

IF WE CAN MAKE IT, WE CAN CHANGE IT

Common artistic production as a tool to challenge neo-liberal models

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## Abstract

For the art critic Claire Bishop 'collectivity and collaboration have been some of the most persistent themes of advanced art and exhibition-making of the last decade' (2012, p.12). I will bring with this thesis a new contribution to this discourse by reflecting on the specificity and potential of the notion of 'common' through the production of art with non-artists. This practice-led research is based on the practice of *microsilons*, the artists collective I founded with Olivier Desvoignes in 2005. The experiential dimension of the practice is entangled with an investigation that integrates recent approaches to the concept of 'common' by theorists and cultural workers as a framework to reflect, critique, resist and overcome the effects of the neo-liberal transformation of all spheres of human activity.

I will describe the common as an 'already-there' (Hardt and Negri, 2009) but also as a 'to come' (Dardot and Laval, 2015a) and, furthermore, as a critical tool. These theoretical underpinnings form the conceptual background for the different experimentations developed by *microsilons* with common modes of thinking, organizing and producing.

I will analyse the way *microsilons* developed its art practice in common with non-artists. Each of these analyses articulates a series of dual central concepts, namely: authorship/common production, banking education/commonly generated knowledge and cultural participation/agonistic mediation, terminology that I will outline in the body of the thesis. Together with these case studies from *microsilons'* practice, I discuss contemporary examples of comparable practices developed by artists such as Copenhagen Free University, Ultra-Red or Suzanne Lacy. In this way, I explore how Olivier and I have been able to build, with people outside the worlds of contemporary art, unique and complex experiences, condensed in common forms.

The geographical anchoring of this practice in Geneva, a French-speaking city in Switzerland, brings a specific testimony. The text describes how the activity of common, acknowledging the importance of divergences or conflicts, can challenge forms of exclusion or oppression, which I will discuss as being more prevalent, yet also more hidden, due to the fact that this city is one of the world capitals of finance.



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## 1. Introduction

How can art as common activity challenge the individualist and competitive orientation of our contemporary society? How can an art practice challenge a given situation and possibly contribute to change dominant models regarding art, knowledge production and culture<sup>1</sup> by setting up a context to produce in common with non-artists? How can divergent voices converge towards the common production of artistic forms?

Such questions have been asked and discussed from the perspective of artistic practice by a number of artists since the question of citizen participation emerged as a central concern in Western democracies in the 1960s and 1970s, as numerous movements were engaging to protest against wars and states' absolute authority. As the contemporary art critic Claire Bishop writes, 'along with "utopia" and "revolution", collectivity and collaboration have been some of the most persistent themes of advanced art and exhibition-making of the last decade' (2012, p.12). Within this thesis, I aim to contribute to this discourse by reflecting on the transformative potential of producing art with groups of people who do not define themselves as artists (I will often use the term 'non-artists' to describe this group). Through the practice of *microsillos*, the artists' collective I founded with Olivier Desvoignes<sup>2</sup> in 2005, I explore how the production of contemporary art in common with non-artists can challenge and perhaps overcome dominant discourses on—and practices of—artistic production, education, knowledge and cultural participation<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> I use of the word 'culture' in this thesis to designate the, 'independent and abstract noun, which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity' (Williams, 1976, p.90).

<sup>2</sup> Due to his closeness to the project and frequency of use, from now on I will refer to him simply as 'Olivier'.

<sup>3</sup> The 2009 UNESCO framework for cultural statistics (FCS) defines cultural participation as including: '[...] cultural practices that may involve consumption as well as activities that are undertaken within the community, reflecting quality of life, traditions and beliefs. It includes attendance at formal events, such as going to a movie or to a concert, as well as informal cultural action, such as participating in community cultural activities and amateur artistic productions or everyday activities like reading a book. Moreover, cultural participation covers both active and passive behaviour. It includes the person who is listening to a concert and the person who practices music. The purpose of cultural

The title, *If we make it, we can change it!* emphasises the idea that what transforms hegemonic discourses are practices that institute alternative modes of functioning based on common activity, therefore going against individual competition.

I structured the written part of this thesis around two chapters: a series of three case studies, densely described, from the practice of microsillons, followed by an analysis of nodal points of these case studies. Although the structure chosen clearly separates the case studies from their analysis, it is not meant as a dichotomy between practice and theory, but is rather an acknowledgement of the fact that my analysis was produced months or years after the projects were realised. As I will explain further in the section titled *Methodology*, it is also a way to emphasize the difference between this specific, rather solitary self-study and other researches that microsillons has initiated or taken part in. This structure also reflects that I am an artist-researcher, meaning this research is led by my artistic practice.

In the series of three case studies I will examine the specificities of the common(s) from my perspective as a founding member of microsillons. This process aims to outline how different standpoints have been integrated into common production, following a process I hereby name *agonistic mediation*, an artistic practice of common activity consciously integrating divergences.

I was trained as an artist and became interested in forms of research when I started to develop projects in common with Olivier. The notion of research was intrinsically linked to the fact that each project was developed with a pedagogical dimension: a knowledge exchange formed an important part of the collaborations initiated by microsillons. This knowledge exchange is possibly transformative, in a form that resembles the spiral structure of Participatory Action Research (see the '*Methodology*' part of this thesis for a definition of PAR). Early in microsillons'

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participation surveys should be to assess overall participation levels, even though it may be difficult to distinguish active from passive behaviour.' (2009)

practice, we formed an interest in self-study research, as we were asked to discuss our work in different professional conferences. We always used these invitations as moments to reflect on microsillons' projects, aiming to share with peers and colleagues the different facets of a common artistic production and how it led us to question our practice. In this thesis, I expand this self-study research approach and reflect on the collective experiments I chose as case studies. The results of this research are nourishing the discussions between Olivier and myself, as well as with our different interlocutors. This is also, at a personal level, a significant step in considering myself as an artist-researcher, able to articulate and to defend a position that is situated within the academic where microsillons is most active today.

Olivier and I joined together to form the collective microsillons in February 2005 and are still working as a collective today. We choose to interconnect our practices as we both desired to develop projects addressing socially relevant topics and to work using process-based collaborative art projects with non-artists in the area of Geneva where we were both living and studying at the time. We wanted to significantly change some of the parameters of our respective artistic production which, up until that point, had been individual, object-oriented work produced for the art world<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, we wanted to highlight these parameters as topics of debate through dialogue and horizontal knowledge exchange.

We worked on conceiving frames to practice and produce in common with groups of non-artists. Common was not only meant as descriptive but as a programmatic and radical approach of art, and sometimes even the core theme of the collaborative project. Nevertheless, between a form of idealistic objective and the

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<sup>4</sup> I am referring here as in the rest of this writing to Greg Sholette's definition of the art world in the chapter 'Dark Matter: Activist Art and the Counter-Public Sphere' (2007). He writes, 'By the term art world I mean the integrated, trans-national economy of auction houses, dealers, collectors, international biennals, and trade publications that together with curators, artists and critics, reproduce the market, as well as the discourse that influences the appreciation and demand for highly valuable artworks' (pp.429-457). In my definition of the art world I would add the following to Sholette's list: art schools, residencies, fairs, contemporary art centres and museums.

reality of the practice, microsillons refused to impose a vision of how society could function through temporary experiments. Yet, if we do not want to impose anything, how can a true co-construction of the projects with people sharing different, sometimes opposed, views happen? There, I identify a gap between the theoretical texts that nourished microsillons' conception of common and the real common productions, which prompted me to pose the following research question: how can common incorporate conflicts arising in the process of producing art in common?

The 'common(s)' is a founding notion in the praxis<sup>5</sup> of microsillons as evidenced by the titles of the common productions we set up – Lieux communs (2009), En Commun (2010), Commune de Montreuil (2014). Throughout time, our position and reference points in relation to the concept of common(s) have been constantly reworked, augmented and adapted dependent on the context that we are intervening in. I want to retrace and analyse this process through an investigation of three pivotal microsillons' projects in order to see what difference could have been made at both an institutional and inter-relational (or personal) level in the collective. I will especially trace the role played by conflict in the common productions initiated by microsillons and how we integrated this role in our practice of an agonistic mediation.

To begin with, I would like to briefly describe how reflecting on common(s) has shifted my own practice. Since completing a master's degree at the Fine Arts University of Paris (Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris), I had been questioning the relevance of my individual practice, its role and its mode of existence outside of the art university. As a student, I made money working in art institutions, for example Centre Pompidou and the Picasso Museum in Paris, as well as Geneva Contemporary Art Centre. I also worked in private galleries of

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<sup>5</sup> I use the word praxis in the Freirean sense, to signify the entanglement of theory and practice, reflection and action (Freire, 1999).

contemporary art , two in Paris and one in Zürich. The accumulation of these experiences, instead of making me more confident with my own practice produced the opposite effect. I was so well informed of the art world (I am referring again to the definition offered by Greg Sholette, see Footnote n°4) and its relation to capitalism and power that I did not see any interest in pursuing a practice that would enforce this system. I was convinced that my practice should experiment and promote other modes of production. My quest to look for alternatives to overcome these contradictions, postures and hypocrisies found in the art world was accelerated through my application to postgraduate study programmes where I could reflect on and revise my work. I had just moved to Geneva for personal reasons when I found out about a postgraduate programme there titled CCC (Critical, Curatorial and Cybermedia), at the University of Arts and Design. The pedagogy of the programme, founded by professors Liliane Schneider and Catherine Queloz, was partly based on the idea of collaborative work between the students but also with different social and institutional partners. Other important elements in the ethos of the programme was the cross-pollination of artistic practice with research, defending the use of reproducible media<sup>6</sup> and a redefinition of the role of the artist in the public sphere based on feminist, post-structuralist and alter-globalist conceptions of art. Olivier was one of my peers and I met him on my first day of attending this influential programme of study.

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<sup>6</sup> In his 1935 essay titled 'The Work of Art in the Age of Industry', Walter Benjamin makes a parallel between the appearance of photography and cinema and the possible end of art having an 'aura', depicting a complete upheaval in the conditions of production and reception of the work of art in society.



CCC Programme students group  
 'Geographies imaginaires' (2004-05)  
 View of the final presentation  
 Haute Ecole d'Art et de Design, Geneva



CCC Programme students group  
 'Geographies imaginaires' (2004-05)  
 View of the final presentation with teachers and pupils who participated to the display  
 Haute Ecole d'Art et de Design, Geneva

The grammatical underpinning of microsillons' practice started to develop while we were still students at the CCC. Olivier and I worked on a collective project involving a practical experience of collaboration with two junior high school classes from the city of Geneva. We had to conceive and facilitate a collective project involving a pedagogical activity on the questions of how Otherness has been constructed and represented, notably through the arts, starting from excerpts of Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* (1978). Through a series of sessions with the pupils we worked with visual and textual elements to produce collages. We then reproduced them on postcards that were displayed together with artists' videos in an exhibition presented at the Geneva University of Arts and Design. As art students, we came with a few concepts and some material to work with, but we were not experts in representation and post-colonialism, especially not how to tackle these issues with teenagers. Therefore, none of us present were the experts. This means that we—students from the Visual Arts University and junior high pupils—had to produce together some knowledge about Otherness without having much to work with other than our respective life experiences. We learned how to build a proposal to make the pupils reflect on the constructed aspect of this notion and how it has been used to serve different purposes—whether economic, political, or artistic. This deconstruction of Otherness was carried out during class sessions in which we discussed objects brought in by the students, objects that illustrated this notion for them. These sessions formed the basis for producing collages and narratives crossing different perspectives.

The different steps of the process we engaged in with our classmates from the Arts University and the pupils and the complexity that emerged through this process thrilled Olivier and I. Through the interaction of research, affects, practices, and different cultural backgrounds, we formed an alternative relation to artistic production, so that we were starting to perceive it as more than merely a manifestation of creativity or an aesthetic experiment. This led Olivier and I to reflect critically on our respective individual art practices. As we wanted to

experiment again with this combination of different perspectives, affects and know-how, we started a shift in our individual practices towards a common one, common between the two of us but also between others and ourselves, as we never intended to work as a 'close' duo and in fact we have never done so. Following this first experimentation of artistic production in common with non-artists, Olivier and I arrived at the conclusion that we could engage our artistic practice in another logic, an alternative to the competitive one imposed by the art market. Moreover, our practice could be a vector through which to critique and develop alternative modes of organisation beyond the art world. We would defend the idea that producing in common is resisting dominant (individual, competitive, exclusive) models of artistic production. Olivier and I decided to adopt the structure of the collective<sup>7</sup> and to chose the name *microsillons* as a way to state that our actions could be modest in their scale ('micro', as in micropolitics) but that it hoped to leave traces (the 'sillons', that can be translated as 'groove' in English). From there, we would investigate the possibility of finding contexts in which we could define and develop specific terminology, starting from the term 'common'.

The main theoretical references I use in this thesis are borrowed from the fields of critical pedagogy and socio-political science. This reflects the genealogy of our practice and of its theoretical anchorage. The concepts I convey here converge on a transformation of institutions through forms of critical awareness and actions undertaken by individuals who assembled themselves in groups because they share a similar interest in transforming realities that are unfair, exclusive or violent. For *microsillons*, the importance of critical pedagogies is linked with the radical approach of mediation/gallery education, which we worked to develop at Geneva Contemporary Art Center, between 2005 and 2010.

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<sup>7</sup> We adopted the term 'collective', as did many other groups did in the contemporary art field, to refer to the reemergence of collectivism after the Modernist-era, 'as a form of production and intervention that raises fundamental questions about the nature of creative labor and how history is recorded and transmitted, for whom, and to what ends' (Sholette, 2007. p.XVII).



## 2. From participation(s) to common(s)

### 2.1. Participation(s)

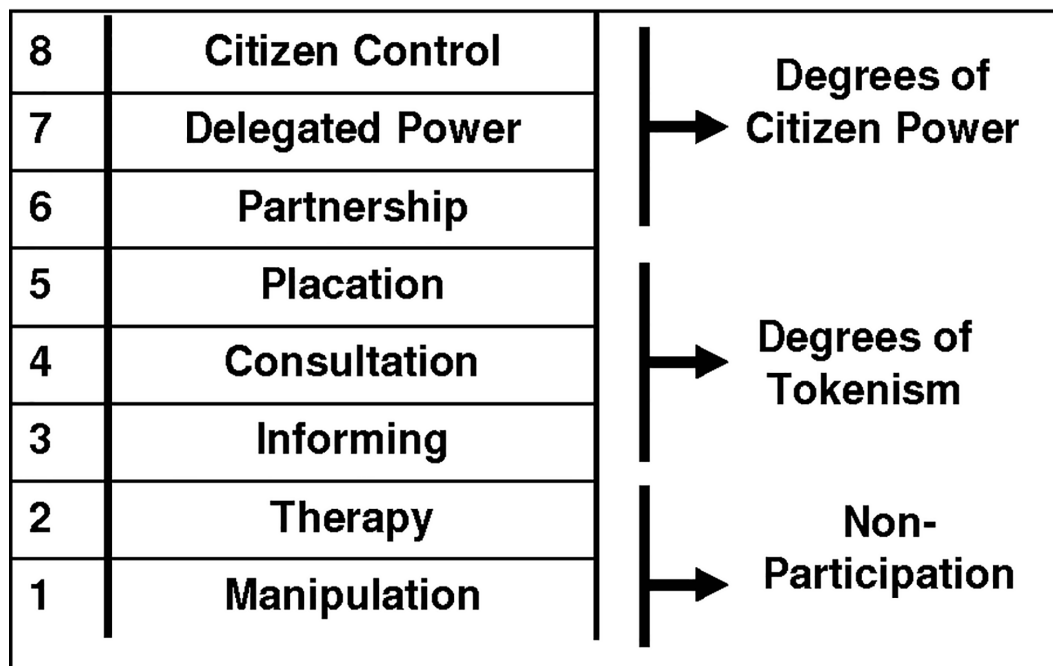
microsillons' practice is situated in time and space and, therefore, I am interested in tackling the question of common production by exploring how contemporary references resonate with the Genevan context. Sociologists Philippe Dardot and Christian Laval, in *Commun : Essai sur la révolution au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (2015), examine the historical and political transformative potential of the common(s). They propose a series of steps to produce and institute the common. By removing the 's' at the end of the word, the authors distinguish their project from more historical approaches considering 'the commons' as shared resource. Alternatively, according to them, the common emerges from collective activity. In fact, the common is this collective activity as well as whatever this activity produces. Dardot and Laval's definition of common can be outlined as having the following four main qualities:

- The rejection of the notion of common good in favour of common in the singular form and as a noun
- Common can be found in collective practices
- The collective practice of the common produces new rules
- One must not underestimate the dimension of conflict that presides over the constitution of the common

This practice-led investigation charts microsillons' endeavour to institute common in three different contexts. Therefore, I need to include in this text, as we did in our practice, the historical perspective influencing our approach that fed into our practice from these contexts. There was a re-emergence of the notion of common(s) and an interest in reflecting on more participatory democratic modes of governance that emerged from the 1960s. In 1969, the North American sociologist, Sherry Arnstein, who was employed by the urban development department of the

USA government, wrote an article titled 'A ladder of citizen participation'. In her paper Arnstein insisted on the importance of involving citizens in decision-making and demonstrated how less privileged communities had been excluded from such processes in the United States. She uses the image of a ladder to describe the different levels of participation, which she divided in a series of categories ranging from 'citizen control', through to 'tokenism' and 'manipulation'.

Arnstein's image of the ladder is crucial in order to understand that the noun participation describes various situations. There is not one single type of participation but rather, different stages that range from the act of informing users of a change in the public transport network to the creation of a housing cooperative. Furthermore, there are differences in the processes of participation depending on who initiates them, 'associations or social movements tend to work with participation processes, which favour co-decision when institutions often stay at a level of consultation' (Bacqué and Sintomer, 2011, p.12). Saying that an art project is participatory does not say much about its conditions of production, nor of its political standpoint. On the contrary, it expresses a certain ambiguity. In France, the term participation carries a history that makes me interrogate its potential to subvert the dominant order. After WWII, the government of De Gaulle widely spread usage of the term 'participation' in opposition to the notion of 'self-organisation' developed in leftist movements. Participation then designates an association with capital and labour in the economic field. In this way, promoting the use of 'participation' aimed at counterbalancing the ideology of class struggle, thus limiting the influence of the Communist Party (Hetzfeld, 2005). The term was then reappropriated by the left, notably the Socialists, in order to develop the idea of 'participatory democracy' in the 1980s. Participation is a vertical mode of interaction, as the ladder-shaped chart from Arnstein depicts, and the use of the term tends to hide the lack of space for more horizontal modes of social organisation. This question of horizontality—and how it can really be applied to art



Graphic representing Arnstein's ladder of participation

practice—is the focus of a 2015 thesis developed by Olivier<sup>8</sup> from the work of microsillons.

Coming back to Arnstein's article, Olivier and I discovered her 'Ladder of participation' in Tom Finkelpearl's, *What we made: Conversations on art and social cooperation* (2012). Finkelpearl is an important actor and promoter of socially engaged art practices in the US and, as a director of the Queens Museum between 2002 and 2014, he developed, through hiring community organizers in the Museum, collaborations and dialogues with communities from the neighbourhood. Since 2014, he has been a commissioner at the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. In the introduction of *What we made* (2012), Finkelpearl acknowledges that Arnstein's ladder is useful shorthand for a model of cooperative participation in the late 1960s, 'the less top-down the better' (Finkelpearl, 2013, p.12). He also suggests that socially engaged art practices drew inspiration from the spirit of the 1960s, particularly the civil rights movement, counterculture and feminism.

These art practices have been delineated through a series of terms formed by artists, critics and curators who needed to qualify and analyse artistic production involving non-artists. What qualities or intentions differentiate new genre public art (Lacy, 1995) or relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2002), dialogical art (Kester, 2004) or transpedagogy (Helguera, 2006)? How do we distinguish or understand the specificities of collaborative art practices (Schneider, 2010), participatory art (Bishop, 2012), socially engaged art forms (Thompson, 2012) community based art or socially engaged art practices? These terms evoke contemporary artistic practices whose relation to the 'public' is central, with the artist playing the role of a facilitator of dialogue between different actors (communities, associations, institutions, etc.). Instead of making their efforts converge mostly towards the

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<sup>8</sup> Desvoignes, O., (2015) *Blackboards were turned into tables... Questioning horizontality in collaborative pedagogical art projects*. Ph.D., University of the Arts London.

production of objects, artists are considering their actions as linked to a context, process-oriented and formed through relational exchange with non-artists.

When microsillons started to investigate the intersection between art practices and socio-political concerns, to experiment with producing art in common, we identified a sometimes frustrating but mostly intriguing lack of precision in the different descriptions of the conditions and modalities of the projects themselves. The literature on the field is mostly produced by curators, art historians or critics whose knowledge of the projects is often a partial, reconstructed, perspective. In addition, the projects analysed through this literature are often partially describing their contexts and conditions of production. Writing on the work of microsillons is allowing me to bring a unique testimony, from the perspective of my practice, as co-initiator of microsillons' projects. This testimony is embedded and specifically considers how artists and non-artists in Geneva from 2004 to 2018 worked towards producing art in common.

To analyse the specificities and qualities of artistic production in common, I need to acknowledge a series of terms and practices to form a conceptual background. Of particular relevance here is Elinor Ostrom's (1990) work on the question of citizen participation and civic engagement. The first (and—so far—only) woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences (2009), started studying urban services in 1975 and the role possibly played by citizens in producing services or goods of consequence to them. She defined co-production as, 'the process through which inputs used to produce a good or service are contributed by individuals who are not 'in' the same organisation' (Ostrom, 1996, p.1073). Ostrom's research demonstrated that communities were able to organize themselves to manage one or more common resource, like forests, water, fish stock etc., while at the same time being non-rivalry and non-exclusive. She stresses the importance of thinking of ways to strengthen the capacity of the actors concerned in order to change the rules of the game and to achieve results other than

'tragedies' <sup>9</sup> (Ostrom, 1990). From the study of hundreds of concrete cases of the management of common resources, Ostrom articulates a clear theory of collective action, thinking through different levels of interaction between institutions and citizens. Ostrom emphasizes the fact that institutions<sup>10</sup> are not only 'public' or solely private, purely market or purely state, and that it would therefore be sterile to analyse collective action on the basis of a dichotomous viewpoint. This argument is of interest to me. A binary vision could not translate the organisational structuring of the institutions that microsilons has been building partnerships with. These institutions are not totally market-oriented, nor are they purely exclusive or lacking diversity, otherwise, microsilons would not be able to make a project with non-artists in these spaces.

Since the 2000s, the discourse on common(s) has focussed on the emergence of immaterial forms of common production, particularly through the development of free software and issues related to the use of digital tools (Lessig, 2001; Benkler, 2006; Boyle, 2003). As the market-logic imposes new enclosures<sup>11</sup>, resistance is supporting rights of access and the sharing of artistic creation or production of knowledge (with, for example, the Creative Commons and other licences addressing a myriad of relationship to property and authorship). Thus, following on from the situations described by Ostrom, 'the formulas implemented to guarantee free access to shared knowledge and / or innovation have multiplied' (Coriat, 2015, p.10). The term common(s) in this research, will also be reflected upon as a philosophical term under which not only is a completely different mode

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<sup>9</sup> This term 'tragedy' refers to the position of Garrett Hardin who wrote 'The tragedy of the commons' (1968). According to Hardin, without a form of hierarchical governance there would be an unavoidable exhaustion of the commons due to their limited nature.

<sup>10</sup> When I speak of institutions in this text, I propose a definition which draws on that of Raymond Williams taken from his *Keywords* (1976), 'institution is the term to designate any organized element of a given society' (p.169). The institutions I am going to evoke in the case studies of this research are state schools, a contemporary art centre, a theatre and a community house

<sup>11</sup> Historically, Enclosures in England are characterized by the appropriation for private property use of common lands, a movement from the thirteenth century but reaches a 'critical importance' in the Eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when 4000 parliamentary acts 'allowed landowners to appropriate more than six millions of acres' (Williams, 1973, p.96)

of organising society is proposed, but also a profound transformation of the imaginary of our market-oriented society.

## 2.2. Common(s): between resource and activity

At the beginning of the 2000s, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri reinvestigated and redefined the notion of common(s) from *Multitude* (2004) to *Commonwealth* (2009). They suggested restructuring the sharing and organizing of the common wealth of the material world. They are proposing the first theory of the common, a more abstract and politically ambitious conception of commons (Dardot and Laval, 2015a, p.17). For Hardt and Negri, the term commons is too much related to the past history, to the moment of the Enclosures and they propose to emphasize the novelty of their approach by using common in the singular form (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p.9). Thus, they see the common as a collective form of production, referring more to intangible resources (knowledge, ideas, images, feelings) than to material goods. Hardt and Negri develop a dialectical concept of reformist revolution that emerges from the autonomy of the multitude to educate and train humans, organize social encounters and create the common. They formulate a series of changes bringing together different — physical, intellectual, affective, economical, legal, political — characteristics of the common that this reformist revolution should reorganize to allow the multitude to learn social cooperation and self-ruling (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 311). For the two philosophers '[...] change is possible at the most basic level of our world and our selves and [that] we can intervene in this process to orient it along the lines of our desires, toward happiness' (Hardt and Negri, 2009, p. 378) and I definitely embrace their perspective.

A strong argumentation from *Commonwealth* (2009) was, for Olivier and me, Hardt and Negri's specific approach regarding knowledge production. If vital resources are increasingly scarce, defending knowledge as the absolute common, an inexhaustible resource, is a shift in thinking that might lead us to reconsider our

relationship with other common goods and to find solutions for a sustainable society. The approach of Hardt and Negri forged our own understanding of the notion of common(s) and we were especially enthusiastic about the idea that, through its production and exchange, common gives more power and more ability to those who are involved in its exchange, rather than losing something because it is used. Envisioning common as an ensemble of possibilities organized and reinforced through a network was a strong motivation to develop a collective practice and to initiate or search for occasions to develop this network.

Hardt and Negri are the first to use common in its singular form to discuss the question of resource. It is important for the work I undertake to identify different references, including those from the francophone domain, to be able to think these concepts in the language we use to develop our practice, which we share with the people involved in microsillons' projects. I am interested, in this thesis, in looking at our practice of co-production in relation to more recent reflections around the notion of common. Of particular relevance here is the development of ideas proposed by sociologists Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval in *Commun : Essai sur la révolution au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (2015). Dardot and Laval understand, common as a something that is not there in the way that a physical resource would be, but as a practice and an activity, 'common has to be understood as co-activity, and not as co-belonging, co-ownership or co-possession' (Dardot and Laval, 2015a, p. 48). This activity of the common carries the potential of instituting activity, from which can emerge the rules to create new institutions (Dardot and Laval, 2015a, p. 444). In microsillons' projects, we have inquired about the potential of common as a theme to work and research with different groups of people. However, what I want to investigate through this research is how common serves as a meta-tool for changing dominant models, be it in the works of art, in an institutional school context, or in the wider field of culture.



