prepared by the festival team, another part are official moments, and a last part are actions performed by the participants themselves, if they so desire. While

the former two elements are relatively straight- forwarded to produce, the local team has to engage with the participants to assemble the self-generated programme, which can veer between
talent demonstration, song, mini- performances, etc. The real goal is not to put diverse persons together in the same spacetime bubble, but to give them a proper sense of agency, which is an essential part of caring.

During the preparation period, we also progressively communicate about the "big party". We can disseminate information on social networks but also use physical resources in the city, such as flyers and posters in the street, in public transportations, on municipal buildings, in the press, etc.

Build-up & Unfolding

Once the festival starts, everyday we publish / broadcast the portraits of the persons whose birthday it is on that day under the "It's my Birthday" banner. But more than that, we can use radio and television programmes to single out a couple of persons with an on air song dedication, and we can also create small actions across from their apartment building or at their work place.

And one festival day is used for the event proper, if possible in a nice and central area of the festival, with a small stage, a bar and some food options. All the participants (both the X's and the A's) receive a couple of free drink and can bring a couple of
friends, as we will also sell drinks during the party. There will be a DJ playing the songs asked by X's and A's (if possible), and if there is a clear demand for a local artist, we will invite them to perform live on stage.

At different moments in the evening, we will invite small groups of X's to go on stage and say: "Hello, my name is XXX, I live in this neighbourhood, I like YYY and today is my birthday." We might arrange / order them by age, starting with young kids and ending with older persons, or the other way around. The point is to remove as many social markers (class, gender, wealth, education, race, etc.) as possible and only use the arbitrary
notion of a birthday to create a transversal picture of society. At one point in the evening, we ask the different groups of A's to come on stage for a group photo, then we invite the B's group on stage for their group photo, and as they pose, a secret choir looks at them start humming, then singing a birthday song, walking towards the stage. After the song we invite guests to share present and bring a big cake with sparkling candles on wheels, with the mayor of the city inside.

In parallel to these "official moments", we involve some of the guests through the evening: maybe they perform a song, display a talent, read
a speech, thank their families and friends. This part is important, because celebrating the diversity also means making room for the persons we celebrate, their identities, their interests, etc.

Once the party is over and the confettis are swept away, we collect all the portraits, as well as the group photos we took, the videos of the guests saying "It's my birthday...", and the performances volunteered. Depending on the host festival and media partners, we publish these elements and/or embed them in the public space (large posters, or free postcards, for instance).

Stéphane Noël 羅永飛

Born in Switzerland, studied contemporary & modern history at Université de Fribourg, lived in Switzerland until 2007, in Berlin until 2016 and currently residing in Hong Kong, Stéphane Noël has worked mostly as a producer and curator of contemporary dance,

music and theatre. Stéphane was also the director of Les Urbaines festival in Lausanne, and the co- director of Belluard Bollwerk International festival in Fribourg.

His advisory capacities led him to join the artistic and editorial board of Gaîté lyrique in Paris (2009–2011) and act as a consultant for European.Lab, the platform for cultural innovation organised by Arty Farty in Lyon during the Nuits sonores electronic music festival as well as for IETM, international network for contemporary performing arts, for which he was a statutory advisor for three years.

Over the last couple of years, Stéphane Noël has not only continued producing independent artists in Europe and Asia, but has also been collaborating with Swiss institutions such as Pro Helvetia (Swiss Arts Council), the City of Zurich, and Basel, mudac (Lausanne), Swiss Architecture Museum (Basel) and Vidy Théâtre (Lausanne), helping them connect with their Asian counterparts and producing platforms, showcase or networking events on their behalf.