Dardot and Laval also use the noun common in the singular form, yet without obscuring the history of the commons in the plural, which occupies a large place in their publication. They do so to insist on the idea that common is for them, 'a principle of political action that is forged and grows daily through all struggles and citizens resistance for another world' (Dardot & Laval, 2015a, p.16). In this use of the singular form, the authors do not want to state that common is not a place of diversity or contradiction but, instead, they are pointing to a continuation of the work of Hardt and Negri concerning the evolution of historical commons and common as a philosophical concept. Using the singular form is a way to include all the histories and utterances under a strong, political statement. I will mostly use the noun in its the singular form in this thesis as a reference to this evolution. In their fourth chapter Dardot and Laval analyse Ostrom's research and, among several points that they consider problematic, two issues are more related to my research. For Dardot and Laval, the vision of commons as proposed by Ostrom is focusing too much on the link between commons and natural resources when, 'it is not the nature of the knowledge that makes its productivity, it is the legal rules and social norms that guarantee its extension or not and its fertility' (Dardot and Laval, 2015a, p 162). Doing so, they demonstrate their will to question the role of institutions and neo-liberal policies, reflecting on common as a way to reorganize the institutions and resist these policies. They see the question of power relations as being largely ignored in Ostrom's analyses, whereas this question, from the perspective of the practice, is crucial. It is particularly vital for the potential transformation of the contexts in which microsilons works, entangling the points of view of associative, self-organised and institutional structures. For Dardot and Laval, a crucial element for imagining the transformation of institutions of the common is to observe how associative and self-organised groups act, how they follow certain rules and principles, each one based on the logic of a potential way of re-organizing society.

However, following in part the work of Hardt and Negri, they also critique the potential of the common seen only as the networking of people exchanging

and producing knowledge together. Dardot and Laval acknowledge the work of the authors of *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009) in their politically radical approach of the common, but are sceptical regarding the idea of an open source society. In an open source society the common is dependent on the access to the code of each one. If the notions of free and open are central to a society based on common, the technology, for them, is merely a tool, and it can serve different political projects, including neo-liberalism (Dardot and Laval, 2015a, p. 56). In this way, they bring to the fore another point that is key for reflecting on the practice of microsillons. This is that the common is more than an already-there that should be organized, it exceeds the efforts of a multitude already involved in the production of common in different spheres that need to organize into a network. This is especially thought-provoking in relation to the mode of working that microsillons advocates by producing art with people who do not define themselves as artists. It somehow goes against the idea that a form of 'natural' talent is required to make art by redefining what is artistic activity and it opens the possibility of practicing common to people who are outside of the circle of cultural production.

After the construction of their critical and historical stance, Dardot and Laval propose their own conception of the common, one that anchors my own approach to the term. This is to understand the common as an activity, not only as a relation to property. Thus, for them, a real common policy must be built in all spheres of society, through the development of what they name as institutions of self-government. In the following section of this text, I will show how the authors use the tension embedded in the concept of institution to sustain the common as praxis. Institution can refer both to any organized element of a society (Williams, 1976), or to a collective act of creation (Dardot and Laval, 2015a). While institutions can be seen as the tools through which norms and models are imposed, it is interesting to counterbalance this perspective with the collective capacity to make new institutional forms emerge. From the perspective of Dardot and Laval, the

noun institution should designate an on-going praxis whereby the group creates itself through its co-activity even as it creates and continuously recreates institutions and rules. Dardot and Laval refer to the position of Proudhon (1966) who believed in the capacity of people to develop counter institutions (cooperatives, unions and associations) in reaction to state-driven ones, using the transformative potential of what he calls 'collective force'. There lies a very important idea for microsillons' practice, which entails the naming— together with groups of non-artists—of certain norms imposed in particular institutional contexts. This takes place in relation to art and new rules are set for how the group is constituted and how its common production is regulated. This process of creation is repeated constantly. In an attempt to find the most nuanced term to designate the interactions between artists and non-artists, microsillons advocates the idea of common as a set of instituting practices, a change in the rules, habits or norms of the institutional spaces we invest.

These practices are in connection with constituted institutions, where a group can engage in a collective and largely self-organised activity to produce something—material or immaterial—that can make public a problem found within this specific group, working with them towards a form of institutional critique. This can be linked with Gerald Raunig's call for a reformulation of institutional critique 'as a critical attitude and as an instituent practice' (Eipcp.net, 2006). Raunig draws on Michel Foucault's definition of critique from the conference 'What is critique?' given at the Société Française de Philosophie in May 1978. Here Foucault defined critique as the art not to be governed 'like that' and 'by that' (Foucault, 1996). The relationship between the type of governance we live in and the type of governance we want to live in is, 'both partner and adversary to the arts of governing, as an act of defiance, as a challenge, as of limiting these arts of governing and sizing them up, transforming them, of finding ways to escape from them or, in any case, a way to displace them' (Foucault, 1996, p. 383). This critical attitude is central for microsillons and links back to my formative years at the CCC, where the role of

institutional critique from the end of the 1960s acted as a key field of teaching, with many lectures referring to these practices. This, along with the concept of common, has been a strong set of reference points for microsilons' approach towards the institution. Raunig leans towards the concept of escape as the possibility to change conditions and create new institutions, and many artists, at the turn of the 2000's, did develop self-declared institutions (naming themselves 'college', 'institute', 'university' or 'school', 'Transforming the arts of governing not only in relation to the institutions of that art field or the institution art as the art field, but rather as participation in processes of instituting and in political practices that traverse the fields, the structures, the institutions' (Raunig, 2006).

The last part of Dardot and Laval's (2015) research comprises of nine political propositions for how to build the common as the organisational principle of human activity. Their first proposition is to construct a politic of the commons by creating institutions in all sectors run according to the principle of self-governance and dedicated to the production of the common. Secondly, they call for a mobilisation for the right of use as a way to overcome the limits of property rights. The care of common can only be entrusted to those who co-use it and not to state or companies. The third proposal is to use common as a principle of emancipation, stating the importance of linking the rules and decisions of the workplace with the people who are affected by them. They argue that installing workplace democracy should be a priority. The fourth proposal continues in a similar direction by prescribing common enterprise, an alternative model to the domination of capitalist enterprise, which is based on the co-decision of workers to ensure the sustainability of the enterprise, rather than on the economic profit of shareholders. The fifth proposal sees the organisation of the associative sphere as a way to inspire and direct us towards a society of the common, based on solidarities, which can be developed at a local scale, though it is not sufficient to institute common at a broader level. The sixth proposition is that common must establish social democracy. For Dardot and Laval, producing the common cannot be done through

reinforcing a welfare state that is disappearing under the logic of competition. The control of the institutions concerned with solidarity and reciprocity has to be in the hands of their users. The seventh point is that public services must become institutions of the common, administered at a local scale, while state constitution can guarantee the protection of common as a right to any citizen. This combination is meant to counter forms of centralisation as well as, on the contrary, reactionary moves towards regionalist modes of organisation.

Therefore, Dardot and Laval propose instituting the common, through a struggle for citizens' rights, at a global level. They reflect on how to develop a conscious, decentralized, politically informed approach of citizenship beyond nation-states, aiming at producing the common. Finally, Dardot and Laval see in federalism a possible form of organising different levels of shared activities. Instituting a federation of commons is a way for them to rethink the hierarchy between instances of governance by giving the same prerogatives to all the actors of a domain. The notion of communalism developed by Murray Bookchin in the 1970s is similarly calling for a redefinition of the organization of public life based on the direct democracy of people self-organized in communes, gathered under a federation. The centralised and hierarchical organisation of the state is replaced by an organic vision of politics, based on the implication of the entire social body existing at a local scale.

I would like to see how these rather abstract or large-scale propositions translate, and with which limitations, into microsilons' practices. Is instituting the common, a possible consequence of how microsilons approach the notion of authorship, knowledge exchange and multi-cultural dialogue? Does this approach differ from the dominant agenda of participation, evaluation and competition found in context where microsilons' interventions take place? If the question of the common has always been central to microsilons, our way of working might not seem as radical as other recent approaches that place the concept of common as a

radical mode of living in opposition to the neo-liberal model. Those occupying Tahrir Plaz in Cairo, Piazza del Sol in Madrid, Taksim Plaz in Istanbul or Zuccotti Park in New-York were reclaiming their right to regain their streets, their cities, their right to (self-)organize their life. This capacity of large groups of people to mobilize their critical and creative spirit in these historical moments is encouraging the opening of spaces for these people to meet, share and invent other modes of life (the important role played by the cultural space 16 Beaver — where numerous discussions and actions preceding the occupation were held — in the Occupy Wall Street movement is a good example of this potential carried by cultural spaces in relation to the production of common).

The ZAD (Zone A Défendre, in French, meaning 'Zone to Defend', a name that high jacks the original name of Zone d'Aménagement Différé or 'Zone of Deferred Development' given by the state authorities) in Notre-Dame-des-Landes (France) is an incredibly strong example of a collective, politicised experience of self-organisation. This long-term occupation could be seen as a definitive form of common: people sharing a similar objective of reclaiming their right to a space in which life can be self-organized and in which self-organized life is produced. The occupation of the ZAD is both a political struggle and a radical attempt to experiment in producing common. The occupation by anti-capitalist and environmental activists of a large perimeter of fields and hedgerow (a site planned for a future airport) started a decade ago. They joined the resistance and decades-long struggle of the local farmers to keep their land and block the airport project. The understanding between these two groups converged towards a common political goal by living in the same area, the convergence of the struggle for a specific territory with the invention of a diverse but united society. The activists occupy houses that were left by former inhabitants, they have grown the land and have developed bakeries, self-organized hostels, educational structures and a network of places offering resources for the people living both in and outside the ZAD, constituting what can be described as a Commune. Sylvaine Bulle, a

sociologist who lived and wrote on the ZAD, sees in the creation of a long-term, realistic, life organisation, a way to overcome the tools and objectives of social movements or 'classic' anti-capitalist political struggles. The experience of the people living on the ZAD was for her:

‘[...] a means of achieving a praxis, which activists define as a project, sometimes anarchist, sometimes revolutionary[...] In this spirit, the occupying practices are not mere scientific taxonomies, but can be described as a collective artwork, based on language, life experiences and descriptions emerging from the common sense’ (Bulle, 2016, p. 169).

The connection between the ZAD praxis of common and that of microsillons is not immediately apparent. We are not occupying a territory as group of anarchists or activists, but I want to describe, as this thesis continues, the more impure form of common practiced in microsillons’ projects. It is not meant as an opposition between two groups—the state and the activists in the case of the ZAD—but is rather trespassing different territories and connecting various standpoints to build a collective artwork.

The common might then not be a radical change but a practice emerging from different spaces not necessarily thought as common. Nevertheless, if the political project put forward by Dardot and Laval seems comprehensive as a concept, the main criticism of their approach relates to the difficulty in understanding concretely the conditions of emergence and existence of the multiple common actions that they propose (Durand-Folco, 2015). In this regard, I would like to also mention Silvia Federici’s (2012) research on the intertwining of feminism and common. Federici reads the history of the commons and enclosures from a feminist perspective and pursues her research on issues of reproductive work and division between waged and unwaged labour, making the structures of what she calls a ‘patriarchy of the wages’ visible and naming those who are pushed

outside this wage economy. Federici exposes how feminist approaches have shaped the struggles of women against capitalism. For example, Federici depicts unpaid reproductive work as a part of capitalism's foundation and she developed theoretical tools to recognise the impact of reproductive work on women's lives. Federici looks at how the principle of the common can help restructure the organisation of reproductive work, calling for the reappropriation of wealth produced through this unpaid work. The capacity to restructure this unpaid work in a more inclusive, collaborative, explicit way is central to the constitution of a society based on common. According to Federici (2012), this can only happen through female political struggle as a means of changing the way we reproduce ourselves and women must enter the public sphere to make this struggle transformative. She is publishing the totality of this research in September 2018 under the title *Re-enchanting the world: Feminism and the politics of the commons*.

Complementary to the work of Dardot and Laval, the sociologist Pascal Nicolas-Le Strat, particularly in *Le travail du Commun* (2016), provides many examples of social experiments in which political ambition is articulated with concrete action. The examples that he details range from the digital domain, the common goods of knowledge and artistic practices that he calls co-creation. The emergence of this co-creation can be traced to what Nicolas-Le Strat calls 'art-in-activity' (Nicolas-Le Strat, 1998, p.80), that is to say an art based on 'transversality, an activity that works permanently and through its middle, art in its entirety, both its production and its reception, a certification that its criticism' (p.80). Art-as-activity for Nicolas-Le Strat 'has neither a beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and overflows', a representation he borrows from the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari (1980, p. 21). This idea of an art growing from the middle and through the middle (using the double sense of middle as environment) inhabits all the practice of microsillons and is embodied in the use we can make of the term 'mediation'. Thus, this art of the middle would be for me that of the common, the one that allows to bring together the forces necessary for the



construction of alternative rules. Nicolas-Le Strat defines common as the will of individuals to assemble together to develop, in an autonomous mode, a life or activity project. What makes Nicolas-Le Strat's version of common innovative is his use of the idea of micrological experimentation, or the re-interrogation of experiences—their re-engagement as they become other experiences—and that this produces a logic of permanent transformation. For him, this logic of continuous experimentation makes it possible to constitute the common, and places the collective in a situation of testing its own dynamic. This element seems to me particularly relevant to the way *microsillons* works and connects the different situations in which the collective intervenes.

In Nicolas-Le Strat's work, however, although it is a thorough investigation, he still leaves out many details demonstrating common activity. The stories are rarely those of the actors directly engaged in these common art practices but rather those of an outside observer who reports an experience that they have not directly witnessed. The literature around collaboration in the field of contemporary art has been dominated by the perspective of professionals—sociologists, art historians, or art critics—who did not take part directly in the projects but who produce an analysis based on content that has already been narrated. Yet, in this research, I bring a perspective from the inside, situated in the sense of Donna Haraway (1988) who advocates for the located, positioned and situational, where partial—not universal—is the condition for asserting claims on the construction of rational knowledge. In this thesis I build on references on the production of the common, both recent and new, in *microsillons'* corpus. I reread the projects of *microsillons* with this perspective and imagine how to use them in our practice. In this way, I produce dialectic between an analytical reflection and the emergence of concrete actions. The noun mediation occupies an important place in this research. It has always accompanied our reflection on *microsillons* and it is due to the so-called field of mediation that we have realized many projects. Mediation is a complex, polysemous term, whose meaning fluctuates according to its use. It

moves, 'between reconciliation, the notion of intermediary or something that evokes the indirect' (Williams, 1976, p.205). The meaning also depends on the adjectives that are attributed to it. In this text, I always mention mediation as an artistic activity related to the field of culture. The usage of the term 'mediation' is seldom, but increasingly, used in the English-speaking world to depict the action of creating a link between works of art and publics under the name of 'art mediation'.

The use of the term 'education' is prevailing 'to identify programmes intended to transmit knowledge and promote engagement with the arts' while 'learning' is preferred 'because people associated it less with the idea of formal instruction and more with the process of knowledge production and acquisition.' (Mörsch and Settelle, 2012, p. 20). In the French-speaking art and culture institutions, the term mediation is dominant, but still strongly suggests a sense of 'reconciliation'. However, *microsillos*' practice proposes that this term can be reinvested with a radical imagination and we understand mediation, in the same light as Williams, as, 'an activity which directly expresses otherwise unexpressed relations' (1976, p.206). One of the key findings unearthed in this rereading process is the importance of the tensions, paradoxes and divergences, at all levels—conceptual, institutional, relational, symbolical — of the projects that *microsillos* have convened.

Therefore a specific factor held within these productions of common appears to be their agonistic dimension. In other words, their ability to generate a, 'vibrant agonistic public sphere' (Mouffe, 2013, p.3) using forms of mediation that assume dissensus rather than searching for an impossible neutrality, universality or consensus. The concept of agonistic mediation emerges as an interesting catalyst for the transformative potential of artistic activity favouring common as a valid alternative to cultural consumption and the commodification of knowledge production.

### 3. Structure

A section detailing how *microsillons* functions internally, namely the parameters found within our practice repeating from one project to the next, follows the introduction of this thesis. This can be described as common artistic production with non-artists, anchored in a local territory, articulated with long-term projects (several months at least) and a moment of public presentation. I then focus on describing the duo dynamic of our collaborative practice and how it informs our relationship with different circles of non-artists producing the projects in common with *microsillons*.

The three case studies from *microsillons'* practice are: *Utopie et Quotidienneté* (Utopia and the Everyday, 2009), an exhibition project on the links between art and education involving many teachers and pupils from the Geneva region; *En Commun* (In Common, 2010), a collaboration with classes from state schools to produce a newspaper on a specific area near Geneva; and *Vive le Théâtre Questionne* (2013) a collaboration with a group of women with a migrant background based on the theatrical character Antigone.

After these three case study descriptions, an analysis of each case study unpacks the way *microsillons* developed its art practice in common with non-artists. Each case study analysis articulates a series of dual central concepts, namely: authorship/common production, banking education/common(s) and cultural participation/agonistic mediation. Interwoven with these case studies from *microsillons'* practice are contemporary examples of comparable projects developed by artists. Essentially, I explore how Olivier and I have been able to build, with people outside the world of contemporary art, unique and complex experiences, condensed in common forms.

The first case study analysis looks at how artists can become catalysts of a common production in a field traditionally valorising the mark of individual authorship as the authentication of objects that then become property.

Through the frame of the curatorial project *Utopie et Quotidienneté* (2009) I will examine the emergence of a practice and discourse of the common that took place from within the institutional context of contemporary art, describing how we collaborated with artists and non-artists to produce an exhibition. This redefined the rules of authorship traditionally found in the project's host institution, Geneva's contemporary art centre. I trace how our chosen form, an exhibition based on collaborative projects, opened up a reflection on the status of the production of art in a context of practice dominated by models historically inherited from the French definition of culture. The question of linguistic terminology such as 'mediation', 'culture' or 'institutions', is important as the working context of *microsilons* engages with global questions on art and culture with more specific concepts that have emerged from French-speaking theoretical and cultural production (for example, 'cultural participation', 'mediation' or 'democratisation of culture'). Therefore, questioning the semantic field of our actions, the type of language we use or produce is constitutive of *microsilons'* work. We displaced our artistic practice to the more marginal—at least within the institution of contemporary art—field of mediation (mostly translated into English as gallery education). I will use the noun 'mediation' as it depicts a specific relation to publics as understood within Francophone art institutions, which I will detail in this part of my text. From a position of mediated 'Otherness' <sup>12</sup>, we set up an exhibition project to map the

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<sup>12</sup> This follows the hypothesis that *microsilons* outlines in the article 'On the representation of pedagogical work in the art field' (2013), which says that mediation can operate as the Other in the contemporary art institution. 'By promoting a living space, by presenting in a positive light certain infringements of museums' usual rules and by putting the visitor back at the centre of the celebration ritual, one might think that art education representations depict a space of transgression or, at least, a different space, within the institution.'



microsilons with Nils Norman, Tilo Steireif, Damon Rich, Oscar Tuazon and trafo.K  
 Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 View of the exhibition from the entrance  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

connections that we were making between different practices reflecting on the notion of common production through the field of art. The term 'publics' is also used to refer to the practice of most art institutions in the French sphere acknowledging the existence of different sorts of publics — and non-publics — who needs to be addressed differently. For myself, I would also like to make the link with the more politicised and situated notion of publics proposed by Michael Warner, who showed the complexity and fictional dimension of the term public to designate existing, fixed groups existing when a public is constituted, according to Warner, through an ensemble of relations, and several publics can use the same institutions with different purpose and even form into counterpublics as a result of the 'contradictions and perversities inherent in the organization of all publics, tensions that are not captured by critiques of the dominant public's exclusions or ideological limitations' (Warner, 2002). Jorge Ribalta, former Director of the MACBA (Barcelona museum of contemporary art) associates the conception of public as something that does not pre-exist with an institution where 'other forms of sociability' could rise (Ribalta, 2004). Working from the field of mediation, Olivier and I have been often confronted with the perception of publics by institutions as cultural consumers and we were often asked to develop projects to address 'non-publics' (people who do not visit cultural institutions). Engaging with different groups in common production possibly helped to rethink the statistic approach of publics promoted by a consumerist vision of culture.

My understanding of the relationship between culture and social positioning borrows from the theory developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in *La Distinction* (1979). Here he shows that culture as displayed and programmed in museums, art centres, galleries, concert halls, etc. is the product of a socially, politically and economically dominant class. This class is seeking to impose its values and produce a distinction between high culture, for educated people and popular culture, for working, popular classes. The conception of the public

developed during *Utopie et Quotidienneté* challenged that of the institution and played out a practice-based understanding of Bourdieu alongside concepts of cultural democratisation and participation (Caune, 2008). *microsillos* emerged from the 'factories' of high culture: art universities<sup>13</sup>. It is within these institutions that we are taught the codes of conduct and the dominant language of art so that we can produce legible forms that are inscribed in the genealogy of art practices. However, the practice of *microsillos* is anchored in our shared belief that cultural hegemony should be challenged, that we should actively counter the imposition of one narrative over another. This shared belief generates *microsillos*' desire to create situations where no voice sounds peripheral or off topic, yet they can exist—and produce—in common within an agonistic conception of dialogue. Through its praxis, *microsillos* wanted to interrupt inequalities, not reproduce them. The philosopher Jean-Marie Schaeffer points out that the most egalitarian societies in terms of work organization, in general, also produce more accessible and thus shared visual culture (Schaeffer, 2001, p. 41). Olivier and I made the choice to change our individual practices in an attempt to produce further authorial, structural and conceptual shifts from within cultural institutions and, possibly, from within specific groups within particular societal contexts.

The second case studies analysis focuses on experimentation in coproduction through the means of art in an educational context and, more specifically, how the banking approach of pedagogy (Freire, 1971) can be challenged through a common art project. Our practice embodies the idea that culture and art practices can be a site for knowledge exchange meant as radical, complex, alternatives to existing, dominant, forms of pedagogical exchange.

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<sup>13</sup> Olivier trained as an art historian at the University of Neuchâtel and it is worth pointing out that only 20% of the Swiss population have an academic training. Whereas I went to the *Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris* before we both met at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, which is now Geneva Arts and Design University.



microsilons with students from Cycle d'orientation Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Stack of the commonly produced newspaper  
Geneva



I draw on the hypothesis that Freire's banking concept of education, which posits that the dominant model of pedagogy is about filling students with knowledge useful for the labour market, still resonates with the contemporary approach of education. A confirmation can be found in the words of Laval, '[...] one of the main transformations that affected the educational field in the last years—but we would also find this mutation in other social fields—is the progressive monopolization by the neo-liberal ideology of reformatory discourses and dynamics' (2003, p. 6, own translation from French). This transformation of education has had an impact on microsillons' practice since the very beginning.

Olivier and I formed microsillons during the application of the Bologna Process and we were directly involved in different debates within the university to discuss the impact of this large-scale transformation of the European higher educational system. The central idea of the Bologna Process is to create a competitive educational system that would resist the hegemony, regarding the logic of the market of education, of North American Universities (Petrella, 2000). Steps towards 'rationalization' and commodification contribute to a weakening of the quality of educational programmes. This is evidenced in the disappearance of numerous educational structures while at the same time, in a U-turn, fees were raised and private partnerships encouraged in state educational structures as governments withdrew their financial participation. As students are turned into clients to acquire market-oriented skills, universities are constantly adapting their courses to the perceived need of the labour market. This, in turn, makes education a tool to legitimate and reproduce social inequalities. This is an evolution of the banking approach of education.

As we were building a solid set of references from critical, libertarian and feminist pedagogies, we wanted to engage them in different educational contexts. This second chapter of my analysis looks at how the ideas that we have developed from within this framework have challenged the concept of banking education, as

evidenced in the project titled *En Commun* (2010). This project aimed to create a coproduced newspaper with two state school classes about a specific neighbourhood in Geneva.

For this common production we used concepts formed by Freire in order to find a different pedagogical way of working that would be distinct from the banking method. We especially worked with the generative theme of 'untested feasibility' (Freire, 2001). The generative theme is a phase of dialogue where a common theme emerges from a group involved in a pedagogical process. The untested feasibility attempts to preserve the openness of the pedagogical process and its results and to favour the emergence of a hitherto unimaginable action that may be accomplished. The uncertainty it brings in the pedagogical process is interesting in relation to the process of art making and reinforces the common dimension of the work, shaped from the process of making together.

The third case study analysis will consider how divergent perspectives and voices can generate a common discourse and visual form. The project *Vive le Théâtre Questionne* (2013), involved a group of women in an agonistic dialogue, which challenged the usual parameters of cultural participation within a classical theatre.

The concept of the democratisation of culture from a French theoretical perspective will form the background for understanding the relationship between cultural institutions and publics. This elitist model of culture has later been challenged by the emergence of a, 'cultural democracy as the practice of culture by each and everyone with a perspective of a development of all' (Hicter, 1977). Based on a participative and social conception of culture, cultural democracy has somehow been merged with the democratisation of culture, to form the larger umbrella concept of cultural participation. This is based on the assumption that cultural participation, 'contributes to reinforcing democratic citizenship and social

cohesion' (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2012). Though possibly it is also shadowed by the very conditions in which this cultural participation takes place and, notably, the question of cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979).

I will articulate microsillos' commitment to an agonistic approach of artistic production. In *Artistic activism and agonistic spaces* (2007), Chantal Mouffe writes:

'According to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony' (Mouffe, 2007).

Fomenting dissensus was not our initial intention, but as we continued our practice, we became more and more conscious of the specific role of tensions in the process of common production. What is the path we undergo to work from, and with, visible and invisible differences within a group? This question attempts to transform institutions into spaces where one can both debate and rethink gender, social, cultural, racial norms as well as foster knowledge production among different groups of citizens. This can take place through the arts and can act against implicitly individualist and competitive models of art, knowledge and cultural production. I will demonstrate how by assuming agonism as a counterpoint to the idea of cultural participation, we tried to challenge the dominant conception of cultural mediation as a neutral, pacifying service in which publics partake. The common production for *Vive le Théâtre Questionne* emerged from a process of agonistic mediation.



microsillons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
First evening at the theatre for the group  
Théâtre de Carouge

This series of critical analyses, forming my internal testimony on microsillons' practice complements Olivier's Ph.D. thesis by examining the entanglement between different entities — institutional, associative, individuals — and how their relationship informs and produces a specific practice of common. My colleague was exploring through his thesis how the notion of 'horizontalité' opens the possibility to challenge, through artistic projects in educational contexts, the traditional relationship of master to pupils, or artist to participants, or gallery educator to public.

Additional meaningful insights on the practice of microsillons are included through short descriptions of other projects aside from the three case studies, to communicate the complexity and the diversity of common productions that microsillons has engaged in.

## 4. Methodology and framework

### 4.1. Methodology

This research, as does that of my peers who have developed their practices in the vast area of socially engaged art, connects resources from various fields of knowledge. To develop microsillons' practice, a certain amount of time was dedicated to reading critical theory, alternative pedagogies, sociology, political science, anthropology, feminist and queer studies, post-colonial studies, ecology and economics. For the purpose of this thesis, I have been rereading a lot of texts that I share as a form of common knowledge with Olivier and I have looked for references that could reinforce my position in this writing, notably concerning the common. Microsillons' projects form a continuous stream of actions articulated with reflexive moments, research being at the same time part of this action and a tool to realize these actions. The Ph.D. research integrates this stream to form the possibility of a longer reflexive period on our past experiences, a process that I hope will also go on to influence our next activities.

Although I am reading different academic texts on emancipation, self-organisation or horizontal knowledge, this does not make me feel at ease to readily go ahead and build upon these theories. I am a non-expert in all of the fields that I have mentioned above. My expertise lies in working with others who are not experts in art practices but who can, in a form of continuous process, connect their own forms of expertise to contribute to a common production of knowledge and making. As I observed above, the literature on socially engaged art practices, participatory art or community-based art is mostly produced by professionals whose knowledge of these projects is often a partial, reconstructed viewpoint. This is what makes this text different, as writing on the work of microsillons in Geneva from 2004 to 2018 allows me to offer a unique testimony from my perspective as co-initiator of microsillons' projects, on how artists and non-artists can work

towards the production of art in common. Each case study analysis traces the activity and development of a previous project. I situate my perspective as a practitioner reflecting on her praxis in relation to feedback from the people we collaborated with, using documentation such as diaries or reports, pictures and sound recordings we made to document the process. These elements inform my analysis and offer anchor points for the theoretical questions raised by the practice. This thesis is not a manifesto of best practice; rather the sequence of projects supports a narrative of how we have worked to build a collective art practice.

Reflecting on research methodology, the continuous process described above resembles the description of Participatory Action Research (PAR), a method that is often used by groups and movements committed to social change. PAR draws together action research (a process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action) and participatory research (a term coined to describe community-based approaches to knowledge developed in a non-academic environment) (Freire, 2000). In theorising Participatory Action Research (Hall, 2005), Paulo Freire insists on considering research as a practice, or rather as praxis, the entanglement of reflection and action. Although he first describes this specific mode of research as a methodological investigation, Freire emphasizes that ideology precedes methodology:

‘First of all I must underline the point that the central question that I think that we have to discuss here is not the methodological one. In my point of view...it is necessary to perceive in a very clear way the ideological background, which determines the very methodology’ (Freire, 1971, *Studies in Adult Education*, A talk with Paulo Freire, pp. 1-5).

If PAR possibly challenges academic routines and assumes that there is no neutrality in research, it also defends the idea of a concrete change of the ‘object

of study' unique in research methodologies. As researcher Orlando Fals Borda states:

'Interest in Participatory Action Research has grown worldwide due to its pertinence to the initiation and promotion of radical changes at the grassroots level where unsolved economic, political and social problems have been accumulating a dangerous potential' (1987, p.329).

PAR differentiates itself from a type of research that leads to action, rather defining itself as action as research. In other words, action, 'which is researched, changed and re-researched, within the research process' (Action Research International, 1998). Furthermore, PAR most commonly seeks an improvement in the situation under study; something is studied in order to change and improve it (Wadsworth, 1998). Therefore, PAR produces an open spiral model, where reflection leads to questions, which lead to activity, which leads to analysis, which in turn lead to a new activity. I am specifically interested in PAR as an approach to practice-based research, based on the insider/researcher perspective. 'Academics (outsiders) want to understand what it is like to be an insider without 'going native' and losing the outsider's perspective. Practitioners (Insiders) already know what it is like to be an insider, but because they are 'native' to the setting, they must work to see the taken-for-granted aspects of their practice from an outsider's perspective' (Anderson et al., 2007, p.27). Following this understanding of PAR, this thesis will describe in depth projects convened by microsillons that serve as a critical platform for microsillons' practice, an opportunity for me to deepen specific concepts that we have been applying up until this point. Assembling all the projects together allows them to be looked at consciously. This allows patterns to be identified as a way to improve our working methodology for our next projects. This in-depth investigation is offering the opportunity to feed not only microsillons' practice but hopefully also other artist-researchers working with similar intentions in various



contexts, as many peers have been accompanying us, in person or virtually, during the course of our research.

This central importance of the collective in my research should not overshadow the very personal and individual experience constituted by writing this thesis. An important challenge for writing this text has consisted in finding 'a room of my own'<sup>14</sup> (Woolf, 1919), in other words, a space in my everyday activity where the text can emerge. The conditions for finding this space are based on a constant negotiation between professional and personal obligations, a reorganization of priorities creating frustration and anger more than there are moments of epiphany where I feel I really managed to express my thoughts clearly. Mentioning these aspects in the Methods section of this writing makes sense to me, for I believe that these conditions have formed this research as much as microsillons' practice or the texts that I have read. It is all part of the context in which I have been embedded, working to produce this writing. It is by observing the evolution of my theorising and art practice as it moves from a personal expression of the self to a tool that contributes to the production of the common. This occurs in an expanding spiral relationship, rather than being an instrument of social and political status quo that I individually decide upon. It is this that creates the specific characteristic of microsillons' practice that I have been focussing on in this thesis.

My PhD writing is structured around two main parts: a series of case study descriptions and an analysis of how the notion of *common* resonates with these case studies. If participatory action research partly inspires the design and implementation of microsillons' projects, the present writing corresponds to a form of self-study research based on case studies that were all realised by the time of the writing up.

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<sup>14</sup> In *A Room of One's Own* (1919), Virginia Woolf describes the difficulties for women to find a symbolical as well as a physical frame in which to write.

In Sophie Hope's article 'Bursting paradigms: a colour wheel of practice-research' (Hope, 2016) questioning the role of practice in qualitative research, she illustrates through a colour -wheel 'a spectrum of positions of practice in relation to research, suggesting existing research paradigms are bursting at the seams [...]'. The diversity of approaches since the 1990's when research into/through/for/with art started to be discussed within the academy were very tangible in the different occasions of meeting with other PhD researchers at the UAL. If all of us were practitioners, the variety of research questions and methodologies was evidencing the impossibility to place these practices 'under one research umbrella' (ibid.). Some researchers would develop case studies specifically for the frame of the PhD while others would focus on historical research that they would entangle with their practice, still others would focus on technological innovation as a possible outcome of the research process. I would describe my PhD thesis as a combination of different approaches of qualitative research going from practice-led to practice-based research. In her article Hope underlines *the urgent need to share practices publicly* (2016) she insists on '[...] the need to look closely at the micro-politics of practice as it is constructed and framed in/by the academy.' (Ibid.), a central motivation when Olivier and I started our doctoral researches. We were looking for an academic institution where we could develop and validate our practice of research in all its complexity: we are a duo of artists working in common with non-specialists, we produce research through these projects as through the writing of articles on these projects or through critically discussing them with peers. It was not possible to find a frame in Switzerland at that time. We did benefit from the already advanced reflexion and experiments done since the 1990's in the United Kingdom, a process that was only surfacing when I started this research. Things have changed since and a few art universities propose to develop PhD's from art practice and to invent alternatives to the dominant academic model defending theory and methodology prior to practice. So, I am engaging my writing both as an artist engaging in collective practice-led researches, and as a researcher in the frame of a PhD thesis. As did my colleague Olivier for the written part of his PhD and as

numerous researchers engaged in practice-led research in which the notion of collaboration is key, I chose to focus for the first chapter solely on case studies from microsillons' practice, specifically on collaborative art projects that Olivier and I also refer to as practice-led researches. This form of methodology is particularly appropriate to give a good understanding of the specific context and interaction of the practice from the perspective of the practitioner. Presenting case studies from microsillons was a way to rethink and to integrate the practice in the most complete, honest way. From the more than twenty projects realised by microsillons since 2004 I focussed on projects challenging their usual contexts of production that could qualify as researches led from the practice of art in common. It helped me identify the three case studies described in this thesis as more specific and more representative of microsillons' belief that knowledge can be produced outside of the specialised spheres and with non-specialists. The case studies are explored chronologically, focusing on the intentions, the context and the common productions. The descriptions evidence the process of researching through the practice, without predetermining the results of this collective research. The case studies can be read as reports on a series of collective practice-led researches.

I then organized the next part as a self-reflexive research based on the practice-led researches presented in the first part. Hence, the second chapter forms a self-reflexive level where the practice in context is understood as a site of emergence of transformative practical and conceptual tools for future researches. Each case study is then seen in the light of a global situation and reread with different tools proposing alternatives to the global situation, the predefined model. I think this could be described as a form of practice-based research, a difference I articulated in my structure by separating clearly the two parts of my writing.

In 2009, Olivier and I started to imagine a common, double-thesis but recognising the tensions at that time between our co-authorship and the research degree requirement of a sole-authored original contribution to knowledge, we

quickly saw in the idea of two separated writings a greater possibility to enrich our discussions and more generally our practice. The result here is a hybrid thesis: the practice is based on elements produced in collaboration with Olivier and other people, while the analysis part is my own perspective and interpretation. Focusing my reflexion on the common as a political statement and a practical tool for developing projects that has been central to our practice, I have looked at how the common has been developed in different phases of our collaboration and in different contexts.

To make visible this displacement from collective practice-led researches to a self-reflexive, individual, practice-based research, I structured my writing in two parts, separating the case studies from the analysis. I elaborate from my own experience within the microsillons collective to both understand how our practice is transformed through collaboration while transforming the contexts in which it has unfolded. I went back and forth from the documents, articles, pictures and memories accumulated around these projects to make detailed descriptions, to bring out reflexive elements from the practice that could be reengaged. The analysis was written from this documentation, after the projects were completed and the separation clarifies the chronological and conceptual differences between the description of the case studies and their analysis. Writing independently from Olivier on microsillons' practice was a new situation for me as we have a long habit of writing texts for conferences or articles together. This change of dynamic was of interest in bringing me to make choices and to take decisions on the questions I wanted to reflect on. I could decide what were my priorities and work at my own rhythm.

If the practice of microsillons is still vivid today in 2019, I chose for the written part of this thesis to apply a case studies methodology and focus on three projects, developed by microsillons and completed since years while I write these words. They correspond to pivotal moments in the development of microsillons'

practice that may also be of wider significance in contemporary art practice. These three projects pose questions (on common, on cultural models, on the role of culture in the city, and on education as a political tool) that they address in their conditions of production. Each of them combines pedagogical exchange, affective engagement and experimental artistic productions in common and constitute an evidence of how microsillons 'share, apply and critique knowledge borne of practice' (Hann, 2015). Each case study's description is divided into three parts: microsillons' intentions, the context and what was done. This simple structure helps me to show what was transformed as the discussion progressed and what was produced through dialogue, beyond the art pieces themselves (relations, ideas, actions...). The focus on the common solidified while I was going through the archival elements on the different projects and I reflected on the structure of the writing from there, forming questions to organize the analysis from this documentation.

Hence, the case studies evidence three practice-led research projects initiated by microsillons and developed in dialogue at the time, while the analysis is research based on this practice. The practice is analysed through new references and new experiences presenting common as an organisational principle subverting actual artistic and cultural norms in French-speaking Switzerland. The analysis is an 'improvement of practice and new epistemologies of practice distilled from the insider's understandings of action in context' (Haseman, 2010, p.3) provoking the emergence of the notion of agonistic mediation, which then becomes a type of interaction that microsillons deploys, promotes or problematizes through its practice. My decision to focus on common was based on the evolution of the understanding of the term for microsillons: our primary intentions, deriving from the research of Elinor Ostrom<sup>15</sup>, being to work towards the possibility for users of public services to participate in the running of these services. Recently, as observed

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<sup>15</sup> See page 23 for more information on Ostrom works.

by Dardot and Laval, notably in light of the squares movements<sup>16</sup>, common can now be defined as ' (...) the living tie between a thing, an object or a place, and the activity of the collective that takes charge of it, that maintains it and cares for it. The common can only be instituted as that which cannot be appropriated' (Dardot and Laval, 2015b). Therefore, the second part of my writing seeks to identify the potential of microsillons' collective artistic projects for instituting the common in contexts where a neo-liberal model is dominant. I make visible the elements microsillons brought to these existing contexts as well as the elements co-produced in these contexts with non-artists, and evidence that this conjunction forms what can be name an 'instituent praxis' (Dardot and Laval, 2015b).

In the present analysis, I focus on the institutional, individual links between the different partners involved, and the way microsillons initiated other forms of interactions. The analysis allows me to understand how these tensions can be described as useful not only to the process of collaboration in progress but also to future projects. The distance of time also favours a more self-critical approach, to identify and name the tensions contradicting our original intention. The time of analysis and awareness is a long time. These tensions are due as much to the confrontation with the terrain and to various people of the projects that we conceive as to the difficulty of defending certain positions in institutional frameworks. It is what Irit Rogoff describes well under the term of criticality:

'...at once an ability to see through the structures that we are living in and to analyse them in a theoretically informed way, while at the same time being able to recognise that for all of one's critical apparatus, one is nevertheless living out and imbricated in those very conditions. Of course, criticality has critique enfolded within it, but it is more. It is a conscious

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<sup>16</sup> The 'squares movement' designates the series of occupations that started in 2011 in Cairo to protest against the application of austerity and neo-liberal policies. It includes the Arab Spring uprisings and the worldwide Occupy movement. See also page 32 of this thesis.

duality of both living out something while being able to see through it, and it requires another mode of articulation, one that cannot smugly stand outside the problems and offer a clever and knowing analysis. Instead, it requires that the experiential dimension of what we are living out be brought into contact with the analytical' (Rogoff, 2017).

I am aware that distance does not protect against bias and misinterpretations, but this method really helped me understand how in collaborative art practice the common might be produced from different or even divergent perspectives.

I decided not to collect new information, not to return to ask participants further questions after the projects were finished. This collection was carried out when Olivier and I were engaged in the projects: we gathered and kept a number of traces, documents, pictures, notes or sound records from the three case studies described in the first part. Then, the position I assume in the analysis of these projects is self-reflexive and self-critical and seeks to place microsillons' practice in a field of cultural and political action, reconnecting with its moments of tensions and contradictions and reflecting on how they influenced the project of 'building the common.' I did not see any possibility to really make a productive sense from re-interviewing people who had engaged in projects with microsillons : when the tensions appearing in the projects emerged because of moments of exhaustion, of collective dissatisfaction, they were noted and this previous documentation, made at the time, is now the support of my reflection.

#### 4.2. microsillons' general working mode

The notion of common, how we produce in common and how it can be instituted as a mode of organisation is at the core of the working logic and research of microsillons. Therefore, when we decided to work together in 2005 we named

ourselves collective microsillons, which has always seemed like a rather exaggerated noun to describe just the two of us. For some people, we clearly are 'a duo', but dual logic is not a principle we want to defend, and we are not just a twosome in the eyes of many of our interlocutors. We want to open the possibility of a fluid, variable entity; we are a group of people that varies in number as we move from project to project. The term collective also clearly refers to the re-emergence of collectivism after the Modernist-era as identified by Sholette (2007). This re-appearance has been challenging the norms of cultural institutions, the art market and dominant forms of art production.

Yet, to a certain extent, all art is in fact collective. Even if an artist's unique signature and authorship are key features of the art world, no art can exist in this space without a collective effort. For example an artist produces their work (with the help and influence of others), a curator exhibits it, a collector buys it and an art historian writes about it. But this intrinsic type of collective dimension is not the focus of this particular thesis. In my research the term 'collective' refers to a series of groups and practices that share a similar interest in self-organisation, self-institutionalisation, non-hierarchical forms of regulation and a certain resistance towards the art market. This form of collectivism uses strategies such as self-publishing and self-valorises their actions among their peers rather than from within institutions. The term became central to numerous art practices emerging in the 1970s, practices which opened the possibility for, the paradigm of the artwork to be replaced with the paradigm of the activity (Holmes, 2007). Using the word 'collective' is at the same time intriguing — it generates questions and allows us to situate ourselves by briefly explaining how this term operates within the art world. The work of microsillons' defends an approach of art that acts, 'as a tool for thinking collectively about the imaginary figures on which the coherence of the social sphere depends' (Holmes, 2007).



microsillons is also conscious of particular specificities in the way that we function as a collective. Being 'only' two, we have been able to challenge institutional frameworks in a way that would not have been accepted by a larger group, acting not as an external force of critique or resistance but as an internal agent for instituting common. Olivier and I, since we began developing projects together in our different working roles as employees (at the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre and today as being responsible for a master's degree programme at the Geneva University of Art and Design), shared tasks, money and workload equally. In the same way, we sign every email and letter, with our two names (less often using the name of the collective). The question of employment and our will to be designated as the collective microsillons in this different situation is core to our practice. Olivier and I are not engaged in a practice of production for the art market. We have never sold anything to a collector and we are basing the economy of our projects on the principle of hourly wages. Having a fixed part-time job (we were hired as art educators and teachers in different art universities) is what allows us to live on a daily basis. A few years ago, we were unemployed for some months and we only sent applications as a pair to potential employers (most of the time, we would not receive any answer). Finally we were hired as teachers in the institution where we formed as a collective, the Geneva University of Art and Design.

This principle of equality is fundamental but sometimes, due to institutional constraints, a need to separate who is doing what in the duo emerges, opening internal discussions that are always challenging yet necessary to reflect critically on the principles that Olivier and I set out when microsillons started in 2005. Between us we have built a climate of trust and we have proved that we have formed and still are a united and situated duo, especially in situations of adversity or division. A symbolic, as much as practical, manifestation of this unity is to ask for a common email in the different institutions we have been hired in. We are asking to be addressed as a collective by the institution and have almost always managed to avoid the constant individualisation of the neo-liberal system. This absence of

individualisation in the relationship we have built with institutions is tedious to maintain and we always have to counter managerial regulations imposed on us by our employers. But we keep on trying.

The dialogue between Olivier and I is a permanent thread between the different spheres of microsillons' activities, whether it is developing projects, teaching or researching. Concretely, it means that we exchange communication several times a day, via emails and text messages, and this constant conversation nourishes the diverse dimension of the practice. We take important decisions on the different aspects of our practice by achieving a form of consensus, though it can be difficult to achieve in some cases. When a decision is difficult to make we try to look at all angles of the question. We exercise our capacity to build argumentation and to sustain a certain working ethic. Since our first projects based at Geneva Contemporary Art Centre, we have been lucky enough to receive various invitations and have learned to make choices and we now refuse to work under certain conditions. Our positions as teachers guarantee our financial autonomy and we feel this balance gives more space for our practice, allows us to experiment with new formats and helps us to avoid the pressure of deadlines that were often imposed on us in the years that are covered in this thesis.

An example of our new work balance can be seen in our recent refusal of an invitation from a Swiss institution that asked microsillons to develop a form of participatory performance for the Museum Day. The performance was meant to valorise the opening of a new museum that has been criticised by many cultural actors within the city for flattening the diversity of the city's cultural scene. We would hardly have made this decision five or six years ago, but throughout the years we have become increasingly consistent in the way in which we deal with this kind of situation and we are more able to render the possible tensions they create into a productive part of our internal reflection.

#### 4.3. Critical Friendship

In an interview published in the newspaper *Liberation* (1991) Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari talk about what they call their 'friendship without intimacy'. Guattari says, 'We are both very different, so that the rhythms for adopting a theme or a concept are different. But there is of course a complementarity.' There is no comparison between *microsillons'* projects and the intellectual production of Deleuze and Guattari, but I see a lot of intersections between how they describe their work dynamic and how their friendship connected to their work and common adventure. We never explain to others how we really work internally, who does what, partly because things have become less clear with time for us. But this thesis offers an ideal space to address this aspect of our collaboration. Our association is based on the balance between our common interests and our distinctive identities, important because they leave unpredictability, a part of the unknown, in how one is going to react to a proposal made by the other. From the outside, our complementarity is first based on visible (or hearable) characteristics: man/woman, Swiss accent/French accent, tall/small. This complementarity is also expressed in our personal fields of interests and how we would entangle them together. For example, Olivier is a real hip-hop lover when my preference is for rock, but we love to listen to music together. We share long discussions about how we raise our respective children or the last recipe we proudly cooked. All this personal interest finds a translation in our projects, through a discussion on musical tastes with a group of teenagers or by developing a dinner format as an element of our research.

Since we started our collaboration, we have gained some recognition in the Swiss art scene and have been hired together as *microsillons* ever since. We occupy positions designed for one person together, sharing the workload and the fee. When it comes to elaborating a project, we go through very long discussions and debates. We have disagreements; we sometimes harshly defend our position, we

hesitate, we discuss again, rearrange, change our minds, take an opposing position to the one the other is choosing, just to see if the argument is solid. Nothing is fixed and we always allow ourselves to change a decision that has been made, even though the project has already entered an advanced state.

In general, we are constantly exchanging information from different sources (books, newspapers, the Internet, radio or TV broadcasts), within the frame of a project. As our familial obligations have increased, we have been increasingly working from a distance. We exchange huge amounts of emails related to our projects and write texts together using a method that we called the ping-pong as different versions are passed between us as our ideas multiply (there can be up to ten versions for a short text). We also draft every email written under the name of the collective, by first writing a draft that we send to each other. This constant back and forth is a way for us to keep a critical eye on every action— even the modest ones—that we undertake. It is very close to that which, in the field of critical pedagogy, has been defined as ‘critical friend’. As defined by Costa and Kallick, the critical friend is:

‘[...] a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens and offers critiques of a person’s work as a confidant. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work being presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working towards. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work’ (1993, p. 49).

Critical educators/teachers use this collective, leadership-free method to share their experiences, to share difficulties with their colleagues, to get feedback within a method of knowledge exchange in which reflexive learning is taking place. The critical friend cares about the others, rather than using critique as a tool of self-promotion or domination.



microsillons

Presentation of documents from research on Freire to Critical Friends from the Another Roadmap for Art Education network

Sao Paulo Biennale

If critical friendship can be compared with the 'peer review', it contains a different tension that is also at the core of the relationship I have developed with Olivier. Using the word friendship allows a change in regard to how the other is seen, a positive, tolerant and supportive attitude that allows a radical and constructive critique to take place. But this notion of the critical friend, described in the literature on critical pedagogies, has been adapted to our mode of work and is meant to be a growing circle of persons involved in the common productions: direct participants (we always have a moment of discussion with the groups engaging in microsillons' projects), peers from different research networks we are part of, people assisting the making of the projects.

Olivier and I are currently engaged in a research project we initiated on Paulo Freire, the Brazilian pedagogue. We are looking at ways to rethink critically and re-engage his conception of education and are involved in an international network, Another Roadmap for Art Education, to discuss the different steps of the research. Physical sessions are organised once a year where each research team submits a specific aspect of its context-based research for constructive critique and feedback from the other members of the network.

This long-term research-based project will build further knowledge in pedagogical practices in and with the arts, in particular through experimental educational projects in diverse contexts of arts and cultural education in Switzerland. It draws on the theory of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, who had a huge influence for the development of critical pedagogies since the 1970s and whose theories influenced some of the most interesting arts educators today. What does emancipatory learning mean in contemporary Swiss society, in the face of migration and social inequalities? This question is answered through different performative and dialogical formats articulating an historical inquiry about the ten years that Paulo Freire spent in Geneva. The archives of the World Council of Churches, where Freire was working, as

well as the ones of the Institute for Cultural Action, that he co-founded, will be key resources here. People that he collaborated with were interviewed. A central question of that research was to understand how his thinking, first developed in the Brazilian context, evolved during his stay in Switzerland, and became more directly meaningful for a whole range of participatory and experimental practices of arts education in Switzerland. A series of meetings with gallery educators, school teachers, cultural and social workers invited to engage with materials from the archive helped to exchange and to conceptualize, among critical friends, new educational concepts for each context that will be presented and discussed together. microsillons produced specific material and settings for these encounters.

Critical friendship is a great tool to accompany the historical and practical research microsillons engaged in as it helps us being more reflexive and to integrate perspectives we would not have envisaged before.

The artist, activist and educator, Sophie Hope has used this term as a title for an evaluation project that she was invited to develop on and analysed in her doctoral thesis (Hope, 2010). Here, she explained how she decided to create a group of critical friends constituted not only of peers, but also of former participants from her projects, significantly challenging the concept of 'participation' in relation to democracy of culture (I define the notion in the last case study analysis of this text) in 'an attempt to redistribute acts of critical reflection from the hands of evaluators, curators and artists of socially engaged art commissions to include that of the participants' (Hope, 2010, p.3).

With this group Hope would discuss different problems, particularly those linked to the participative dimension of her practice. She wanted to consider, 'the validity of what a critical voice with agency as an act of cultural democracy might look like; and if this is something encouraged, listened to, ignored or politely

brushed aside through ‘participatory art’ (Hope, 2010, p.3). Inscribing the practice in this form of friendly criticality is important for it also supposes that artists are able to open this criticality to the larger groups of people involved in collective projects. It also allows for the possibility of a discussion about the difference of status between the commissioned artists and the volunteering participants as well as with other peers. We have reflected the role of the critical friend in socially engaged art projects in an article titled ‘Negotiating Community Structures’ (2017).<sup>17</sup> As microsilons was invited to propose a community art project in Cosmo City, a suburban city in South Africa, we proposed to instead be part of a group of ‘critical friends’— composed of socially engaged artists, cultural producers, inhabitants and community leaders — who accompanied for three years a ‘community knowledge programme’ instead of imposing a distant model or method in a context we knew only superficially.

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<sup>17</sup> microsilons (Desvoignes, Olivier & Guarino-Huet, Marianne), “Negotiating Community Structures”, in : Sadie V. (ed.), Revolution Room, VANSa, Johannesburg, 2017, pp. 130-141 (See Annex of this thesis).





microsilons with Nils Norman, Tilo Steireif, Damon Rich, Oscar Tuazon and trafo.K  
 Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 View of the exhibition  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

## 5. Case studies

### 5.1. Case Study #1 : Utopie Et Quotidienneté (microsillons, 2009—10)

Utopie et Quotidienneté (Utopia and the Everyday) was a curatorial project involving the direct participation, in the conception phase, of more than 200 pupils from Geneva and around. The project was developed by microsillons in 2009 at the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre to interrogate the connection between art and alternative pedagogies.

#### 5.1.1. Context

Olivier and I decided very early on in the course of our collaboration that we wished to develop a public format to articulate important references for our own common practice together. This would provide concrete examples of how contemporary artists develop collaborative art projects with non-artists. We found the space in which we could realize this project at the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre, where microsillons were charged with conceiving specific projects around the issue of mediation between 2005 and 2011.

I was still studying at CCC when I started an internship at Geneva Contemporary Art Centre. At that time, the institution was mostly dedicated to the exhibition of solo shows of emerging or well-recognized contemporary artists and its public was a rather fixed combination of art collectors, connoisseurs and cultural actors. There was nothing like a public programme, which was surprising for an institution of this size and largely functioning with state money. At that time, the only offering to the public consisted in a guided tour carried out by the press officer for each exhibition (a dozen temporary exhibitions were held at the gallery each year). Discussing this situation, Olivier and I, both wanting to find a space to experiment how we could make art in common with non-artists, agreed that we

should submit a proposal for a pilot project to this institution. We both thought this could be a productive approach for continuing to experiment with common production after the project *Geographies Imaginaires* (see the Introduction of this thesis for a brief description) that we carried out as students. The proposal we presented to the director, Katya Garcia-Anton, was to develop collaborations with a specific group (we were paradoxically unspecific on this point), over several weeks, based on an exhibition held at the Centre, resulting in the presentation of a visible outcome. Garcia-Anton accepted this proposal and offered us a small production budget and the use of a space to present the future common production. This space consisted of a wide corridor between the reception and the offices of the institution. This is not a central area where the public activities of the Centre take place and we agreed to discuss a more stable collaboration if the pilot project was convincing.

The idea of developing a public programme within a contemporary art institution seemed completely relevant to us at this time, despite our rather thin knowledge of gallery education, 'mediation' in French, as a discipline. But we were informed that gallery education/mediation, especially in Germany, Austria and the UK had become an interesting site for experimenting with projects addressing political and social questioning. We found that several autonomous collectives formed in the 1990s developing a critical attitude towards the institution as well as the norms limiting the role of the gallery educator as an agent of this institution. This critical trend in gallery education started to have an impact in Switzerland in the 2000s and reflecting on the relationship between the art institution and the public became a central subject when microsillons started working in this field (I will return to this in the first part of my analysis of this case study). As a well-informed and important player at a local and national level, Garcia-Anton, was aware of this trend in state cultural policies and she was interested in microsillons' effort to investigate forms of public address that are challenging the cultural status quo between artwork and publics in institutions. She seemed to share our desire to develop an

approach that does not consist of validating, consuming or celebrating the institution and its activities and discourses. This critical trend in gallery education, bringing together institutional critic and radical pedagogies, was the countermovement to a process of commodification of culture (Ribalta, 2004) where many institutions and cultural policies have gradually replaced the traditionally modernist discourses of a universal access to art and culture conceived as commodified experiences.

Olivier and I saw that the combination of this specific moment of visibility for the concept of mediation along with the lack of any public programme, visible or not, at the Geneva Contemporary Centre, provided the occasion to establish long-term projects there through a form of residency. We felt that there was an opportunity to produce a significant change in the role played by publics or so-called non-publics there. The open dialogue we started with Garcia-Anton encouraged us to imagine a different understanding of the notion of public in the institution. This shifted us towards a more radical meaning of the term, a reading of 'public' with, according to Ribalta 'what is common, with the state, with shared or common interest' (Republicart, 2004). Therefore, we wanted to envisage the Centre not only as an art institution with a specific history and standpoint but as a public space and a space for publics, inserted in a particular neighbourhood (the Centre is located in a former factory, in a neighbourhood that was, until the 1980's full of workshops and small industries, before becoming the heart of the contemporary art scene in Geneva) and able to recognize, welcome and foster a variety of discourses and usages of cultures. In the end, this pilot project titled *Cabinet de Curiosité Extra-Terrestre* initiated a six-year-long collaboration with the Centre. The working relationship was established on the agreement that *microsilons* would develop long-term collaborations with groups outside of the circle of habitués,





microsilicons with class from Ecole Montbrillant  
Cabinet de Curiosités Extra-Terrestre (2005)  
Classroom session  
Ecole Montbrillant, Geneva



microsilicons with class from Ecole Montbrillant  
Cabinet de Curiosités Extra-Terrestre (2005)  
View of the final display  
Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

with a specific attention to notions of inclusivity and diversity. We were hired on the recognition that Olivier and I would fully share our job role. As we could choose our title, we suggested the phrase 'responsible for mediation projects'. We insisted on using the word 'projects' in our title, and had two main objectives: to avoid working in usual formats of mediation, like guided tours or workshops, and to place experimentation at the core of our proposal. Under these conditions, microsillons would conceive a dozen projects, signed by microsillons and groups of non-artists and presented in various spaces within the Centre.

The question of how we have built ourselves in relation to the Centre's physical spaces and, more than this, the symbolic relationship that microsillons formed with the institution, is worth a short moment of description. Within the institution microsillons created an autonomous cell, at least in the first years, physically separated from the offices of the Centre's administrative team by three floors. This physical distance, this peripheral position, reinforced our mode of functioning as a kind of auto-institution, a space where we could spend days without seeing any administrative employee. From a practical perspective, this physical distance gave us a lot of freedom that we reinforced by not using the computer system of the Centre (we almost always work with our private computers, which is our small attempt to keep a certain control on our practice). Our office was a space where Olivier and I could organize meetings with the protagonists of the projects; it was a workshop, an exhibition space and a storage room. It was looking more like the laboratory of a techno-fan bricoleur than an office providing educational services. This marginal space was a perfect spot for imagining alternative approaches to the production of contemporary art in Geneva in an otherwise rather traditional contemporary art institution.

After a few mediation projects realized under this partnership, Olivier and I had gained enough confidence in the relationship with the director to propose the curatorial project that microsillons continued for a long time afterwards. Garcia-

Anton was genuinely enthusiastic and quickly accepted our request that they dedicate an entire exhibition floor to the project. Reaching this scale would also mean looking for financial support and accepting eventual constraints to fit the criteria of this partnership. Additionally, the director made clear to Olivier and I that she would co-sign the project as a curator. However, without the authorial boundaries of this co-signature having been discussed at this early stage, it later became the source of many moments of conflict.

#### 5.1.2. Intentions

microsillons' proposed an exhibition format that would present the practice of artists engaging in projects using alternative pedagogical theories, as well as strategies and tools to work with non-artists. This would take place through a documentation section within the exhibition, as well as a series of site-specific experimentations. This project, which we later titled *Utopie et Quotidienneté* (Utopia and the Everyday), would constitute an unexpected turn for microsillons' practice. This occurred at different levels: in the relationship we built with institutions, in the territories and roles we explored, and in our general perception of the possible role that cultural institutions play in relation to society. Beyond the central thematic of the links between art and pedagogy carried by the exhibition, microsillons aimed to make this process of instituting the common in a place historically dedicated to recognizing the talents of selected artists. Nicolas-Le Strat is interested in the notion of 'existential test' proposed by Luc Boltanski (2009, p.113), in what he calls an ability to re-interpret fundamentally the effects of truth and reality specific to the institutional fact. For Nicolas-Le Strat, existence can never be absorbed in the institution as the practices are reinvented and the activities are reshaped and the instituting dynamics inherent to common activity are challenging the institutional status quo. The 'work of the common' conceives this test of and through existence as the best democratic guarantee that the institutional form 'will remain sufficiently in adequacy with the dynamics of the

practices' (Nicolas-Le Strat, 2016, p.102). It is in this sense that *Utopie et Quotidienneté* approached the common, through the activities and productions generated through very specific art practices. The challenge was not only to (re)present them but to put them in tension with the usual rules of the institution and, even temporarily, transform what is instituted: authorship, conditions of production or relation to society.

The global context was validating, to our eyes, the urgent need to interrogate the role of artists in alternative educational processes, a question we had been tackling in the previous years in connection to the debate opened by the Bologna Process. During this time, many exhibition projects were being proposed around the themes of art and education. In her 2008 article *Turning*, Irit Rogoff named this trend 'the educational turn' in curating. This article traces the numerous questions and answers proposed by the art world to reinvestigate what was in fact an old function of art institutions— namely, educating people. The different projects labeled as the educational turn were reconsidering the potential of resistance and were critical against neo-liberalism. They were carried out by certain artistic practices championing the collective versus the individual and the process-based rather than a results-oriented approach. Rogoff's conception of turning opened up new debates, writing and projects, that participated in the production of the very movement it was describing.

microsilons took advantage of this enthusiasm to develop a concept through which we could rethink the possible role of art and the artist in educational processes. We believed that the articulation of art from within pedagogic methodologies produces a discursive situation in which criticism can take place. It is a laboratory where culture can become a site to experiment with practicing common within society, rather than it being a place used to reduce audience's misunderstandings about works of art. Being in charge of a slightly marginal activity within the institution, but central to current contemporary artistic discourse gave us



a sense of legitimacy. We wanted to discuss these issues in the most visible place of the institution, rather than from within the margins, as artist-mediators and not as curators dealing with the pedagogical approach for a single show.

The curatorial concept we developed was based on two axes: a documentary section grounded in research by microsillons and a more experimental section in which we invited artists working according to principles of common production and educational strategies. Guest artists would be invited to develop common activity with different groups in Geneva. The projects would be realized before the exhibition and presented in the space during the exhibition period. Olivier and I, with Garcia-Anton, extensively discussed the financial aspect of the project due to the specific conditions of its production. We wanted to offer similar fees to each guest and calculated that we could invite, based on the financial, spatial and logistical parameters of the exhibition, three artists or collectives. Our proposal would include 3,000 Swiss Francs in fees and about 10,000 Swiss Francs for the production costs. The exhibition would benefit from the support of the Swiss agency for culture, Pro Helvetia, the public water, electricity and gas company in Geneva. Olivier and I had never worked with such a large budget, allowing us to cover all production costs for the exhibition as well as producing a publication at the end of the exhibition.

For the documentation section, microsillons gathered a significant database of projects, articles and practices demonstrating how artists have integrated pedagogical tactics into their practices. We assembled, selected and discussed this material for the exhibition display and a dedicated area was given in our office to gather a series of binders organising the research under different headings that Olivier and I had decided upon together: commodification, the need for models, the pastoral approach and the commodification of knowledge.

In parallel to this research, we were also considering how the common production could be organized to offer another reading of the same questions that we were tackling in the documentation section. microsillons' idea was to invite artists' collectives who were using pedagogical tools in their practice and to ask them to work in Geneva with a group of people over several weeks towards the production of an outcome that would be made visible in the exhibition. The choice of group, the length of the collaboration and the way that this experience could be manifested was left very open, but as we had to define a budget with the director, the financial limits already created one boundary to this activity. Olivier and I shared the more personal agenda of observing the making of collaborative art projects by artists or cultural producers. Not only did we want to bring together practices demonstrating common production with non-artists into a context where this had not been discussed before, but we also wanted to learn from observing the tactics, choices and ways of adapting to this particular site by the guest artists.

After a long discussion with Garcia-Anton, we were able to invite three artists or collectives to develop collaborations with local partners. Olivier and I worked on a short list of artists who we thought could fit our criteria. Our selection was based on the knowledge we had of their practices—mostly obtained through documentation. To secure the ground, we first invited the artist Nils Norman, who we knew personally as he had been a guest teacher on the CCC study program. We had not previously worked directly with him but we had been able to observe how he worked with our peers and felt that his approach corresponded with our own; Norman's collaboration is research-based, situated politically and socially and the production and presentation of a common results as part of the process. More than this, the dialogue with Norman was open and respectful. The rest of the invitations were sent in the spring of 2009, the exhibition was planned for November of the same year—so the schedule was already tight.

Our second invitation went to *trafo K.*, a feminist female collective of art educators, who developed a series of projects in Vienna and Austria. Inviting a group of art educators was a key element in the discourse we wanted to spread through the exhibition, supporting the idea that mediation was a field of radical practices that would build on institutional criticism, collaborative and performative practices as well as collective research. We knew the work of *trafo K.* through the discovery of a kit that the collective developed with teachers and students in hairdressing to fight against gender stereotypes at school. Olivier and I were interested by their use of different objects, artistic proposals and games to discuss in complex and non-prescriptive ways a topic that was becoming central in the field of education. Teachers, librarians and educators that we held discussions with in Geneva were in search of tools to bring this subject into the classroom/library/community centre. This learning kit on gender was a well thought out and cleverly designed tool. Our intention to invite *trafo K.* was mostly motivated by the idea that they could adapt this kit for a Francophone context (the kit was—and still is—in German).

The third invitation was sent to the Centre for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), a New York-based organisation working with groups of children, teenagers—and later marginalized groups—on the development of projects where the city acts as a tool to discuss urbanism, civil rights, public services and the production of knowledge, through and on the city. The aim of this approach is to exercise a conscious and critical citizenship. With this invitation, we imagined that two members of the group could travel to Geneva and develop a project with another group using a similar methodology to those taking place in New York.

From these initial invitations and the work that we had carried out up until this point, *Utopie et Quotidienneté* was evolving fast. A series of unexpected events and unimagined demands would enter the conditions of production and challenge *microsillos*' initial plan of a co-authored exhibition project.

### 5.1.3. Actions

Each invitation was answered differently, in ways that we would never have imagined. As previously stated, Olivier and I thought that we could play both an organizational and external role that would allow us to observe how the collectives made their projects while at the same time acquiring practical knowledge for future microsillons projects. Things happened differently, we had to get involved much more than we expected in the production of this work and became embedded in aspects of these projects that we had completely neglected to foresee.

After we sent the invitation emails, Olivier and I quickly received positive, if conditional, answers from Nils Norman and trafo K. Norman did not want to work alone on a collaboration and felt it would be important, symbolically and practically, to work with an artist from the region in Geneva. More precisely, he would invite Tilo Steireif on board as a collaborator, an artist and teacher trainer he met when he was guest teaching at the Geneva Fine Art School. Steireif is in charge of the education of teachers in visual arts at the Pedagogical University in the city of Lausanne, sixty kilometres from Geneva. Norman also asked if the collaboration could include the CIRA (Centre International de Recherche sur l'Anarchisme), an archive on anarchist movements, which is also based in Lausanne. These requirements from Norman opened the circle of collaboration, a principle we have returned to several times since. Steireif proposed that his students from the Pedagogical University should join the circle. Finally, the students, who were already teaching art in different schools in the area, brought their respective classes into the circle, making this coproduction involve almost 200 pupils from ten to seventeen years old.

The specific requirement of trafo K. was to work with a German-speaking group, possibly a class. The question of language is something Olivier and I had not been anticipating and we felt that this was due to our lack of experience in non

French-speaking contexts. We were conscious that we would probably need to work with interpreters in the common production phase with local groups and we were willing to import collaborative practices taking place in German into the French-speaking areas. In these ways there were possibilities for overcoming the difficulties of dealing with multiple languages in the process of producing art in common. Olivier and I finally suggested that the German School of Geneva—a private school for bilingual German/French children—would collaborate with trafo K. We met the visual art teacher from the school, Nöelle Huber, whose kindness and total commitment to the collaboration would really help establish dialogue with the class of teenagers who were going to join the circle.

Our invitation to the CUP received a more expected answer. Based in New York, the collective wanted to keep their work to their specific context and to maintain a sustained practice within their locale. As a principle of the projects they develop they could not imagine working in an unknown city, another country and with another language.

In the same email, answered collectively, Damon Rich, one of CUP's founders, suggested developing a project with a friend based in Paris, Oscar Tuazon, a successful Paris-based artist developing utopian architectural structures. Olivier and I asked Rich if they could send a proposal before a firm decision could be made on their participation in the exhibition. The duo proposed making an installation based on an enquiry around a well-known housing complex on the outskirts of Geneva, Le Lignon. This complex, built at the beginning of the 1970s, is known for being the longest block in Geneva at 1.6 kilometers. It is a modernist ribbon-shaped building that can be found in an astonishingly rural environment (there is, in fact, an eighteenth century farm in the middle of the housing-complex that is still in use). Rich and Tuazon imagined they could produce a kind of playground, that they called a pedagogical landscape, inspired by a series of interviews with inhabitants and architects, which could work as a critique of the

modernist architecture when applied to the mass housing-complex. The hypothesis of the artists was that people would be very critical of their living conditions in Le Lignon and that it could be interesting to integrate their critique in a participative sculpture. One of the main obstacles was the lack of time of both artists to engage in such an enquiry. Olivier and I decided to take charge of this part of the project in dialogue with Rich and Tuazon.

In parallel to initiating the common productions, the documentation section of the exhibition was also absorbing a lot of our energy. Olivier and I were refining our questions, the examples we wanted engage with as well as starting to think about ways to display this information that could also work with future acts of common production. The space we were working in was a large square room of approximately 500 square meters, with a series of large pillars supporting the building. Olivier and I wanted to leave as much space as possible for the project space for working in common and thought about an adaptive and modular solution for the documentation section. Instead of having a fixed place for the documentation, we would display it on different panels—one for each issue of investigation—that we could place in several locations around the exhibition space.

Before the summer break, Olivier and I wanted to complete the selection process for all of our documentation content and to finish securing the groups of collaborating institutions—mostly schools, where the collaborations needed to be integrated into the curriculum. We wanted our choices and decisions to be approved by the director at the Contemporary Art Centre as well, as she was going to be out of the office for some weeks. In addition we needed to have as much in place as possible as we were also beginning a new tenure at the Zurcher Hochschule der Kunste, as head of a lifelong learning programme on art education and society.



Nils Norman and Tilo Steireif  
Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
Presentation of student's newspaper from CIRA  
Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva



Nils Norman and Tilo Steireif  
Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
Cabin presenting posters from CIRA  
Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

As many school classes were part of the production process, it was important to be able to start working with the pupils at the end of August, when the new school year is about to start. The three common productions were already taking shape and we were able to plan ahead with the duo Nils Norman and Tilo Steireif, as well as with the collective trafo K. The third project with Damon Rich and Oscar Tuazon was also coming together, although through a slow dialogue via emails.

Norman and Steireif's project was already a dense proposal of archival research, teachers' meetings and class sessions over the course of two months. The two artists and microsilons spent an afternoon together at the CIRA. The library is situated in a small two-storey, wooden extension in a seventeenth century stone house where we met Marianne Enckel, the director of the CIRA since the 1960s, as well as an editor in anarchist theory. CIRA is the largest library on anarchism in Europe and also hosts an archive filling every inch of wall space, from floor to ceiling, with books, booklets, newspapers, pictures, posters and videos. The space has been in existence since 1957, when an Italian anarchist, Pietro Ferrua, founded it with two friends. Documents connected with the question of pedagogy were numerous and Norman and Steireif chose to focus on looking at student's anarchist newspapers in order to narrow down their search. They continued visiting the CIRA, selecting different publications to be displayed in the exhibition. They also selected some books sold there to constitute a small library to display at the Contemporary Art Centre. Norman, shortly after the first visit, proposed a 1:5 scale wooden model of the library, in which the work from the pupils as well as documents from CIRA's archive could be displayed. The space for the cabin was the first element of the exhibition plan that Olivier and I designed and we were looking forward to knowing more about the other proposals.

The situation of not knowing became quite stressful as time went by. Meanwhile, Steireif invited a group of twelve classes and teachers to reflect on the sense of Utopia in their everyday school life. Steireif visited each class for





Nils Norman and Tilo Steireif  
 Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 Space presenting filmed interviews of students engaged in the project  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva



trafo. K, Gabu Heindl and a class from the German School of Geneva  
 Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 At the German School  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

presenting the pupils with experiments realized in anarchist schools. The class teacher would then propose, that the students work on a specific transformation of their school environment. One class worked on the plan of their actual school to propose concrete transformations of the building. Another class went for outings to observe and draw the elements they would encounter. Another class reworked their time schedule according to their desires and proposed to integrate new disciplines (like yoga courses, or vegetarian cooking lessons) in their curriculum. A class of children with learning disabilities worked on a series of clay sculptures representing their feelings at school. Steireif interviewed and filmed students participating in the project, asking for feedback on how they have lived the experience. The mounted video was displayed in a small and cosy space of the cabin.

Two weeks before two members of trafo K. collective were expected in Geneva for their first working session with the pupils from the German School, we received a terrible message from them. Charlotte Turecks, who was supposed to take charge of the project together with Nora Sternfeld, had died in an accident. We felt deeply sad for Charlotte Turecks' family and friends. And egotistically we worried about our collaboration. Olivier and I went to the florist to send some flowers and the most comforting words we could find to the other members of the collective. We quickly received an email from trafo K. maintaining that they would still carry out the workshop with the pupils on the same dates. Elcke Smodicks would join Nora Sternfeld for these three days of exchange with the students.

This time period was split between one day of work at the German School and two days at the Contemporary Art Centre. trafo K.'s idea was to encourage the pupils to reflect on different aspects tackled in the exhibition project through a series of exercises, discussions and by making models. Olivier and I had, on the request of trafo K., the difficult task of telling the pupils what would be shown in





trafo. K, Gabu Heindl and a class from the German School of Geneva  
Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
Working session  
Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva



Damon Rich and Oscar Tuazon  
'Lignon Triple Beam' in Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
Participative installation  
Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

the exhibition. We prepared some visuals about the documentation section and we also planned a guided tour in the empty exhibition space, inspired by a text, 'Plea for a mediation in an empty space' from a German art educator, Ana Bilankov (2002). Two months before the opening, although things were in part defined, there was absolutely nothing from the future exhibition actually placed yet in the space. microsillons and the class would walk around the different areas of the room and Olivier and I would explain what we were planning on placing there. We formed a large circle of chairs in the middle of the room to answer questions from the pupils. The following day was dedicated to making models. trafo K. asked pupils, in groups of three or four, to use cardboard to represent the part of our narrative about the exhibition that they were most interested in. This process whole made Olivier and I aware of some problems around how we were organising the documentary section of the exhibition. We also had difficulties explaining our concept without simplifying the possible interaction between art practices and the project's socio-political objectives. After this step, trafo K. invited the architect Gabu Heindl to work with them on a display for the models made by the pupils and the questions that this experience had raised for trafo K. The pupils' models were displayed on a table in a scaled-down version of the exhibition as articulated by the class. A series of questions like, 'Can we impose feminism?' and, 'Who is asking?' where inscribed on the reshaped pillars of the exhibition space, which, with the table, formed an installation named Wild Translation.

Damon Rich and Oscar Tuazon's project at Le Lignon continued to develop even though the artists were only a remote presence in this research. Olivier and I took charge of the entire field work process—meeting associations, residents, one of the architects of the housing complex—to collect information to transmit to Tuazon and Rich. We carefully recorded all of the discussions that we held and learnt a lot of incredible things, but regretted that the invited artists did not invest more time and energy into this activity. After this investigation, Rich and Tuazon proposed building a scale model of a 'playground for adults' in the exhibition





microsillons  
 Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 Panel Emancipating ?  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva



microsillons  
 Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 Panel Modelling ?  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

space. It is interesting to note that scale models, or spaces inside the space, became a common thread between the three common productions. Taking the shape of the site of Le Lignon, it operated as a 'pedagogical landscape', encouraging new relationships between the built environment and a reference to the Practice of the everyday life<sup>18</sup> (De Certeau, 1984). Rich and Tuazon built this structure together in less than two days and then left again, without Olivier and I really feeling that we had satisfactorily communicated with them.

The documentary section was finally organized into five panels linked to specific topics: Standardizing, Empowering, Capitalizing, Guiding and Deschooling. The panels displayed a selection of quotes, images and examples to illustrate each research area, while articulating paradoxes resonating within the questions that came out of the trafo K. project.

microsilons insisted that this exhibition format should be accompanied with specific communication tools. The Contemporary Art Centre had standard visual communication formats that they applied to each exhibition, including a flyer and a press release. The flyer contained the basic information about the exhibition (title, dates, information about the curator's talk, etc.), which was also sent as a general invitation for the openings. Copies of the press release were distributed in the space, as guidance for visitors inhabited the exhibition. As Olivier and I wished to develop a communication tool that could translate the complexity of the exhibition, we suggested working on a series of gazettes (a one page newspaper) placing the idea of a series, a common format, at the core of our reflection. Specific signs were produced to indicate the different circles of collaboration of the common productions. Finally, we also decided not to hold a VIP private view as would usually take place the evening before the public opening of each exhibition held at the Centre. We wished to mark a break with this exclusive format and to reinforce

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<sup>18</sup> In this book, Michel de Certeau examines the capacity of individuals to appropriate, to produce self-interpretations and usages of mass culture.

# UTOPIA AND THE EVERYDAY

27.11.2009—14.02.2010

Opening Thursday 26th November, 6pm – 9pm  
Open from Tuesday to Sunday, 11am – 6pm  
The exhibition is closed between 24th December 2009 and 1st January 2010

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### GAZETTE # 1

"UTOPIA AND THE EVERYDAY. BETWEEN ART AND PEDAGOGY"

"UTOPIA AND THE EVERYDAY. Between art and pedagogy" is a Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève project, conceived by the *microsilons* collective in collaboration with the Centre's director, Katya García-Antón. This ambitious, experimental project aims to open a debate, in Geneva and Switzerland, about the role of artists in education, both within and outside artistic institutions. It draws on the practice of artists and collectives for whom a reflection about teaching methods lies at the heart of their work, and explores points of contact between art and education.

The exhibition also proposes avenues for reflection on the role of mediation (a practice associated with the educational mission of artistic institutions) as a discursive movement in which constructive criticism

of these institutions can take place: a laboratory on culture and society rather than as a means to reduce misunderstanding between works of art and the audience.

Three artists or collectives were invited to develop projects with local partners, and the fruit of their work will be presented during the exhibition, which takes place from 27 November 2009 to 14 February 2010, on the second floor of the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève.

The three partnerships were as follows:

– *trafo.K* [Vienna] and Gabu Heindl [Vienna], in collaboration with *B. Klasse* of *Deutsche Schule Genf*.  
– Nils Norman [London] and Tilo Steireif [Lausanne], in collaboration with the HEP [Haute Ecole Pédagogique] of Lausanne

and the CIRA [Centre International de Recherche sur l'Anarchisme].  
– Damon Rich [New York] and Oscar Tuazon [Paris], in collaboration with the inhabitants and associations of *Le Lignon*.

Besides the results of these partnerships, a number of earlier projects undertaken by other artists will be presented in documentary form. They will be structured around a series of questions based on educational theory, which will be brought to life in the space.

**GUIDING?**

What is the role and position of the teacher towards the learner? Should he be a leader, a guide, or simply one who accompanies, a facilitator? In his analysis of pastoral power, the philosopher Michel

microsilons  
Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
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symbolically the idea of common, of a shared space, in resonance with the productions presented in the exhibition.

Olivier and I learned a lot working on this project, we were involved in each step—research, conception, liaising with the collaborations, discussions with the individuals and institutions involved—we were dedicated to make this project a serious reflection on how artists can develop alternative, collective and critical pedagogical proposals. The response to the show was diverse and not as enthusiastic as we would have wished for. The exhibition contained many readings; it would in fact take over two hours to read the whole textual mass of information present. Fully aware of the somewhat unappealing quality, due its profuse visual and textual content, of *Utopie et Quotidienneté*, we spent a tremendous amount of time after the opening carrying out guided tours, meetings and round-table discussions, amongst other communicative strategies.

The exhibition space was also important for us as a device that we could activate in order to debate the content that we were showing, which in turn enabled us to participate in the common knowledge production on socially engaged art practices. Olivier and I organized different forums to bring together teachers involved in the project and groups of gallery educators. It was at this stage that we met all of the pupils who worked on the material presented in the work by Norman and Steireif. Meetings were held with each class in the exhibition space in which we could discuss with the students their general interest in the project, as well as their opinions about the exhibition.

Once the show was over, all the materials used to build the exhibition were distributed to different associations or artist cooperatives and the students' productions were returned to the partner schools. It was unfortunately impossible, for budget reasons, to work on a book publication that would share the work further. However, Olivier and I could make our material visible and available on





microsilons with Nils Norman, Tilo Steireif, Damon Rich, Oscar Tuazon and trafo K.  
 Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 View of the exhibition  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva



microsilons with Nils Norman, Tilo Steireif, Damon Rich, Oscar Tuazon and trafo K.  
 Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 View of the exhibition  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

microsillons' website, as the presence of the project on the official online platform of the institution was limited, only showing a few images and a press release. microsillons' archive on our website offers a more complete and complex perspective. In the months following the exhibition, we also collaborated with the Art Museum of Thun, in the German-speaking area of Switzerland. The museum displayed an adaptation of our documentation section and commissioned new work from Switzerland, Austria and Germany that the artists and art educators involved in the project chose together with the director of the Centre for Contemporary Art.





microsillons with Katya Garcia-Anton, Carmen Mörsh and Javier Rodrigo  
Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
Round-table  
Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva



microsillons  
Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
Course for art educators and art teachers held in the exhibition  
Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva





microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
 En Commun (2010)  
 Blackboard after classroom session at Allobroges Primary School  
 Geneva

## 5.2. Case Study #2: En Commun (microsillons, 2010)

En Commun consisted of the common production of a free newspaper based on an enquiry about a particular area of Geneva, Le Bois de la Bâtie. This took place with two local classes of pupils between April and June 2010. The newspaper was distributed in several cafés and associative spaces in Geneva under the umbrella of a festival dedicated to participatory art practices.

### 5.2.1. Context

In the spring of 2010, Laura Gyorik-Costas, the director of La Terrasse du Troc, an artistic festival based in Geneva, invited microsillons to propose a project for its summer edition. The festival focuses on practices involving some form of participation from the public and each of its editions have been based in a different neighbourhood in Geneva. We interpreted the word 'festival' as implying a performative dimension, conceived as a series of installations or performances set up by artists and activated at different moments for and with publics. The festival is funded mostly through state (city council) money. Gyorik-Costas attached three conditions to her invitation, stating that the project must:

- be presented during the festival, in July 2010, five months after our first conversation
- involve pupils from schools in the canton of Geneva
- be related to the Bois de la Bâtie, a woodland area and well-known walking place situated on the outskirts of Geneva.

Olivier and I were not totally convinced by the festival format, which was mostly inviting artists to develop short, performative moments in which the festival's public could participate. However, we were happy to experiment with a new collaboration if we were able to negotiate favorable working conditions. In a discussion with the festival team, we managed to convey that we needed time, a

group and a reasonable budget to engage in a common production. The development of this common production would be facilitated in part by the festival team because we could benefit from the support in organizing practical tasks. The team contacted two educators with whom we would collaborate, an art teacher from a junior high school and a schoolteacher from a local primary school. Contacting two classes increased our chances of receiving at least one positive answer, which was also a requirement for our funding. The director of the festival suggested that we apply for funds dedicated to projects with a pedagogical dimension distributed by the Canton of Geneva Department of Education to cover microsillons' fees and production costs. To apply for the funding, as is almost always the case, Olivier and I had to outline, in advance, the different sequence of steps and expected outcomes from our project. We had to decide upon many aspects at an early stage, yet we tried to leave some undefined areas to keep the experimental spirit at the core of microsillons' practice. The information that the Department of Education required was mostly practical. For example, which classes we would work with, how many hours were necessary to develop the project, but they also wanted us to specify in advance the outcomes of our collaboration and speculate on its impact. This form of projecting future results runs contrary with the idea of unexpected outcomes that drives microsillons' transformative approach. Olivier and I designed a structure that alternated between classroom sessions and field trips to the Bois de la Bâtie. We put forward the following points in our application under the category 'Educational content', leaving us time to decide what the newspaper would really be about:

- Awareness of the environment via field workshops (Bois de la Bâtie)
- Reading texts on the forest (nature as a land of discovery)
- Production of interviews and articles
- Photographic documentation of field research
- Image processing on computer
- Composition of texts and images on computer
- Discovery of printing techniques through a field visit

- Presentation of the project to their classmates in both schools through an exhibition

In the end, both classes agreed to participate. Therefore, we decided to think about a format that could accommodate content produced in parallel by the two groups. The primary school was within walking distance from the woodlands while the junior high school was on the other side of the city. The teacher of the junior high school class, Valentina Pini, was a former student of the University of Arts and Design, and after a short meeting with her to discuss the project, Olivier and I were sure she would play the role of an ally. The other teacher, Jessica Aguet, was the substitute for the usual teacher of the class and she also gladly accepted to be involved in this experiment with her class.

Olivier and I were interested in working on a site that we had never investigated, but that had an interesting history and role within the city. We discovered that the woodlands were given to the city of Lancy (bordering Geneva) by a family who owned them in 1869. The woodlands are a patchwork of smaller sites dedicated to different activities such as sport, urban gardening, walking, celebrating birthday parties or watching the Rhône and Arve rivers as they converge. We assembled a map of the area depicting its different usages along with elements of its history.

#### 5.2.2. Intentions

Besides the need to meet the pedagogical requirements of funding from the Department of Education, Olivier and I saw this commission as an opportunity for the pupils to carry out an investigation on some unexpected, unspoken, hidden aspects of the Bois de la Bâtie site, and that this would open up a space for these stories to emerge. Writing a proposal in advance for funding reasons is a subtle exercise in balance between including elements that are reassuring for the funding



partner, while maintaining space for the emergence of something to take place that has not been previously prescribed. On top of this, we had to undertake this negotiation within a relatively short period of time—only four months—before the project would be made public.

Olivier and I discussed this together at length, writing down all of the different elements forming the context and conditions of the project so far, considering which aspects of the project could address the specific funding requirements. We agreed on developing a newspaper, which we saw as an ideal vehicle for assembling different facets, perspectives and knowledge on the site of investigation. The newspaper was, among others, a reference to the pedagogical practices developed in the 1920s by Elise and Célestin Freinet, who used to place printmaking and class newspaper production at the centre of their educational process.

Olivier and I held a preparatory internal working session focusing on the subject of the newspaper in order to connect the local aspect of the project with a larger question. This aimed at engaging the project with a wider, more political agenda. Following the principles of critical pedagogies, we built this project as a problem posing and consciousness raising educational process, according to the principles set by Paulo Freire. Taking from the history and contemporary role of the Bois de la Bâtie, as well as from our research as microsillons, the topic of the “Common(s)” seemed to fit as a central theme for the newspaper. Common(s) seemed to be a good subject to reflect on and to start a debate that would raise numerous questions linked to life in the city, such as: What are common goods? What are the pre-defined usages for public spaces and what could the counter usages consist of? How might common goods become private and what does that mean? We wanted to share these central questions with the pupils, structuring the classroom sessions and school outings around them. This would highlight the importance of public space, being able to evaluate in places that are not regulated

by consumption but that are instead adapted to the needs of the citizens. This type of space is being reduced within cities like Geneva, and Olivier and I felt it was important to attract the pupils' attention to this fact. The theme of common(s) also demonstrated the principle of common production — in that case of illustrated articles— as an alternative to individual work, which is the norm in educational contexts.

Our challenge was to find the balance between developing the conceptual and practical framework for the production in common while also leaving enough space for the pupils to appropriate and eventually transform this initial schema. As for the theme of the common(s), our aim was not to promote common(s) as a good way to organize society over other modes of ownership. We did not want to impose our views in this way, but wished to open a dialogue on how 'common' can break with feelings of exclusion produced by competition in the school system. This demonstrates the way that *microsilons* seeks to make visible different structures, statuses and roles that are ingrained in the spaces that we inhabit. By researching one context with a group in common, this then provides the opportunity to turn this reflection—and the knowledge produced through it—onto the group's own institutional context.

### 5.2.3. Actions

We continued to investigate the site, to do walks in the Bois de la Bâtie, to take notes from these walks and to list a series of structures and/or people who could play a role in the project. Our aim was to compile a list of organizational structures connected to the site of the woodlands that we could present to the pupils. Our list, after a few days of research included: a football club; an animal park—dedicated to indigenous species such as marmots, sheep, deers and birds; the Wild Wildlife Federation local branch; an association protecting bats; a cemetery; a cooperative of urban gardens; an underground mushroom farm where people

organized free parties in the mushroom farm tunnels; a restaurant; the city refuse collection service; an association campaigning against suicides on the bridge linking the Bois de la Bâtie to the Quartier de Saint-Jean; the city services in charge of playgrounds; and a dog owners' club.

We also visited each classroom for a preparation meeting with the two teachers. Jessica Aguet—the teacher from the primary school class for children with learning difficulties—was very friendly but she also appeared to be slightly unhappy with the class, and, as previously stated, she was only acting as a substitute in a challenging environment. Some children had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and Hyperactivity, some did not speak French well enough to be able to follow in a larger class. Other children had severe behavioural problems or learning disabilities, students that she described as 'uncontrollable' and really 'slow', while she mimed quotation marks to us. Olivier and I presented the project to her, although she had already read the application for the Educational Department commission. She felt that the theme of the common(s) was interesting and seemed to be pleased that she would not be solely in charge of the pupils for the duration of our collaboration. Dates for the sessions were decided upon together and the head teacher gave us a tour of the school.

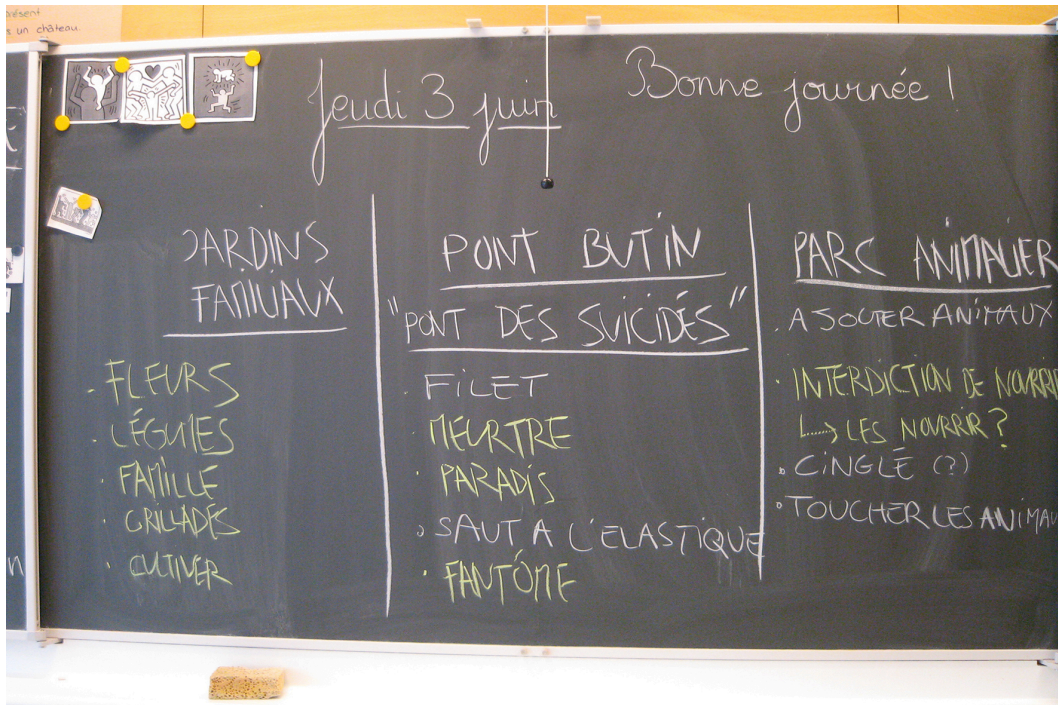
A similar meeting with Valentina Pini took place at the junior high school. She was enthusiastic about the collaboration and described the pupils we would be working with in positive terms. A few days after these meetings, Olivier and I had our first encounter with the pupils at the primary school. We had prepared a first session for the two classes with material on the Bois de la Bâtie and the theme of the common(s), so that we could provide some contemporary examples of initiatives based in Geneva, some historical examples and some readings for the group. Olivier and I also brought, as we do in every project, our own technical gear in order to present the visual material: a small projector, speakers, laptops and a printer. We unpacked this equipment before the beginning of the session and the

pupils immediately noticed the change. They were curious about the different technological devices and the new possibilities that they offered (we could go out of the classroom!) Having this portable equipment gave us autonomy from the school resources, but we also tried to valorize the materials that they were regularly using in the classroom, especially the blackboard which serve as a collective notebook for each class. We arrived in the primary school classroom thirty minutes before the scheduled time of the session to install ourselves there. We devoted the first few minutes to introducing microsillons' activities, in other words, who we are, where we come from, why we are here. We roughly explained our proposal that microsillons would be the editor of a newspaper and that the pupils would take on the role of journalists.

Working with two different age groups requires some adaption but we used the same excerpts of texts, pictures and videos with both groups, only differing the time we spent discussing this material with each. For example, among the set of images, we selected the logo of the Geneva Pirate Party, a political organization connected with other similar organizations throughout Europe, who have three main principles: the protection of citizens' rights, liberation of culture and awareness that patents and monopolies are detrimental to the functioning of our society. While Olivier and I were unpacking the sense of these principles, one of the pupils directly made a link between computer piracy and paedophiles, 'Pirates on the Internet are exchanging pictures of children they have kidnapped!' 'Where did you hear that?' 'Someone came to school last week and explained to us that a lot of mean people use the Internet to do cruel things to children'. The other pupils nodded. The teacher, half-embarrassed, half-amused, clarified what happened, 'an animator came to the school for a presentation titled "The danger of the Internet". The children have been mixing things up a bit since'. Olivier and I felt it was necessary to spend several minutes discussing piracy in its different aspects and why we wanted to explore this topic with them. Among the visual material that we brought into the classroom, we were careful to assemble different perspectives,



microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Classroom session at C.O.Montbrillant  
Geneva



microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Blackboard listing keywords for the articles at Allobroges Primary School  
Carouge

disciplines and modes of representation. We included references from popular culture (the film 'Pirates of the Caribbean' for example), art history, science and images from mass media. We could build, with this content, an introductory session starting from the history of the commons, through to the commons in contemporary society, the creative commons, piracy and hacking. We also selected excerpts from texts such as Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (2004) and Michel de Certeau's *Invention du quotidien* (Practice of the everyday life) (1990). We spent thirty minutes—certainly too much time for the pupils—explaining all the partners in the project, how they are related to each other and how they would interact in different phases of the collaboration. Some pupils were really agitated at this point and would not pay attention to what we were saying, we tried to focus on our presentation but reminders to keep quiet were regularly made by the teacher, whether Olivier and I wished for them or not. Rather not.

A more dialogic moment followed, with a talk on the Bois de la Bâtie, our common field of investigation. We looked at a map of the area, discussed memories of moments spent in the park and made a list on the blackboard of the varying ways in which people used the different zones of the Bois. Olivier and I asked questions that more precisely address the status of the space in relation to other spaces the students inhabit. The terms of 'public' and 'private' arrived quickly into the conversation, opening the floor for discussing the material Olivier and I brought with us on the concept of the common(s). When we repeated the session with the other class, the students made more elaborate responses; they were especially enthusiastic when we announced to them that we would be making two outings together during the project. We collected little content from this first session apart from notes that we made on the exchanges that followed our presentation.

Step by step, we dissociate ourselves from the traditional school structure by physically changing the classroom's usual order and behavioural norms. For

example, we did not use the teacher's desk and we let the pupils write notes on the blackboard, trying to set the conditions for ideas and new associations to emerge. Olivier and I both navigated between the two groups and spent time discussing the work. Choosing societal or political topics is also a vector for 'non school-like' behaviours, such as chatting while working, copying the technique of a classmate in order to draw something or sitting on the tables. Entering into the classroom in this way, opening out the limits of the permissible actions, acts as a starting point for constructing critical dialogue. It valorizes the search for alternative types of knowledge and can, in turn, contribute to a redistribution of the roles assumed by each pupil within the classroom.

For the second session, Olivier and I presented in detail the list we had made on the Bois de la Bâtie, with additions from the first session. We also presented a suggested structure for our newspaper project. We asked the group of children to each vote for one topic on the list and to then form teams of three or four pupils who had chosen the same topic. The junior high school students would then choose between the remaining topics on the list, constituting groups of five individuals. Each sub-group was assigned with the task of producing an article on their chosen topic. The primary school class opted for the urban family gardens, the animal park, and the mushroom plantation, which had been used for free parties. The junior high school class elected to write three articles. One would be about suicide (there is a bridge, near the park from which many people have apparently committed suicide). Another article would be written on wildlife and animal species found in the woodland, with a focus on bats. The final group would report on a cemetery located just next to the park.

We set up the tables in groups of four in the classrooms and the subgroups started reflecting on how they would investigate and document their subjects. Olivier and I were circulating between the different groups and sharing with them the information we had gathered during the conception phase of *En Commun*.





microsillons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Students from C.O.Montbrillant interviewing social workers from Stop Suicide Association  
Geneva



microsillons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Students from Allobroges Primary School visiting Family Gardens at Bois de la Bâtie  
Lancy





microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Working session with students from Allobroges Primary School  
Carouge



microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Working session with students from C.O.Montbrillant  
Geneva

As a school outing at the Bois de la Bâtie was planned for the next session, Olivier and I suggested that we could conduct interviews with a series of local actors during our field trips, which would act as material for the articles. Questions for the different interviewees were prepared along with a list of equipment—recorder, camera, pens and notebooks to draw. Before the visits, Olivier and I convened meetings with individuals connected to the six topics. School outings are a traditional feature of school life, but are experienced by the pupils as a moment of 'exception', a break from the daily routine. Making field research is offering the possibility to learn and practice a lot of skills, to build an experience of knowledge acquisition both actively and collectively. Olivier and I met the first class at the primary school early in the morning and we walked together to the woodlands. It took us twenty minutes.

It was decided that we would split ourselves between adults and pupils. Aguet, the teacher, agreed to meet with the president of the association of urban gardens, Olivier accompanied the group writing an article about the mushroom farm and went to meet with the farmer, while I was with the group researching the animal park where we met one of the animal keepers. The material was distributed between the subgroups and we all went to our respective appointments. When the whole class met two hours later, everybody wanted to share their experience—some had eaten strawberries from the garden, others had discovered secret tunnels found under our feet for growing mushrooms and others had been helping to feed the animals. Olivier and I gathered all the material from the visits before we walked back to school.

Two days later, we came back with the junior high school class. Pini attended a discussion with a zoologist specializing in the protection of bats in urban environments. Olivier went to a meeting with two social workers in the office of an association on the prevention of suicide, especially among young people. This organization, Stop-Suicide, had been carrying out a campaign on the bridge





microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Working session with students from Allobroges Primary School  
Carouge



microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Working session with students from Allobroges Primary School. A draft of illustration.  
Carouge

bordering the woodlands on its northern side. Together with five students, I visited a recycling and garbage collection site to discuss the recycling politics of Geneva with the person in charge of communication for the plant.

The series of newspaper articles were tackling various topics that could open up debate on the common(s). However, it was interesting that the experience of gathering together information and selecting images also raised questions around how to translate individual ideas into a collective vision. For instance, we agreed on the different options for this common to emerge, via voting for decisions concerning the general (which was also the best way to include the decisions from the two different classes) via forms of consensus in the smaller groups.

In the following classroom sessions, the pupils gave presentations on their respective field trip experiences to their classmates. This offered a space for the students to recall and discuss any important information gathered during the trip and to start to think about specific angles to take when writing their articles. We could confront the experiences we made through the school outings with the content of the different discussions that were held in class before. What have we learned from this specific space on the common(s) and how did it make sense for us, as individual and as group. Moving back and forth between holding discussions in smaller groups and then opening this out to the whole class was very intense and productive. This helped the pupils understand that their experience had to be communicated to others (to their classmates first, then to a broader audience, the readers of the newspaper) and to develop a sense of criticality within the group. Editing the article occurred, once again, through collective work inside the redactors groups. Most of the last session was dedicated to the layout of the articles. Olivier and I let the pupils use our laptops to search for images to complete their work—in most state schools, there is one computer in the classroom and its use is a form of 'privilege'. Only if one is finished with their schoolwork can



microsillons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
 En Commun (2010)  
 Article on Family Gardens from Allobroges Primary School  
 Geneva

they use the computer and browsing the web is forbidden if not under the close supervision of the teacher. Different techniques to translate into common illustrations for the articles the experiences were chosen, from collages to collective design of glyphs, decisions were made depending on the dynamic of each group of redactors. Pupils from the primary school class wanted to have their picture taken to illustrate their articles. Each group of redactors chose a place they like in the school and either Olivier or I took the picture. The junior high school class, when we proposed this idea, rejected it in a united front. This divergence of decisions is made visible in the newspaper.

During the six sessions microsillons held with each class, we tried to investigate the significance and practical implementation of the concept of 'common(s)'. Our last session with the students consisted of a visit to a print workshop to introduce them to the technique of 'offset' printing and also to discuss with them the economy of printing and its role in the diffusion of knowledge and information. The printer we made contact with was known for working with many artists and alternative projects. He spoke passionately about his work to the students and made a demonstration of the different type of printing machines he uses in his workshop. This was another lovely visit and most of the pupils were fascinated with this encounter. This last session was also our last possible exchange with the pupils before the distribution of the newspaper as summer holidays were starting the following week. Although the articles were ready, the general structure of the newspaper and its visual identity were not yet defined.

Once the class sessions were behind us, Olivier and I refined the layout of the articles. In parallel, we were writing our editorial and deciding upon a title for the newspaper: *En Commun* (In common). We invited a graphic designer to help us create a visual identity for the newspaper. After a few sessions, the newspaper was ready to print. Two thousand copies would be printed and distributed not only at

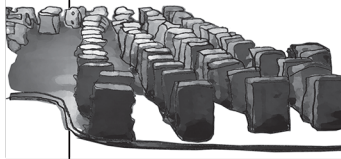


**Dans des galeries** souterraines dont l'entrée se situe à la rampe Quidort, se trouve une champignonnière. Le sous-sol étant un bien public inaliénable, l'entreprise qui utilise les galeries ne peut que d'un droit d'exploitation, obtenu par l'acquisition d'une parcelle en surface. Les élèves se sont intéressés à la champignonnière mais également aux usages inédits qui ont été fait de ce sous-sol. Outre une rencontre avec un employé de l'entreprise Parmentier, des questions posées par téléphone à Monsieur Parmentier, l'article "La champignonnière de la rampe Quidort n'accueille plus de Réardor" (dans : La Tribune de Genève, 5 mars 2010) a été consulté.

## LE BOIS DE LA BÂTIE

### LA CHAMPIGNONNIÈRE QUIDORT

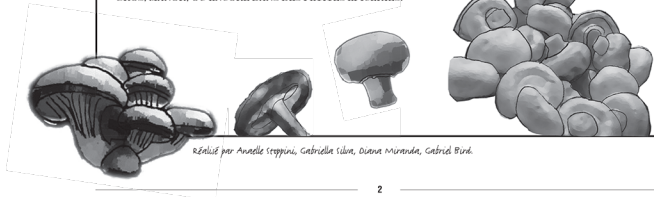
LA CHAMPIGNONNIÈRE SITUÉE À LA RAMPE QUIDORT 4 - OÙ ÉTAIENT ORGANISÉES DES FÊTES - EST MAINTENANT RÉSERVÉE AUX CHAMPIGNONS. DANS CETTE CHAMPIGNONNIÈRE, ON FAIT POUSSER PLUSIEURS SORTES DE CHAMPIGNONS DONT UNE PARTIE EST VENDUE DANS LES COMMERCE GENEVOIS.



CETTE CHAMPIGNONNIÈRE EST EN-PLANTÉE DEPUIS UNE SOIXANTAINES D'ANNÉES. PENDANT QUELQUES MOIS, L'ANNÉE DERNIÈRE DES FÊTES Y ONT ÉTÉ ORGANISÉES (VOIE L'ENTRÉE DE L'UN DES FLYERS À DROITE). MALHEUREUSEMENT, C'EST VIENT PLUS POSSIBLE CAR CERTAINS VOISINS ONT PORTÉ PLAINTES. D'APRÈS LE PROPRIÉTAIRE, CES FÊTES NE CAUSAIENT PAS DE RÉEL DÉRANGEMENT.



L'ENTREPRISE PARMENTIER PRODUIT TROIS SORTES DE CHAMPIGNONS DONT DEUX À LA CHAMPIGNONNIÈRE QUIDORT : LES PLUS BOTTES ORIGINAIRES DE FRANCE ET LES SCHITAKES (ORIGINAIRES D'ASIE). DES CHAMPIGNONS DE PARIS SONT CULTIVÉS À LA PETITE-GRIVE. LES CHAMPIGNONS SONT VENDUS À GENÈVE SOUS LE LABEL "GENÈVE RÉGION - TERRE AVENIR", DANS DES MAGASINS COMME MIGROS, MANOR, OU ENCORE DANS DES PETITES ÉPICERIES.



Réalisé par Annelie Stegmann, Gabriela Silva, Diana Miranda, Gabriel Bink.

microsillons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Article on mushroom farm  
Geneva

the festival but also in a series of cultural places, organizations, cafés and within different city services. We sent six copies to the private address of each student, as we thought that they would not come to the opening, and one copy to the people who agreed to be interviewed. On July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010, we launched the newspaper at the inauguration of the Terrasse du Troc festival in the presence of the teachers and just two of the pupils. This element is interesting to reflect on; that is, the difference in perception between compulsory and volunteer participation in a project. Our diverse experiences show that it is difficult to motivate pupils and their families to attend openings or official moments. Having the opening situated in the middle of the summer holidays certainly was the worst possible moment for assuring a minimum presence of students. So we worked, at the start of the school year, on an exhibition format for each school that participated in the project, valorising the work that they had accomplished, but also disseminating more widely the content that had been produced from the subject matter 'common(s)'—an issue that is largely marginalised in the educational field. Olivier and I regret that we had a rather limited number of sessions and, therefore, we had a dense schedule to follow. We would have preferred to work within a longer timeframe, which would have allowed students to become more involved in the different stages of the newspaper production.





microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Visiting print workshop with students from Allobroges Primary School  
Carouge



microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Visiting print workshop with students from Allobroges Primary School  
Carouge



microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Presenting the newspaper and the common production steps at C.O.Montbrillant  
Geneva





microsillons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
Visiting the backstage  
Théâtre de Carouge, Geneva

### 5.3. Case Study #3: Vive Le Théâtre Questionne (microsillons, 2012-13)

Vive le Théâtre Questionne consisted of a series of visits to the Théâtre de Carouge in Geneva and meetings with a group of eight women from a migrant background. We were in contact with these women over the period of a year. We assembled together in the common production of a series of sentences embroidered onto craft objects, which were then displayed for the duration of three months in the theatre lobby, restaurant and central space.

#### 5.3.1. Context

The project Vive le Théâtre Questionne started with an invitation. Mathieu Menghini, a former theatre director, now teaching on the interconnection between art, democracy and cultural participation at the University for Social Work, invited us to merge microsillons' practice in artistic experiments with non-artists, with his own competencies in theatre and pedagogy. Olivier and I were both quite unfamiliar with the conventions of the theatre and neither were we informed about the methods of 'mediation' developed in this field. But Menghini's proposal was a fantastic opportunity for microsillons to reflect and work outside our usual frames of reference and the norms of contemporary art. Menghini wanted our collaboration to foster a model that could be developed into a long-term mediation project that would be spread throughout Geneva's major theatres. Olivier and I, however, were interested in discovering new modalities of collaboration and having the opportunity to work with Menghini whose shared activity on 'mediation' we had got to know from our professional circles. We appreciated our exchanges, notably for the strong political commitment of Menghini to reflect on the role of cultural institutions in democracy.

The three of us, under the collective name of Groupe L'Aventin (we kept our collective name in all the communication produced for the project) set up basic principles for the model that Mathieu Menghini wanted to develop. The approach

consisted of inviting a group of a dozen people to start a conversation and a common production using the act of watching a play as a starting point. It was important in Menghini's eyes to start by thinking about a form that would be reproducible as an action. As Olivier and I had never conceived a project based on a reproductive structure, we were interested to see how this could come about and open the possibility for a common production to emerge. Therefore, Mathieu Menghini, Olivier and I held a series of meetings to consider how this could work, we would then propose this structure to different theatre directors and to Geneva's cultural promotion service, hoping that they would be interested in hosting our approach to 'mediation' that would reflect upon the homogeneity of the major theatre audiences in Geneva. We constructed a model with three main phases:

- A rather 'traditional' introduction to a play, with readings of excerpts from the script
- A group visit to the theatre to watch a play we would choose in advance from the theatre programme
- A month-long phase of reappropriation and co-production with a group we would invite, based on a series of discussions held beforehand

The professional theatre field in Geneva is vast, vivid and diverse in its formats. There is an interesting alternative scene and five major theatres, both private and public. Our plan was to address important—in term of size and visibility—theatres that qualified as 'institutions'. This was both practical, as we would be able to get funding more easily, and symbolic, as the ambition of the Groupe l'Aventin was to make visible the lack of diversity in the public frequenting theatres and to call for more inclusion in these prominent institutions.

Mathieu Menghini had already received invitations to collaborate from two theatre directors, Hervé Loichemol and Jean Liermier. Both held very different opinions about the scope of a project such as ours. One was convinced that the theatre should be the amplifying chamber of political and social questions while the other was interested more in how such a project could transform the image of his

rather conservative establishment. They were both interested in developing cultural participation in their respective institutions, the Comédie de Genève and the Théâtre de Carouge. The two theatres are fairly different in many regards. The Comédie is a state theatre in the center of Geneva run by a director whose programme focuses on political topics, whereas the Théâtre de Carouge is situated in the secluded and privileged periphery of Geneva and programmes traditional plays from famous playwrights. Based on conversations with the directors, we found that in both institutions the public tended to be largely white, middle to upper class and aged over forty years old. Mathieu, Olivier and I met with the two directors with our proposal and a budget projection that we had made based on hourly wages and production costs.

In the end it was Jean Liermier, the director from the Théâtre de Carouge, who was quick to offer us funds that would cover the costs of two long-term collaborations. In addition to this, the theatre would provide free seats for the groups involved. From the annual performance programme, the Groupe L'Aventin decided to work on the production of *Antigone*, which Jean Liermier was himself staging later that year.

### 5.3.2. Intentions

Mathieu Menghini, Olivier and I wanted to design an educative structure that would open dialogue, debate and questioning, between our different fields of expertise. This was in opposition to the norm in the theatre world, where mediation is mostly focused on explaining a script and then understanding how this text is staged. During the process of designing this project, we were constantly confronted with paradoxical conceptual choices related to the notion of 'cultivated' culture in relation to the social and political function of the theatre in the city. One such question that we asked ourselves was: Is cultivated culture—in this case the traditional theatre play—a form of common that needs to be shared amongst all the classes and groups of a society? How does the concept of universalism

resonate within the field of theatre? Can artists challenge anything in the forms of 'reproductive mediation'<sup>19</sup>? Can a play, a text written in another time and context, be the starting point to produce a common experimentation in knowledge exchange including social, political or personal concerns? In the model for a pedagogical production of the common that we had conceived, the institution plays the role of an ally by supporting the experimentation, facilitating access to information and by providing the means to present the results to its public. The Groupe L'Aventin formulated three core goals for this pilot project:

- Test the potential of theatre as a tool for reflecting on society
- Break the psychosocial, symbolic and cognitive barriers in access to theatre so that the non-specialist audience has the potential to critique the experience for themselves
- Explore the citizen in each individual and their potential to contribute to the life of the city. This aims at making the experience and opinions of those living in precarity or on the margins of society more audible and perceptible.

Before choosing the play, Olivier and I were already interested in collaborating with a specific organisation that had been active in Geneva for four decades offering language lessons, legal support, and professional counselling for migrant women (the use of the word 'migrant' is the choice of the association). The organization, Camarada, also hosts a silkscreen-printing workshop to create designs for notebooks, posters and cards. Camarada is known for providing goods services as well as being very politically active in the neighbourhood where it is located.

How did we make a connection between this organisation and *Antigone*, an Ancient Greek play written by Sophocles? *Antigone*, the main character, is a young

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<sup>19</sup> See Carmen Mörsch's (2015) classification of the different functions of gallery education. 'Reproductive mediation' means to try and harness a repeat audience. This public is one that already engages with the institution, but is persuaded to do so with more frequency and in different ways through varying gallery education formats.

woman who stands against the law, personified in her uncle, the tyrant Creon who is reigning over the city of Thebes. She does so in order to bury her dead brother who died as an enemy of the city. Her uncle sentences her to death for resisting his rule of law. A famous quote from the play is: 'A woman cannot make the law!'. Antigone was written in 441 BC, at a time when democracy in Athens was being established. It is an example of drama playing an important political role as Athenians were involved in the plays. Antigone's tragic entanglement of the political with the personal, the family and the state, the people and their leaders, the feminine and the masculine, raises questions that are still prevalent today. The story of Antigone is the story of an absolute opposition—incarnated by Antigone and Creon—in which no solution is found in time to avoid tragedy. Throughout the centuries, Antigone was adapted and staged by numerous authors who used this symbolic figure of resistance to critique contemporary oppression, for example Bertold Brecht in 1947 and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet who directed a film version in 1991. Mathieu, Olivier and I thought the political dimension of Antigone, the themes of unfair legal action, power and female voice, could be fruitful material to discuss with women from different cultural backgrounds. The question of choosing a select group for this collaboration was quickly answered but remains paradoxical as by opening a frame for debate with a group to fit our brief, being a woman and a migrant, in turn had the potential to expose Mathieu Menghini, Olivier and I to counter-productive bias and false expectations.

### 5.3.3. Actions

After our basic framework to create a common production had been agreed between the theatre, Mathieu, Olivier and I, we contacted Camarada and met the head of the organisation, Caroline Eichenberger, together with three other social workers. Camarada is a woman's world; the users, the social workers and the volunteer teachers (one of the organisation's main tasks is to teach French to new migrant women in Geneva) are all women. An initial discussion and presentation of our project to Camarada provided the opportunity to clarify several unthought-of



aspects of our proposal. The social workers from Camarada tested our motivation and our understanding of the specificity of working with women from different origins and backgrounds. They were not hostile at all but rather practical in their questions and pointing out blind spots in our proposal. While Mathieu, Olivier and I were explaining our interest in developing a social form of mediation by critiquing a traditional Western cultural text from multiple cultural perspectives, the team asked us to which extent we had thought about the possible barriers of language. The employees explained that the women frequenting the association have very different levels of understanding and practice of French. We were certainly aware that a certain level of preparation would be important before seeing the play but we had not considered this as a barrier. Regarding the constitution of the group, Camarada also explained that going to the theatre was simply not possible for single mothers of young children who could not afford a babysitter.

These issues raised the question of how the project's ethos could take on board the exclusion of some women in order to form a working group. Mathieu Menghini, Olivier and I proposed to the staff of Camarada to communicate to the women that we could take on the production budget if needed. We also discussed the time slots available that would not conflict with other activities taking place in the organisation. After this discussion, a further step was to present the project to a larger circle within Camarada including workers, volunteers, and users. Mathieu, Olivier and I were invited to present our project at a weekly meal organized by the organization and prepared by the users (who do so as an alternative form of payment if one cannot afford the fees for the courses on offer, for example). After the meal, we were invited to look around the space, which was versatile and could be transformed for multiple purposes, from sewing courses to parties. A specific service of Camarada was to create jobs for the women. A serigraphy studio was producing small publications to communicate the association's activities and to report the political situation for migrants. Crafted goods were also produced to bring financial support to the charity. After this dialogue, Mathieu, Olivier and I left with the assurance from the staff that they would support our project. They would

find a group of women willing to take part for several months (we did not fix a length of time at this stage, which was seen as a positive approach by Camarada's team) and they agreed to host sessions in their organisation as often as needed. A few weeks after, the person responsible at Camarada sent us an email informing us that a group of eight women was taking shape and we set up a date for a first meeting.

Meeting with the women for the first time was an awkward moment. We did not know who would participate in the project as we only had a list of eight names (we had agreed with the charity on a maximum of twelve). Mathieu, Olivier and I arrived in advance to prepare a small room at Camarada, arranging the chairs in a circle. We also met with a volunteer from the association who would accompany us throughout the production. Once all of the expected attendants had arrived, every person said her name. The women had already held a discussion with members of staff and had agreed to the collaboration. Mathieu, Olivier and I explained our proposal and how we imagined our respective roles would play out in the project. Mathieu would focus on the mediation of the play *Antigone*, while Olivier would be responsible for the common production with the women. Olivier and I explained that we have a very narrow knowledge of theatre but that we were excited to discover the play with them and to think of a common issue of concern that could translate the different opinions and readings we would develop from viewing the play. We thought of this first session as a solid preparation for watching the play. Mathieu Menghini as the 'theatre expert' presented the plot of *Antigone*; he also brought with him different visual materials, printed on A4 for sheets that Olivier and I displayed on the wall. This included drawings of the characters of the play with their costumes in the version that would soon be staged by Jean Liermier, excerpts from different stagings of the play from different times and locations, a family tree of the principle family in *Antigone* and the dynasty who founded Thebes. I was feeling nervous while listening to Mathieu making this presentation and I was looking at the women, trying to interpret their expressions. Were they bored to death? Are they going to stay after this session? After a forty-five minute

monologue from Mathieu, the women had a lot of questions and remarks, which was a sign of their interest and a great reassurance. One of the women said she had read the text to prepare for our collaboration.

We set up the practical details: when was it possible to go together to the theatre (was it important to arrive at the theatre together, to find our seats in the large room of the theatre, to share the same ambiance)? Where should we meet (the sidewalk in front of a McDonald's restaurant was designated as our meeting point)? We also agreed, for the rest of the collaboration, on a frequency of not more than two meetings a month, so that the project would not become a burden for its participants. Two women in the group were retired and the rest were working and/or raising children and Thursday was the only time slot when the entire group would be available.

After this first intense meeting, Olivier, Mathieu and I took a moment to share our impressions and feelings. It was a relief to notice that, despite the warnings of Camrada's team, the level of French of all the women was rather good, as was the general understanding of Antigone's complex situation in the play. At this stage of the project, despite our will to question the representation of women in plays and their role as spectators by studying cultural codes and their potential gendered dimension, I could not see a strong feminist position emerging.

On an evening in October 2012, Mathieu, Olivier and I were waiting for the group of women. It is the first time we met them in a public space. They arrived individually, some in their regular outfits—jeans and simple jumpers—and others wearing clothes that were chosen carefully for this specific moment and more makeup than the first time we met. We did not say anything in advance about a dress code and some women in the group had already experienced an evening going to the theatre in Switzerland. Although we could have organized individual tickets so people could choose the most convenient date, the collective viewing was an important element in the methodology of Groupe l'Aventin. The viewing of



microsillons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
 Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
 Group picture in front of the theatre  
 Théâtre de Carouge



microsillons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
 Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
 In the theatre just before the spectacle  
 Théâtre de Carouge

the play Antigone went well and the staging was quite simple but with a few special effects to keep the attention of the public focused for the duration of the performance. The peak of the evening was the moment we all shared after the show with Jean Liermier who conducted a visit of the theatre behind the scenes, followed by a discussion on his personal approach to the characters of Antigone and her uncle, Creon. We had a lot of pleasure sharing this moment with the eight Camarada women and the two employees from the charity who had joined us.

We always met with the group in Camarada's space for practical reasons but also because it is a space where the women feel safe and confident, they know more than us about how the building is regulated and are happy to facilitate things for us. It provided a form of reciprocity in our exchanges and articulates the idea of a safe zone with the contact zone (Pratt, 1991, see analysis of this case study). We had only one working session in the theatre space to decide how the common production would be displayed. The theatre is where we meet to enjoy a collective evening as spectators (without focusing on other plays here, we end up meeting to watch three theatrical productions all together). Each time we prepare snacks and beverages according to a ritual established by Camarada's users. During meetings we sit in a room in a circle, using tables to write. During these sessions we do not assume a neutral or observational role, but instead begin each discussion with a moment of common 'updating', then a question to start the session. We conducted three open sessions of two hours with no agenda, just framing discussion enough for them not to sink into purely anecdotal inputs. This very open approach of the sessions was an adaptation to the group dynamic, to the different inputs and topics to discuss which emerged from the first discussion after we went to see Antigone. Olivier and I did not want to rush into the common production of a visual proposal for the theatre and really believed that this visual proposal should emerge from the dialogues held with the group.

Our first meeting after the theatre performance took place with Olivier, one employee from the association, all the eight women who came back, and me.

Mathieu could not join us. A vivid discussion started on the characters and theme of the play. Our assembly started a discussion on Antigone and Creon, and also discussed the societal model found in the play, to discover that aspects still exist in current cultures. For example, the brother as a dominant figure, the father as the incarnation of authority, the son as the privileged child, the daughter/sister/wife as having to conform to rules going against her will, beliefs or desires. In the play, Antigone turns her back on her future life as a married woman and mother saying that the love and honor of her dead brother would be enough for her. I was intrigued by how such a position would be considered by the different women in the group, as I would not have made a similar choice if faced a similar situation. Answers were diverse and nuanced and we spent the entire session discussing situations where personal relationships and beliefs create conflicts. The women would tell us about very personal elements of their lives but always relating to our common work; we were mostly ignorant of their situation and what had brought them to Switzerland. Statements were made such as one woman from Liberia declaring that if her son does something illegal in Switzerland, she would denounce him to the police. Another woman who arrived from Iraq a few years ago said she perfectly understood the choice of Antigone and said she would do exactly the same thing for her own brother.

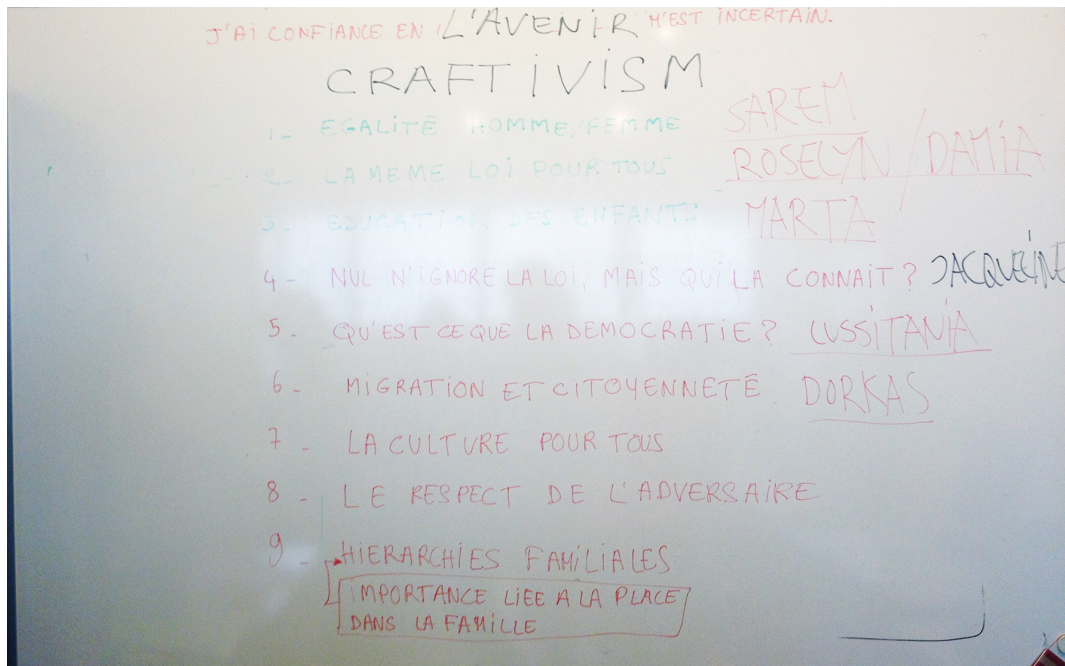
Olivier and I were there to moderate but we also took part in the debate, we did not position ourselves as neutral or external observers, but as members of the group, as it was our role to facilitate the process of bringing the common into a form and to favour the opportunity for each person in the room to speak. Two other sessions of two hours followed this one, operating with the same mode of open discussions on personal topics that emerged from viewing Antigone. Themes emerged like civil rights, education, agency as women in a male dominated society, the family, the difficulty of raising children between different cultural models, isolation, work (what it allows us to do and what it imposes) and justice, amongst others.

Many differences emerged when these issues were mentioned. On education, for example, the morality of punishment towards children was debated. The question of the hospitality in a host country, of what seemed too 'soft' or too 'closed' in terms of asylum law was also at the heart of lively discussions. Some of these positions were completely at odds with the discourse of organisations like Camarada whose mission is to support and welcome migrants. This aspect was later discussed with the employees of the association and they made Groupe l'Aventin aware of the problem that making public a discourse in contradiction with their political position, as an association engaged in the defence of the rights of migrants, would cause.

The relationship developed through another visit to watch a play at the theatre de Carouge: the *Murmure des murs* from Victoria Thierrée-Chaplin, a contemporary (2012) production with a strong visual staging and a mix of dance and acrobatic figures. This outing was very enjoyable and added to the feeling of confidence and respect within our group and, besides, was giving our common production more material to express different affects, cultural backgrounds and relation to cultural institutions.

When the moment to give shape to the production with the group arrived, we tried together to condense the substance of our experience and verbal exchanges in a proposal to the institutional partner and its public. The whole group agreed that the richness of our discussions was the space left for dissensus to be expressed within the group. We wanted to communicate that dialogue can emerge from difference and bring different points of view to a similar experience, which is also a particularity of feminist praxis. It is not about finding who is right or wrong, but rather that expressing and sharing the complexity of each personal situation can produce commonality. The commonality, in the specific context of working with migrant women, whether their status is deemed by the state to be legal or illegal, also consists in the constitution of a space — physical and conceptual — where one can express an opinion or shares an experience. This resonates with what Nicolas-





microsillons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
 Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
 Whiteboard with themes from the writing workshop  
 Camarada, Geneva



Le Strat named a 'site of problematisation' (2016, p. 265) a central feature in the process of bringing the specific preoccupations of a group to become of common interest. The 'site of problematisation' is where the experience of the group can be explored, discussed and controverted and it is always forming at a 'crossroad of stakes and actors' (p.266) From these conversations emerged the elements, which would be shared with the public from the Théâtre de Carouge. We opted for a short writing workshop, on two sessions of two hours, to write sentences expressing the paradoxes and dissensus of our debates.

After two sessions of working on the double-meaning sentences addressing the different opinions and standpoints we developed throughout our discussions, we ended up with the following result:

- Nul n'est censé ignorer LA LOI est illisible.

(Nobody can ignore THE LAW it is unreadable.)

- Les migrants ont le droit de REVER leur coûte très cher.

(Migrants have the right to DREAM they pay a heavy price for it.)

- L'inégalité règne entre LES GENS sont unis comme les dents d'un peigne.

(Inequality reigns amongst PEOPLE who are united like the teeth of a comb.)<sup>20</sup>

- On doit accepter LA JEUNESSE est incompréhensible.

(One must accept YOUTH it is impossible to understand.)

- Il faut respecter SES ADVERSAIRES doivent être traités par le mépris

(One has to respect THEIR OPPONENTS they have to be despised.)

- La liberté de voter c'est LA DEMOCRATIE n'est jamais accomplie.

(Freedom to vote is DEMOCRACY it is never realised.)

- Il faut un accès pour tous à LA CULTURE est différente pour chacun.

(Everybody should have access to CULTURE it is different for everybody.)

- Il faut préserver LA DIVERSITÉ CULTURELLE est une difficulté pour l'éducation des enfants. (One has to preserve CULTURAL DIVERSITY it is difficult when educating children).

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<sup>20</sup> The second part of the sentence is a translation of a saying from Erythrea.



microsilons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
Text stitched on garment in the theatre cloakroom  
Théâtre de Carouge, Geneva



microsillons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
 Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
 Text embroidered on canvas  
 Théâtre de Carouge, Geneva



microsillons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
 Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
 Text embroidered on tablecloth in the theatre cafeteria  
 Théâtre de Carouge, Geneva

We then arrived at the point of having to find a form in order to display these sentences in the theatre and share them with the institution's public. Olivier and I presented the work of several craft artists to the, now seven, women<sup>21</sup>. We thought that this form of infiltration of a political message into public space could serve as inspiration for thinking of other ways of how to imagine combining form and content. We imagined that we could hijack some objects and places in and out the theatre, objects that could be recognised by as many people as possible. We visited the theatre to decide which objects we would hijack with our sentences and where in the building we would disseminate them. We listed together with the group places and/or objects where the sentences can appear in various embroidery techniques: a coat in the cloakroom, a seat in the theatre room, a pillar and a bench in the lobby, a table cloth in the theatre restaurant, a sign at the welcome desk, a cushion on a small couch, in the a trash can in the large public place outside the theatre. It was a direct way to address questions about feminism and how artists can relay, in public space, divergent opinions on education, migrant rights and status as well as language.

The objects were leaning on the strategy of camouflage (we have used similar colors, or fabrics, than the elements already present in the theatre) to instil poetic and intriguing fragments of discourse. The objects themselves were not realised by women from the group and we play with that ambiguity of the 'hand-made' in the craftwork itself as we mixed different stitching methods (embroidery, cross-stitch, mechanical stitching), also addressing the question of 'authenticity' that is often attached to participatory art projects and deconstructing some of the stereotypes attached to migrant women. Olivier and I displayed the craftwork in different zones of the theatre according to the decisions made by the group—the lobby, cafeteria, auditorium, reception, wardrobe, and one on a rubbish bin in the public square where the theatre is located. These sentences, far from offering a

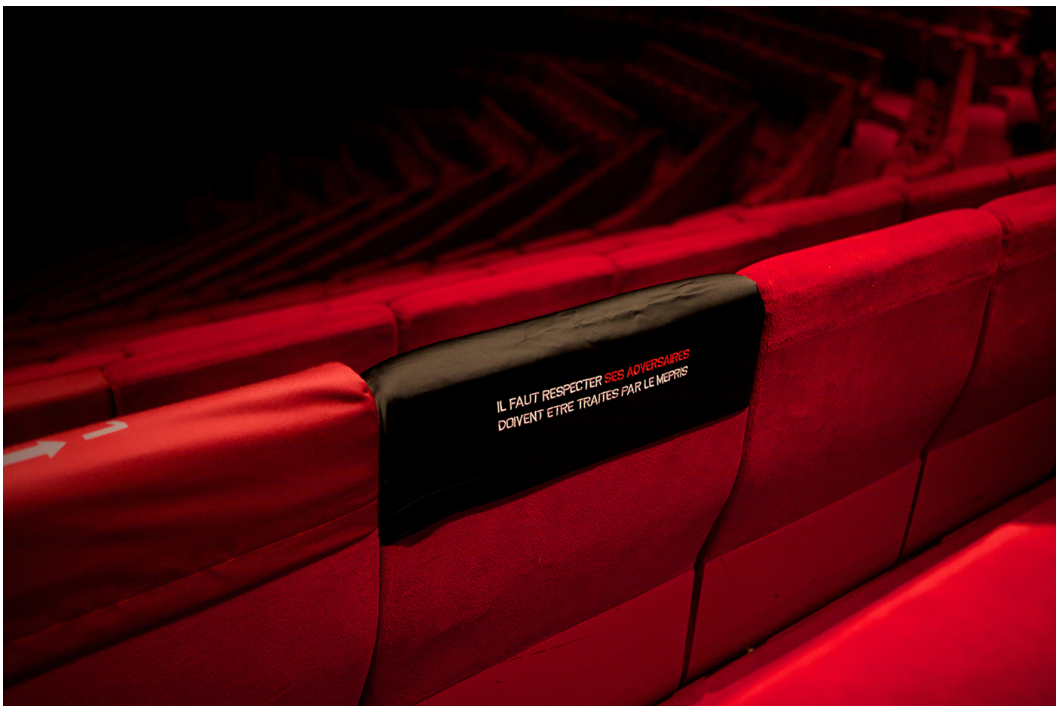
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<sup>21</sup> At this stage in the process, one woman in the group expressed her wish to no longer attend the sessions, saying that she had already spent enough time on the project.

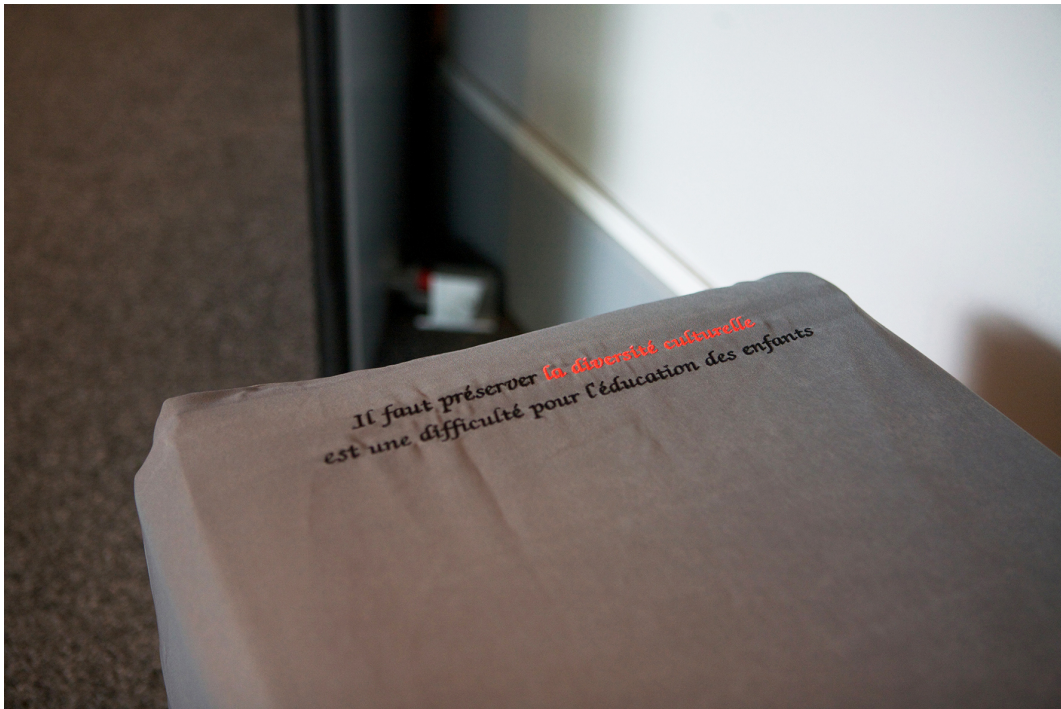




microsillons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
 Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
 Text embroidered on a pillow in the lobby  
 Théâtre de Carouge



microsillons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
 Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
 Text embroidered on theatre seat  
 Théâtre de Carouge

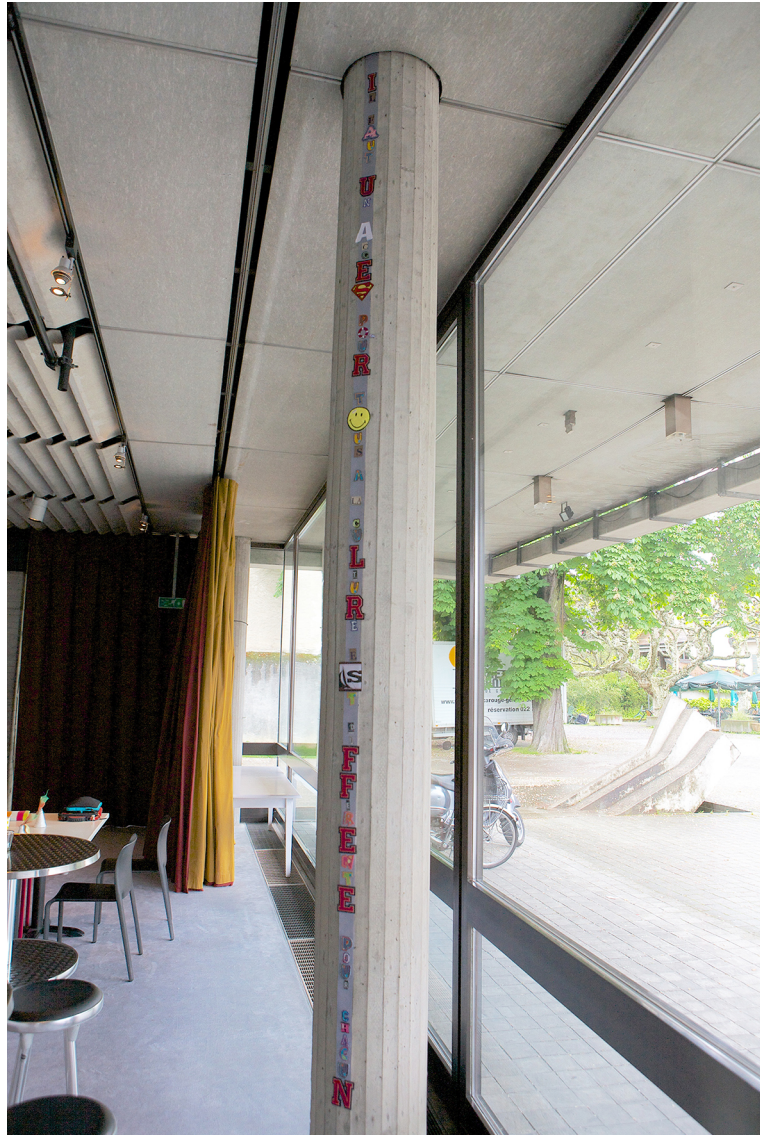


microsilons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
Text embroidered on bench in the theatre lobby  
Théâtre de Carouge

consensus, affirmed the irreconcilable dimension of certain positions. But they were also The last public phase of our collaboration was the presentation of the craft objects to the theatre's audience. The title *Vive le Théâtre Questionne* (All Hail the Questioning Theatre) was proposed by Mathieu, Olivier and I, on the principle of the portmanteau sentences. The opening took place alongside *Figaro's Wedding*, a 1784 play by the French author Beaumarchais. After a convivial moment to officially announce the presentation of the project, a buffet had been set up in the theatre lobby and a 'tour' of the objects was organized for the crowd occupying the lobby before the beginning of the play (the room has a 500 seat capacity, which is rather big for Geneva). We asked the theatre for enough complimentary tickets for each woman to invite one person; some of them came with female friends and others just came alone. One day when I passed by the organization's office to drop off some materials for the project, a volunteer from Camarada gave me an envelope with a card inside, written by the group of women with whom we had collaborated. It was the most moving testimony we had received from all the different projects we have developed. I stayed for quite a while in the office to chat about the experiment and how Camarada's team viewed the approach that we took and our attitude towards the women.

One of the most interesting developments of this collaboration concerned one of the women, Dorka, who brought a lot of politically-situated, engaged and interesting inputs into the common production. She was applying for Swiss nationality and Camarada was helping her to prepare a strong application file. They added to this file the fact that she had taken an active role in *Vive le Théâtre Questionne* as a demonstration of her involvement in Swiss cultural life. This impact that goes beyond the symbolical is not central to the project, but it clearly shows the importance of encouraging initiatives that reinforce solidarity and hospitality to counter exclusion and to make each voice more audible.





microsilons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
Text stitched on on trash been in front of the theatre  
Théâtre de Carouge



## 6. Case Studies Analysis

### 6.1. Challenging authorship: artistic mediation and the institution of common

Based on the case study *Utopie et Quotidienneté*, a hybrid proposition developed by microsillons, between an educational experiment, a curatorial approach and a series of common productions with non-artists, this analysis inscribes the project in a genealogy of radical approaches of art and education by contemporary artists. It then seeks to understand how art institutions can foster the notion of common production despite being based on rather hierarchical and exclusive modes of producing. Part of this process lies in the ability of artists to reflect critically on their role within society and on the privileges of their position, while another aspect could be found in a transformation of the criteria set by institutions to judge artworks. I will finally end the analysis reviewing what microsillons' experiment really challenged and what could have been pushed further.

This chapter focuses on how microsillons challenged the notion of authorship as conceived at the Geneva Centre for Contemporary Art — only artists, collectors or curators had their names on the cartel of the institution before the project — in the specific context of an exhibition, *Utopie et Quotidienneté*, produced from the common activity between artists and non-artists, and curated by microsillons in 2009. At this point in the thesis, it can be broadly understood that the term 'art' covers very diverse practices and that the separation between 'high' or 'cultivated' culture and 'popular' or 'mass' culture is not relevant anymore to the field of contemporary art (Nicolas Le-Strat, 1998). Yet there are still many devices that contribute to the reproduction of a certain conception of art as the expression of an individual talent, originality or sensibility, which are propped up by authorial signature and branded style, arts connection to the market, the visibility of the conditions of production of art and the way that art institutions function. Through the messy entanglement of a production in common with non-artists, pedagogical

tactics and curatorial experimentation from the perspective of artistic mediation, the institution has been invested with a different conception of the exhibition and its making — based on the production of artworks following common activity of artists and non-artists.

#### 6.1.1. Developing a different approach of mediation as artists

As I have described above, in the case study section of this thesis, the collaboration of microscillons with the Geneva Centre for Contemporary Art was based on a mandate to develop mediation projects with groups of non-specialists, who are not regular users of the institution. Due to our practice and training, Olivier and I define ourselves as artists in each context that we work in. There has traditionally been a clear separation between the artist and the mediator (gallery educator) in contemporary art institutions. Their roles are a priori different and a number of signifiers show that these two activities are hierarchized and perceived differently<sup>22</sup>. One of these significant parameters is the notion of authorship. In the art world, the work of art is produced by an artist — sometime a group of artists — and is then selected by a curator and disseminated via an exhibition, a catalogue, press articles etc. The art mediator — or gallery educator — is an important agent in this diffusion process, but mediation has not, until recently, been considered as a site of production or a place of an autonomous discourse or practice in its own right.

Historically, the practice of mediation is anchored, in the Francophone understanding of the term, in a logic that combines the desire to make institutionalized culture more accessible—as in the concept of the democratization of culture<sup>23</sup>—along with, more recently, the development of a quantitative and

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<sup>22</sup> See the microscillons' article on the representation of art education in Swiss contemporary art institutions: microscillons, Lüth, N., Fürstenberg, S. (2013) Kunstvermittlung zeigen – Über die Repräsentation von pädagogischer Museumsarbeit. IAE Journal [Internet]. no.7. Available from: <<https://blog.zhdk.ch/iaejournal/no-7/>> [Accessed 3 February 2017].

<sup>23</sup> André Malraux, the French Minister for Culture in the 1950s describes the role of the state in 'Democratisation culturelle' (cultural democratisation). He says that, 'the state and its institutions must give citizens equal access to legitimised culture'. For Malraux, the arts, the culture 'cultivée' have a

consumerist vision of the art museum experience. This consumption must be delivered through different channels, in particular through the activities of the education department. Thus, at a time when microsillons began to develop projects for the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre, the dominant vision in the French-speaking world was one of mediation as a tool that would facilitate access to legitimized artworks<sup>24</sup>. This vision is reflected in the very term 'mediation', which can imply an, 'interceding between adversaries, with a strong sense of reconciling them' (Williams, 1976, p.205).

We have sought to question the common as a central notion for this institution as artists-art educators and to develop dialogues with people who 'were not there' on the reasons why they 'were not there'. We wanted to confront the institutions with the limits of their discourses on inclusivity. For example, the microsillons project titled *Lieux Communs*, which happened before *Utopie et Quotidienneté* in 2008. *Lieux Communs* is an exhibition of artworks realised by artists with disabilities, which invited reflection about the issue of accessibility not only in its practical, physical but also symbolic aspects: who can exhibit in a recognized institution, on the basis of which criteria?

microsillons worked with a group of residents-artists of the Clair Bois Foundation, a foundation for people with multiple disabilities, to realize a project questioning the notion of accessibility, in the broad sense of the term. The six artists had been participating for several years in video workshops, where, with the help of educators and animators, they produced videos on topics of particular concern to them and sought to deconstruct stereotypes attached to people with

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civilizing function and must be accessible for the entire population. This ideal of a cultured population relies heavily on the concept that certain works, which Malraux calls 'works of civilization', have a universal value and sharing these values contributes to national unity. These artworks are chosen by a limited number of people as a demonstration of taste for the masses (Caune, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> The French government's vision of cultural education in 2007 was understood as follows 'Culture as it is codified is not accessible to everyone, at least immediately. Therefore making it accessible requires the intercession of "mediators" (informants, accompagniers, educators) and, at the same time, the elaboration of mediation procedures' (French Ministry of Culture, 2007).



microsilions with Alexandre Baumgartner, Yvan Mallo, Daniel Rabina, Sabrina Renlund, Salvatore Sortino, José Tena.  
Lieux Communs, Exhibition View, 2008.  
Geneva Contemporary Art Centre

different capabilities.

This group of artists with disabilities produced, during the preceding six months and after several visits to the Centre, a set of videos, texts, photographs and drawings, in which they could comment, more or less metaphorically on the relationship they have with the art institution, how they conceived of their artistic practice, and their role as an artist in the places dedicated to contemporary art. The pieces presented in this exhibition carried a direct critique of the functioning of the contemporary art institutions and their opacity for outsiders.

Studies on the use of (as in the visitation of) contemporary art institutions seem to support this vision by showing that only a small part of the population actually visits art museums. A Swiss study on museums and their publics, *Public et musées en Suisse* (2005), still serves as a key reference point today. According to Valet (2012), the study shows that, 'more than three-quarters of visitors to Swiss art museums have a university or intermediate-level education and that nearly 70% work in middle and senior-level management' (p.12). Therefore, early on in our approach, microsilons was interested in the important relationship between culture and social position proposed by French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Claude Passeron (1969). They analysed a multitude of sociological data to form the conclusion that culture as it is programmed and displayed in museums, art centres, galleries, concert halls, is the product of a socially, politically and economically dominant class seeking to impose values and produce a distinction between high culture, for educated people and popular culture, for the working, popular classes. Following a Marxist perspective, Bourdieu's research avoids universalising his object of study, but places it in a specific moment of history, insisting on the relational dimension of the social realm (Wacquant, 2004).



Illustration extracted from the activity report of the Department of Culture and Sport of the City of Geneva, 2011-2015. Illustration from Mirjana Farkas.

Bourdieu traces the different channels through which individuals within society will acquire a form of symbolic cultural capital via their education and familial environment and how this capital connects with their economic capital, forming a system of class reproduction within French society. The above mentioned study allows me to extend this reading within the French-speaking area of Switzerland. The determinant nature of taste and social behaviour within a society was a strong statement and has influenced many other social theorists since Bourdieu. For the art historian Jean Caune, the development of a mass culture, in opposition to a cultivated culture, has replaced the social opposition of elitist culture/popular culture. Thus, mass culture, if it impacts on all societal layers, is often identified depreciatively; objects produced by means of mass communication (films, books, music) being partially excluded from the field of culture by the 'proponents of an elite definition of culture' (Caune, 2008, p. 83).

In Switzerland, the measurable lack of social diversity in the public attending cultural institutions triggered a series of decisions made by Pro Helvetia (a public foundation 'dedicated to support and disseminate Swiss arts and culture') and the Federal Office for Culture to redefine cultural policy. This made mediation and the support of pedagogical actions aimed at 'non-publics' (persons not visiting the art institutions) a priority. This focus made it possible to carry out an important census and evaluation of practices in the field of art mediation in Switzerland. Carmen Mörsch (2013), a specialist in this field, played a central role in this process and identified five functions for cultural mediation: affirmative, reproductive, deconstructive, reformative and transformative. In short she describes these different functions as:

- A cultural mediation can be said to be affirmative when it is dedicated to the promotion of the activities and discourse of the institution. Such mediation can be seen as problematic because it legitimizes the institution and risks reinforcing the inequalities it is supposed to reduce between people who have a privileged access to culture and others (Mörsch, 2013, p.118).



- Mediation has a reproductive function when it aims to address audiences who do not yet visit the cultural institution (non-publics) in order to consolidate the institution by demonstrating a growth in its audience. This desire to reach new audiences can be problematic for, 'it focuses on the absent—defining them as ignorant of the benefits that institutional culture could provide them' (Mörsch, 2013, p.118).

- Mediation is deconstructive when the different actors involved can formulate institutional critique. Mediation can then assert itself as a place where an alternative discourse on art can be produced and shared, outside of specialized and legitimized circles (Mörsch, 2013, p.119).

- Cultural mediation is reformative when it can lead to an improvement of in the way that the institution relates to its public from an experienced and embedded engagement with more diverse audiences (Mörsch, 2015, p.113).

- Finally, mediation has a transformative function when the institution becomes the place of a social co-construction. This occurs when the mediation taking place leads to a transformation of the institution's own structural organization and role in society. The risk with this is that the mediator instrumentalizes participants to facilitate this transformation (Mörsch, 2013, p.120).

For Mörsch, the same institution has the potential to develop a mediation that fulfils all of these functions, or indeed only one. When microsilons cultivated its approach for the Geneva Centre for Contemporary Art, we were interested in establishing a mediation that would be both deconstructive and transformative. As a collective of artists working within an institutional environment we wanted to advocate the idea that mediation is a common experience, as Carmen Mörsch points out, rather than a single-channelled knowledge transfer. Olivier and I wanted to open institutional spaces up to other perspectives. We had the ambition of transforming the institution so that it would take into account the reality of a society where numerous inequalities are interlinked and could help to

counterbalance this by becoming a place where different audiences may interact. Carmen Mörsch writes that, 'instead of "introducing" those "excluded" from the exhibition, it is the institution itself which, isolated as it is from so many different realities, needs to be carefully familiarized with the latter' (Mörsch, 2009a, p.101). This approach requires a rethink in how art can be produced together rather than simply being consumed. As Mörsch explains, 'Cultural mediation can be understood as an opportunity to contribute actively to the elaboration of art and its institutions and this legitimization is centred on the potential of co-construction' (Mörsch, 2013, p.159). In its attempt to transform the institution to make it radically democratic and multifarious in its approaches and practices, so-called 'transformative' educators see pedagogical structures as privileged spaces (because they are dedicated to education and are less highly valued and thus less 'supervised') for critique and for the development of alternative practices. Mörsch writes:

'Gallery education—and this is its principal purpose—creates the spaces to enable resistance in cultural practice, outside the elitist enclaves of artistic consumption and the populist strategies for increasing audience numbers [...] Gallery education, understood thus, is capable of transforming every single person involved: the institutions, the educators, the audience, the art production' (2009b, p.16).

A series of innovative experiments by German-speaking mediation collectives (sometimes operating independently from any institution) in Austria and Germany in the 1990s, were practicing during the emergence of the term 'artist mediation' (Maset, 1995). Rather than serving as agents to transmit the taste of art, the mediation of these collectives claimed a form of autonomy from cultural institutions and, above all, used aesthetic and discursive tools borrowed from the field of art. Some writings of authors including Foucault and Bourdieu inspired these collectives in their plans to challenge reproductive mediation practices. For Foucault, it is not so much about criticizing the institution from the outside, as it is

thinking about the power relations that are being exercised within and how to transform them. It is not a question of denying the importance of institutions in power relations but to suggest that we should rather analyse the institutions from the power relations they seek to maintain rather than the opposite (Foucault, 2001, p. 1058). By placing ourselves in the field of mediation, the ambition of Olivier and I was to occupy a place in the institution from where we could imagine how alternative relationships to the ones already existing could be developed. Occupying the position of mediator was particularly interesting, because it is a peripheral role that has been developed to form a direct relationship with people who are outside the institution. We undertook the double challenge of changing both our position as mediators in the institution and also changing the way in which the contents of the exhibitions were produced, by establishing 'common' as a principle and setting the conditions for a relationship with people other than the 'insiders'.

microsilons had great autonomy in the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre in the ways we worked and what we produced —and we were still developing in parallel our own projects, like Bureau Mobile at least in the first months of the collaboration. The Mobile Office is a tool we conceived, together with the designer Izet Sheshivari. Each of the projects involving Mobile Office creates specific and contextual collaborations to open spaces for research, discussion, critical thinking, and creativity connected to exhibitions, institutions, projects or public space. It is a working 'place' for microsilons and groups with whom the collective works. It also generates unexpected encounters. This mobile structure is not intended to be a traveling exhibition space with a fixed identity or a trademark image. Its deployment is always as a simple object whose main quality is to be functional in a particular context. The Mobile Office is folded and redeployed as needed, taking advantage of its modularity. It can then be transformed into an exhibition structure, a projection tool, a printing unit... It does not present itself as a work of art but acts as a vector for performative exchanges within public space. Mobile Office activities take place in a limited time frame: rather than grow into an increasingly established



microsilions activating the Mobile Office in the streets of Geneva  
Mobile Office (from 2009)  
Geneva

structure, during projects it loses the elements until its complete disappearance. The Mobile Office is an experimental, flexible, nomadic and temporary apparatus.

With strong responsiveness, the Mobile Office was echoing the local cultural and political events as well as multiplying the spaces and tools for speech, with its ability to get 'off the beaten tracks' of art within public space. Following the same logic, the program responded to desires, opportunities, meetings. It is open and polymorph. This idea of being versatile, adaptable and of a possible escape, was important to balance with more fixed relationships, as the one we were developing with and through the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre.

A link with the exhibition's programme was sometimes totally absent and Olivier and I could work on broader institutional questions, developing relationships with groups over time. For example, microsillons proposed projects in which the institution was directly criticized. We knew, for instance, artists who were working in residence at a home for people with disabilities, and decided to produce a collective exhibition of 'site-specific' works from their collaboration. Many of the works directly criticized the lack of infrastructure for people with disabilities, which in turn brought concrete changes to improve the physical accessibility of the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre.

The project opened a crack and created changes beyond the representation of content. An article in an independent Geneva-based newspaper — the *Courrier* — underlined the quality of the project and how it formulated a critique not only of the physical space of the institution, but also of the hierarchies between 'official art' and 'outsider art'. It was the first time in the history of the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre that a newspaper article was dedicated to a mediation project, which was an important recognition of mediation as a site of alternative discourse production within the institution. It demonstrates just one of the paradoxes in our collaboration with the Centre that this process of recognition first required

microsilons to defend a dimension of autonomy through artistic authorship: the recognition of a certain originality— what Garcia-Anton named an 'innovative approach' — facilitated the possibility for common productions to take place within this institution. Defending the importance of the common and at the same time working to reclaim a label from within an emerging field, an area that was originally conceived as part of the service provided by the institution, is a tension that was necessary to challenge power relationships for the sake of the common project.

The term mediation holds different meanings depending on its context of use, whether religious, political, judiciary or cultural. I am interested in mediation as a term in which it not only means the process of mediating an object through specific social relationships, but where it is also, 'a direct and necessary activity between different kinds of activity and consciousness with [...] its own, always specific forms' (Williams, 1976, p. 206). Artistic mediation can become a privileged space of criticism, being within the institution, but on the periphery of artistic discourse itself, thus ensuring a greater space of freedom that takes place in connection with social actors from outside the institution. The artist Ana Bilankov brings an interesting point of view on the autonomy that mediation has the potential to develop vis-à-vis the legitimized work of art (we were able to put this into practice, thanks to trafo K., in the exhibition *Utopie et Quotidienneté*) in an article entitled *Plädoyer für eine Kunstvermittlung im leeren Raum* (Bilankov, 2002). By imagining an artistic mediation that would take place in an empty space, without any work of art, Bilankov raises the question of the interdependence of this type of activity in relation to the work of art and, moreover, it raises a crucial point for this thesis, namely: What is the point of mediation acquiring autonomy rather than remaining an "additional" service for cultural institutions?

In her proposal, Bilankov not only opens the idea that mediation can be of interest in and for itself, just like a work of art or an exhibition, but also that mediation can address art at another level; by focusing on the empty space of the institution, it can interrogate the very functioning of the art world itself. This

perspective reveals a space for imagining projects where a question can initiate an open-ended mediation project. In parallel with the development of critical mediation, the world of art was undergoing a social turn<sup>25</sup>. Both in expression and form, the boundaries between art and mediation became more and more blurred. However, the boundaries of the legitimating system have remained the same, in that mediation, even that which is 'artistic' or 'critical' is symbolically not considered equal to 'art'. And if the term 'artist mediation' shows an evolution of the practice, it does not testify to any cases of institutional validation for these projects. However, it is important to note, as microsillons has observed in different research frameworks on mediation in French-speaking Switzerland, that more and more projects are being developed that critique hegemonic cultural discourse and modes of inclusion. Some of these practices have been made visible and valued in part thanks to the, 'educational turn in curating' (Rogoff, 2008) and Janna Graham's reading of the benefit brought by this turn to gallery education as a discipline (Forsman, Eva et al., 2015).

It may appear contradictory to discuss authorship, but the way that we labelled our work was a significant change in the organization of exhibition making and knowledge production for the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre. microsillons' mediation projects were signed by us and with the names of all of the people involved (we would actually produce an imprint for each project). It is this visibility that allowed Olivier and I to relocate our practice from the periphery to the centre of the institution, to rethink the frontiers that prioritize and neutralize the production of art and to overcome the situation described by Jean Caune that, 'art gives rise to more and more mixed formats and yet these artefacts are considered, in their respective fields, as belonging to separate domains without porosity or exchanges' (Caune, 2008, p 29). *Utopie et Quotidienneté* was an experiment of porosity, of productive dialogue between artists, pupils, teachers, architects, workers, citizens and educators.

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<sup>25</sup> This term was coined by Claire Bishop in *The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents* (2006).

Finally, when she describes the different functions of mediation, Carmen Mörsch underlines that deconstructive and transformative approaches increase the level of tension between institution and gallery education department when expanding. A self-critical understanding of education and its power relations is necessary in order to produce a deconstructive and transformative form of gallery education. *Utopie et Quotidienneté* was an occasion to test this hypothesis a bit further, trying to push the logic of transformation — presenting projects based on a collective authorship, produced by artists and non-artists, to use the exhibition space for debating the role of art in connexion with educational practices and its potential for society at large — as far as possible, and rethink the key parameters of the production of art through this curatorial project.

#### 6.1.2 Defending common productions with non-artists in contemporary art institutions

The experience that Olivier and I had working on mediation projects within the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre during four years was not really helpful in anticipating the issues around authorship and property that we encountered with the curatorial project *Utopie et Quotidienneté*. Moving from the peripheral activity of the institution to its central one, the production of exhibitions, Olivier and I saw as a simple transfer, at a bigger scale, of the practices and discourses developed in the previous years. But as Gregory Sholette writes, 'Obviously, there's the contradiction of being anticapitalist and at the same time feeling that you need to have capitalist institutions in order to just keep things running' (e-flux, 2017). Conscious of this contradiction but confident in our capacity to challenge this capitalist dimension at the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre, we believed our access to the exhibition spaces, as co-curators of a complex project, was the first manifestation of a deeper transformation. The practice of *microsillons* has always been anchored in a reflection on the role of cultural institutions, in particular because the collective was formed after Olivier and I both took part in a project linking a cultural institution with an educational institution. So, to talk about our



relationship with the institution and go beyond the idea that we should be outside to imagine alternatives, we often quote the following by Andrea Fraser, 'It's not a question of being against the institutions. We are the institution. It's a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to' (2005, pp. 278-283).

The kind of institution *microsilons* wants to be and contribute to is an institution of the common and it is in this spirit that we have developed our collaboration with the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre. *microsilons* advocates an understanding of common, following Dardot and Laval, as a set of instituting practices in connection with constituted institutions where a group can engage in a collective and self-organised activity to produce something—tangible or intangible—for the use of the group or beyond. Thus, for Dardot and Laval, it is necessary to develop the institutions of the common as, 'a specific form of social organization' (Williams, 1976, p.169). To do this, they refer in particular to the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis who suggests instituting what he calls a radical imaginary (Castoriadis, 1975) to reinforce the importance of the 'possible' in existing institutions. This instituting of a radical imaginary is not made from nothing but from another imaginary that Castoriadis calls an instituted imaginary, ie. a set of material and immaterial elements (conceptual tools, norms, types of relationship) underpinning existing institutions (Castoriadis, 1975). The way *microsilons* developed its practice at the Geneva Contemporary Art Center aimed to create a radical imaginary investigating the margins or peripheral activities of the institution. This would enact an imaginary based on common, self-organisation, dialogue and difference.

The Geneva Contemporary Art Centre operates according to an instituted imaginary that corresponds to a certain conception of art. Even if contemporary art and its institutions are a priori concerned with diversity and inclusion, the reality is more complex and it is necessary to apprehend it to propose alternative operations, to develop an instituting imaginary. The Geneva Contemporary Art

Centre, created in 1974 on the basis of a private initiative, is part of the network of Kunsthallen (art galleries) in Switzerland. These places, established in the tradition of the German Kunstverein from the mid 19th century, took over the distribution and promotion of so-called avant-garde works. Thus, even if it is no longer directly visible today, the commercial dimension and the promotional role of certain practices related to the art market remain an important part of the instituted imaginary of a place like the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre and the artists shown there were also present in the art market. The only person deciding the Centre's programme was Katya Garcia-Anton, the director, with the agreement of a committee formed of art collectors.

There are many examples of contemporary art institutions working with different organisational models and defending artistic practices that reinforce their positioning. I will name two structures, defined and defining themselves as institutions, which promote collective management and modes of functioning borrowed from self-organisation. The first is in France, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, a city on the periphery of Paris, and the second is the Shedhalle, based in an alternative cultural centre, the Rote Fabrik, in Zürich. The Shedhalle project has existed since 1980, while the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers opened in 1994. Both institutions operate with teams who are in charge of programming for a limited period of time. The collective dimension and the time limitation avoid the concentration of power that often characterizes cultural institutions. I had many occasions to go to these two places while I was living in Paris and later in Zürich and the difference in content in comparison with other older and bigger cultural institutions was reflected in the more complex and fragmented identity of the two spaces.

When it first started, the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers was a pioneer in France for dialogical art, performance art, socially engaged art or political art. The mix of disciplines and formats was a translation of the common process of decision-making preceding each project or research. Another specificity of the functioning

of the Laboratoires is the obligation to include an artist in the team responsible of programming the space. In a discussion with Mathilde Villeneuve, member of the 2002-2018 team, she explains that this regulation forced them to discuss what the role or status of the artist would be, as is the work of managing an institution really compatible with the pursuit of an art practice? She explains different strategies taken by the artists who were members of the team to address this question, 'some declared that their occupation in the team was an art residency while others paused their artistic work to focus on the tasks of programming'.

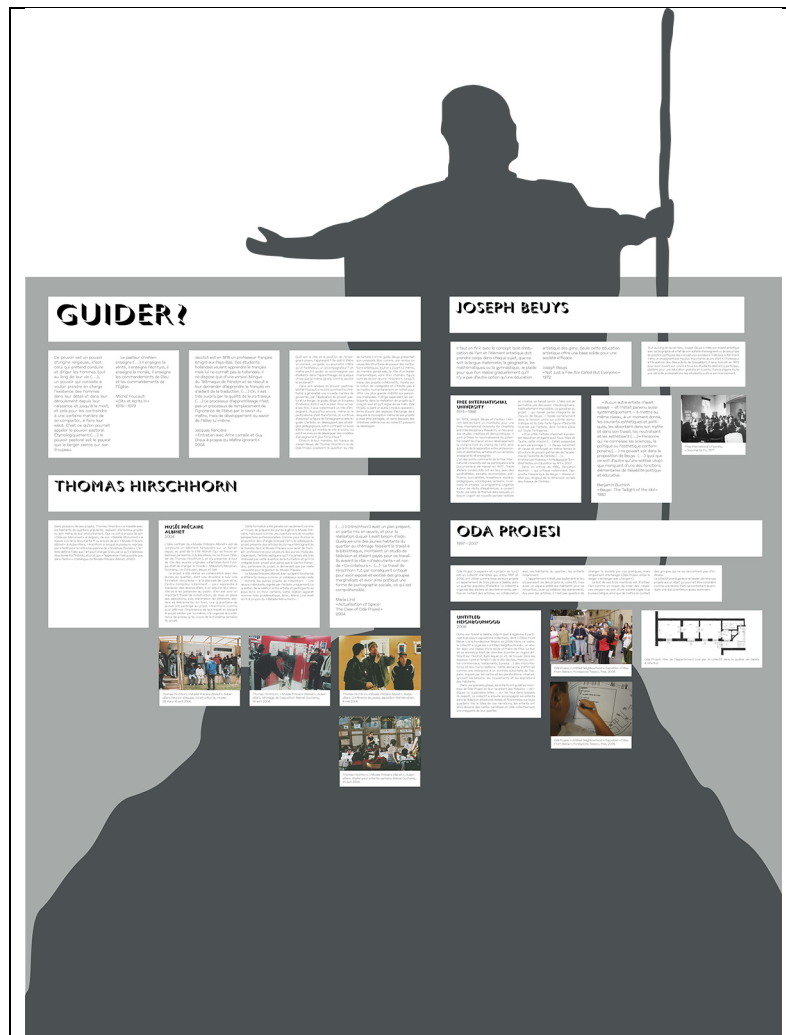
These examples are inspiring but they do not apply to the situation of microsilons promoting the common within an existing, hierarchized, contemporary art institution. I would like now to come back to the way in which the field of gallery education played a role in rethinking the concept of the common from existing institutions and their hierarchization of discourse. In an event called 'Educational turn: Internationale perspektiven auf vermittlung in museen' (Educational turn: international perspective on mediation in museums), by the Schnittpunkt organization in Vienna in 2010, the art educator and theorist Nora Sternfeld, who participated in *Utopie et Quotidienneté* with her collective *trafo. K*, introduced Irit Rogoff's talk saying that gallery educators and artists had been somehow left out of the debate about the educational turn, which has focussed on a curatorial discussion. In her article 'The unglamorous task', Sternfeld criticizes the manipulation of art education by curators, 'it becomes clear that the "educational turn in curating" functions as a turn exclusively for curators. It instrumentalizes "education" as a series of protocols, bypassing its complex internal struggles with notions of possibility and transformation' (e-flux, 2010). This is reflecting very accurately the situation we experimented in our dialog with the institution and the tensions we experimented to defend a space ruled differently through common activity.

The critical educator Janna Graham shows that this curatorial trend around education, in a neo-liberal context, could still provide a frame for critical art

education projects. For Graham, the educational turn relates to the neoliberal discourses and practices linking creativity and education. It is also linked with the need for novelty, of turns, in art institutions, but can paradoxically provide a platform for critical gallery education to question, for example, the idea of artistic genius and to propose alternatives (Graham, 2010). Over the course of several years, Graham developed a satellite of the Serpentine Gallery, a neighbourhood space called the Centre for Possible Studies, where inhabitants and merchants from the area of Edgware Road in London could choose the content of the programme and participate in different research proposed by artists in residency. The Centre for Possible Studies was using its satellite status to propose open-ended projects on very long-term bases, with groups of non-artists and resisted for several years the institutional pressure to be more predictable and consensual.

Another example of mediation in response to the educational turn is the project *Transductores* (Transducers) started in 2008 in collaboration with the University of Granada in Spain by art teacher Antonio Collados and educator Javier Rodrigo. The project articulated three different phases: a curatorial dimension presenting an archive of projects in an educational centre, linking art with pedagogy; an experiment of self-organised education called 'Aulabierta'; and thirdly, the activation of a series of multipliers or continuity work in the local context of Granada. In this way, *Transductores* was originally thought of as an organic project containing various dimensions of cultural and educational work. It had the intention of combining in one single dimension, pedagogical, collaborative work in the field of art and cultural policies.

*Transductores* opened at exactly the same time as *Utopie et Quotidienneté* and we learned about this project while Oliver and I were inviting people for a round-table in the context of the exhibition. We invited the two temporary curators to take part and started an on-going conversation with them in a commitment to a vision of a politically engaged contemporary art of the common.



microsillons  
 Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 Pannel 'Guiding' in the documentation section  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

We engaged a dialogue with Javier Rodrigo, who joined the Geneva round-table pointing out both the potentiality and limitations of the exhibition model to translate experimentations. If *microsillos*' intention through *Utopie et Quotidienneté* was to propose various understandings of how a pedagogical experiment can be shaped into an artistic form and engage different relations with the exhibition's visitors, the exhibition format was somehow flattening these differences. But for *microsillos*, a central concern was to advance the idea of the cultural institution as a place to practice the common and, therefore, we believed it was important to show the results from the experimentations.

### 6.1.3. Redefining the status of the artist

If we want to make the cultural institution become the place of a common practice this implies, besides changes in the functioning of this institution, that artists question their roles and redefine themselves as commoner(s).

If the question of the common has been avidly discussed since the 1990s, this can be attributed to a second movement of enclosure that emerged, sometimes called the new enclosures, which specifically tries to impose new forms of ownership on knowledge, information or culture (and by extension on many elements of life) through the reinforcement of copyright (Dardot and Laval, 2015a). These new enclosures in the field of knowledge are allowing many private companies to develop lucrative activities, further limiting the dissemination and sharing of a broad concept of cultural property. The different international trade and commerce agreements also reflect, by their specific interest in intellectual property (see the creation of the WTO and TRIPS in 1994), a perpetual movement towards world domination by a few nation-states. A merge between intellectual property rights (copyright) and industrial property rights (patents) brand all forms of knowledge with an economic dimension: the knowledge economy. Dardot and Laval quote Maurice Cassier, who sees the extension of the patent principle as the introduction of a new model that facilitates the creation, extension and protection

of markets (Maurice Cassier, interview, 2001). In the face of these strategic alliances, a resistance based on the defence of the common(s) is organised in different activist groups and social organisations (Dardot, Laval, 2014, p.117).

How do these questions translate into the world of contemporary art, which has not been cut through by such a change, but has remained a field in which the authorial signature and the market have always remained central? Even artists who are interested in social questions seem to develop a signature style. Olivier and I made this point in *Utopie et Quotidienneté*, in the documentary section 'Guiding?' The panel gathered around the concept of 'pastoralism'<sup>26</sup>, as developed by the philosopher Michel Foucault, interrogating the artist's position in pedagogical and collaborative projects. Foucault addresses this concept of pastoral power in several texts, showing how Christendom implemented a system where the leader dominates the people 'for their own good', for each one's salvation. Foucault differentiates this form of domination from the power of former 'war kingdoms', where only victories would lead to domination. Foucault also discusses how, as a shepherd, the leader must know each and everyone of their sheep personally and 'teach' them how to behave from birth to death. This concept of pastoralism is useful for anyone working in collaborative art projects or in school contexts, to think critically about the position of the artist(s) engaging in such a process. Working for the people's 'own good' is a slippery position and being conscious of the power structures we can develop in such contexts allows us to discuss and challenge them.

On the same 'Guiding?' panel, we chose examples to discuss how the concept of pastoralism can apply in the field of socially engaged art practices. The

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<sup>26</sup> Pastoralism, or pastoral power is, according to Foucault a form of power derived through the traditions of Christianity that operates in democracies: pastoral power. Foucault writes on pastoral power that, 'This power is a power of religious origin, one which aims to guide and direct men [sic] through their entire lives [...], a power that consists in wanting to take charge of the existence of men [sic] in all of its detail and activity from birth to death, in order to constrain them to behave in a certain manner, and ensure their salvation. This is what we could call pastoral power' (Foucault, 2007, p.175).

first example was Joseph Beuys whose practice, at the intersection of speech, performance and pedagogy was based on his appropriation of the religious figure of the shaman, was completely integrated and valorised in the art market (Bishop, 2012, p. 243). Our second example was Thomas Hirschhorn, the Swiss artist who does not want his practice to be qualified as community-based or socially engaged art. He prefers to use two terms, 'presence' and 'production'. Olivier and I always found this position intriguing and the two terms are interesting to reflect on what takes place during any socially engaged art project. Nevertheless, it also articulates the presence of the artist as the condition for the artwork to exist.

Examining these two artists as a central node for reflecting on the social dimension of art raises the question of authority in a conflict with the very principle of common production. By forming ourselves as a collective, in the context of an art university, where it was not possible to be evaluated as a group, we chose to be part of the multitude, according to the reinterpretation of this term made by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. They conceive the multitude as a dual concept, as a 'socially existing force in resistance to neo-liberal domination' and as a 'trend toward the realization of democracy' (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p.260).

To recapitulate Dardot and Laval's concept of the common, they describe it as the establishment of a guiding principle for society, by prescribing the instauration of the common enterprise, based on co-decision of workers to ensure the sustainability of this enterprise. In this way the common offers an alternative model to the dominant capitalist one, which is based on the economic profit of shareholders. Shifts that microsilons caused by, for example, inviting other artists to take part in *Utopie et Quotidienneté* and applying conditions of remuneration previously unseen in the institution, represent examples of how this alternative model could be, but does so from within an institution of contemporary art. We could talk about a form of peer-to-peer initiative, or solidarity between artists that is in contradiction with the model of competition that prevails in the world of art. We wanted to include in the design of *Utopie et Quotidienneté* this ethic of



networking, sharing tools, principles and convictions between people with similar goals. Beyond a first circle of guest artists, throughout the project, we met—through visits, the organization of a round-table, the diffusion of our gazettes—people with whom we still work today. For example, the research project *Another roadmap for art education*, formed an international network of actors from museums, universities, schools, and independent cultural and educational workers, who practice and explore cultural education as a practice committed towards social change. The idea of a network within *Utopie et Quotidienneté* was also practiced at the local level, in the numerous connections produced within each of the common productions, bringing together many associative or institutional partners with the actors directly involved in them.

This paradigm very clearly differs from the above-mentioned model of the isolated artist, who might be a guide for the flock but not part of it. If the socially engaged art practice strongly challenges a modernist conception of the artist, it is also integrated into the art world. If, as Greg Sholette writes, 'socially engaged art practice is becoming such an attractive paradigmatic model for younger artists' (2016, p.219), the risk is that this new model of 'artist critic' will follow the 'new spirit of capitalism'<sup>27</sup> as described by Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski (2007). This enterprising model is adaptable, flexible, self-organised, going from one project to the other, in a way that is now reinforcing rather than resisting the extension of neo-liberal power. Socially engaged art practices today are seen by Gregory Sholette as two opposed polarities:

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<sup>27</sup> The new spirit of capitalism is a transformation based on the « abandonment of the specific ideological features » characteristic of pre-1960's capitalism towards the « emergence of a new image of firms and economic processes » aiming at providing « those whose commitment is indispensable for the expansion of capitalism - the successors to cadres - with self-evident reasons for the 'right actions' (markedly different, as we shall see, from the recommendations made in the 1960s); a discourse legitimating these actions; encouraging prospects for individual development; the chance for people to project themselves into a future that was restructured in line with the new rules of the game; and the suggestion of new modes of reproduction for the children of the bourgeoisie, and upward social mobility for others. Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007, p. 57).

'It is for the better when social practice and community-based artists engage with the political, fantastic or even resentful impulses of people, a process that can lead to class awareness or even utopian imaginings much as we saw with Occupy Wall Street. It is for the worse when the social body becomes prime quarry for mainstream cultural institutions and their corporate benefactors who thrive on deep-mining networks of 'prosumers' bristling with profitable data' (Sholette, 2016, pp. 219-220).

It is in this field of contradictions and complexity where *microsilons* sets out its own approach, which implies rethinking the status of the most symbolic element of artistic practice, the work of art.

#### 6.1.4. Changing judgement criteria through common production

In *'Droit de cité'* (1998), the French philosopher Etienne Balibar considers that the work of art is the subject of three fictions serving the logic of the art market that must be discarded if one wishes to defend a democratic conception of the artistic sphere. He identifies a fiction of eternity (the fact that the work will always exist in time), a fiction of evidence (the work carries a fixed meaning and it is up to the viewer to apprehend it) and a fiction of ubiquity (the work will always be the same, wherever it is presented). I will add to this list the fiction of the unique creator at the origin of the work.

Thus, *microsilons* has sought, through the framework proposed for *Utopie et Quotidienneté*, to move towards deconstructing and counterproposing these fictions. We have worked to invert these concepts to achieve what Pascal Nicolas-Le Strat (2000) named a 'radical non-identity of the work', a space in-between the contributions of the different actors, artists and non-artists involved in the projects.

A large part of *Utopie et Quotidienneté* is based on the exhibition as a medium and the presentation of art produced in common as discursive elements of

this demonstrating the connections between art and pedagogy. This combination is rather specific and served to combine historical and thematic research with experimental production. For the latter, Olivier and I were looking for practices that produced forms, yet the common production could not be reduced to this final form or to a completed object. On the other hand, the production of a common form is a step in the right direction for finding a construction of the common as its physical presence in the exhibition space questions the democratic potential of the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre and its capacity to challenge its own selection criteria.

Nicolas-Le Strat writes that, 'It could be the very meaning of a democratic project to base its production of aesthetic or cognitive forms on the idea of 'entrer en rapport' (making relations) (2000). However, the purpose of *Utopie et Quotidienneté* was distinct from practices that the curator Nicolas Bourriaud defines as 'relational aesthetic' (Bourriaud, 2002). Behind this term, Bourriaud stylistically and thematically convokes different practices that are linked by, 'the same theoretical and practical horizon' (2002, p.45) that are based on social exchanges. For Bourriaud, 'a work can function as a relational device with a certain degree of randomness, a machine to provoke individual or collective encounters' (2002, p.30). The criterion for relational aesthetic practices therefore is an interactive environment that is constructed both by the artist and the public. Some of Bourriaud's arguments sound close to the motivation for *microsillos*' practice, 'It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows' (2002, p.45). The art practices that support his theory produce several paradoxes and seem to have a particular intention.

Bourriaud, along with other curators such as Maria Lind, or Hans Ulrich Obrist, have been promulgating a vision of the contemporary art space as a laboratory, a place of experimentation. Claire Bishop deconstructs this approach quoting from Hal Foster writing that, 'the institution may overshadow the work that

it otherwise highlights: it becomes the spectacle, it collects the cultural capital, and the director-curator becomes the star' (Foster, 1996, cited in Bishop, 2004, p.53). Instead of contemplating a work of art, Bishop describes here a paradigm based on the participatory principle of the work, 'because the work of art is a 'social form 'capable of producing positive human relationships' (2004, p.62). For *Utopie et Quotidienneté* however, if the curatorial dimension was rather experimental, it was not really meant as a space in which one can participate, but rather a space where one has to engage with the content in order to understand it. The relational dimension mostly occurred in another time and place from the exhibition, which is operating as an alternative to both the modernist white cube and Bishop's postmodern laboratory.

Moreover, the exemplars that Bourriaud's employs to define relational aesthetics raise questions about his concept. Artists who appear in the text, to mention only a few, include, Liam Gillick, Rikrit Tiravanija and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster. Bourriaud posits that the relational aesthetic work of art asks the public the following question, 'does this work of art allow me to enter into dialogue?' (2002, p.109). But the nature, subject or time of this dialogue does not seem to be a preponderant criterion and the aesthetic decisions remains in the hands of the artists. Thus, it seems that Bourriaud's proposal remains at the site of activating the gallery-going public, choosing to focus on works that require the physical participation of the spectator rather than to challenge the traditional author/spectator relationship.

The transformative power of socially engaged art practices involving non-artists in a common project is often posed as a principle, though it rarely describes exactly what it actually is that is done in common. If I gather with people to eat soup on the invitation of an artist, I do not feel the soup engages me more or less than any other artwork would? The sociologist Pascal Nicolas-Le Strat, in an article on the experience of co-creation, describes moments from workshops in various



Damon Rich and Oscar Tuazon  
 'Lignon Triple Beam' in Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 Participative installation  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva



Nils Norman and Tilo Steireif  
 Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 Presentation of works on utopie realised by classes from Geneva and Lausanne  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

settings (prisons, hospitals, etc.) but does not speak about the formal result of these meetings, nor of their presentation to a public.

I would like to think about the criteria that can be applied to the forms produced in common and to the interest in sharing these forms with audiences beyond the circle of co-producers. *Utopie et Quotidienneté* allowed us to observe the process of emerging forms in practices other than those of *microsilons*. The observation helped us define for ourselves what should be common when making work and within the practice of installation. Three methodologies transpired that require different degrees of participation from those entering the gallery space. Interestingly, the most participative forms were those that were the least collaborative to make out of the three projects presented in the exhibition.

The proposal of Damon Rich and Oscar Tuazon was visually effective and had a playful dimension that was very much appreciated by many of the young visitors to the exhibition. As such, it played a very effective role as a 'real' play area that allowed people with children to engage with other content in the exhibition. On the other hand, it did not translate into an educational exchange with the inhabitants of Lignon. This work ends up corresponding to, despite the expectations of *microsilons*, that which Nicolas Bourriaud describes as, 'a situation of participation and activation proposed to the visitors of the exhibition, designed by the artists' (2002, p.43). Olivier and I expected the production to emerge from a common activity engaging artists and co-producers rather than being merely a participatory situation for the visitors.

The collaboration between Nils Norman and Tilo Steireif clearly separated the pedagogical from the artistic work. The shape of the wooden house emerged early on in the process (after the first visit to CIRA) from Norman's drawing, and was developed with the aim of presenting different types of items: archive material from the CIRA, displayed in a small library/consultation room; and videos realized





Nils Norman and Tilo Steireif  
 Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 Presentation of documents from the CIRA  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva



Nils Norman and Tilo Steireif  
 Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 Presentation of documents and books from the CIRA  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

by Steireif with interviews of the pupils who took part in the pedagogical experience; and an important amount of drawings and sculpture realized by the pupils in the frame of this experience, with their art teachers. The external walls of the house were covered with posters from CIRA. Nicole Goetschi, one of the teachers taking part in the collaboration observed that, for her, not enough of the material produced by the pupils was valorised. Indeed, the students contribution was all inside the cabin, so that the external and structural elements of the work take on the form of Norman's own personal 'signature' (he works with certain recognisable materials and colours for example). And it is true that to discover all of the students' (who numbered more than 200 altogether) work it was necessary to enter a process of discovery, because they were organized in an archival, serialised system.

As part of the documentation in *Utopie et Quotidienneté* we referred to Asger Jorn's 1953 project that he conducted with children as part of the International Movement for a Bauhaus Imaginist (which became a part of the International Situationist Movement), in Albisola, Italy. For this experiment, children were invited to paint pieces of crockery without specific instructions. For Jorn, 'the results [...] seem to show that any child before schooling is more able to use the modern techniques, in order to make homogeneous and alive a pictorial surface, than all the professionals from the artistic, decoration craft, architectural or industrial domains'<sup>28</sup> (1955). However, if the work of the pupils presented in *Utopie et Quotidienneté* seemed to Olivier and I more visible than any productions of this sort made in an art institution context, then Nicole Goetschi did not share our opinion and thought we were unconsciously applying a 'contemporary art filter' which allowed us to avoid giving better visibility to the children's production. She would have been in favour of a presentation of all the contributions of the pupils on walls, 'as any other artworks'. This teacher brought a strong and very interesting critical element to my train of thought by asking if professional artists and non-

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<sup>28</sup> Jorn wanted to criticize the codes imposed by the Bauhaus pedagogy, he viewed it a failure that the Bauhaus students tended to copy their masters' style.





artists can produce forms together and present them in an art institution. Utopie et Quotidienneté was practically confronted with this question and if microsillons was supporting Norman and Steireif's display choices, we also discussed internally what we would have decided in a similar situation. The activities led by the different teachers invited by Norman and Steireif produced different forms that are, in different ways, strongly questioning the role of art in the school curriculum. Nicole Goetschi considered that she would offer the students following her course a moment of freedom, in different public places, asking them to draw or note what they see or feel. Jerome Bichsel, another teacher, worked, with clear and framed instructions, on imagining with a class how they could transform the authoritarian architecture of their High School. The results are in one case a collection of more or less well-realised drawings and in the other a series of maps and plans in the spirit of an architectural project. In their respective ways, what is interesting with the two proposals is not so much their final result, which can be seen as conventional in many ways. What is more interesting is the process of discussing how students can participate to the design of their curriculum or of their school building.

trafo. K's project directly addressed the question of the status of the young pupils' collective productions. In a 2010 article, Nora Sternfeld reflects on the relational difficulties one can encounter when making work within the framework of common projects. In this article published in the e-fux journal, Nora Sternfeld returns, in particular, to the experience that her collective led in Geneva with the young people from the German School. She describes the difficulty of engaging students in productions, which trafo. K call 'comments', seem to her sometimes a frustrating translation of politically and socially engaged artworks. Therefore, the collective decided to openly display questions they were left with after the project. trafo. K wanted the questions to be an important, very visible part of the work, and they asked an architect, Gabu Heindl, to work on a specific display for making the questions a central feature of the exhibition. Nora Sternfeld makes an important remark, from the perspective of the art educator:





trafo. K, Gabu Heindl and a class from the German School of Geneva  
 'Wild Translation' in Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 Presentation of works realised by a class from the German School of Geneva  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva



trafo. K, Gabu Heindl and a class from the German School of Geneva  
 'Wild Translation' in Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)  
 Presentation of works realised by a class from the German School of Geneva  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva





trafo. K, Gabu Heindl and a class from the German School of Geneva  
 'Wild Translation' in Utopie et Quotidienneté' (2009-10)  
 Pillars designed by Gabu Heindl  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva



trafo. K, Gabu Heindl and a class from the German School of Geneva  
 'Wild Translation' in Utopie et Quotidienneté' (2009-10)  
 Nora Sternfeld and students from the German School of Geneva discussing their production  
 Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

'The Beside-the-Point and the Unpresentable Projects are not always as focused and critical as we would like them to be. To some extent, they are open processes and the unexpected results they produce can be productive. These results are not always presentable and are sometimes embarrassing, often beside the point' (E-flux, 2010).

Sternfeld explains that art educators have to deal with certain contingencies and conditions, and engage in sometimes long, tedious and uncertain processes. For Sternfeld, producing an artwork is not the purpose of the process and that anything made should not be regarded as a requirement or entirely representational of the experience. Should this work be shown in a contemporary art context then? Or should we think of other forms, produced differently, not necessarily realized by the participants but conceived by and for them, as in a large number of practices where the artist is not the one who makes the work? This form of commissioning is carried out in the work of Nouveaux Commanditaires (New Patrons), a franchise created by the artist François Hers and the art critic Xavier Douroux, on the principle of forming mediators in a specific area to identify groups, communities, organisations, etc., that are potentially interested in working with an artist on an issue that they share. Over the duration of twenty years, this model has produced many artworks, which, to me, do not differ in their final result from other forms of commissioned art supposedly least participative in their conception.

After *Utopie et Quotidienneté*, Olivier and I discussed at length the various collaborations, what we thought was successful and in particular about the difficulty of producing common forms. None of the projects proposed in the exhibition managed to really go beyond a certain hierarchy between the work made by artists and that made by non-artists. Amongst the different projects presented in the show, the elements are juxtaposed without becoming a 'whole' entity. Does this signify that we have touched the limits of possible experimentation in practicing art in common imposed by the institutional framework itself?

In projects where we intervene as artists in a direct relationship with a group, Olivier and I always try to make the conception period into an integral part of the process, sharing the responsibility for this stage in the production, including its aesthetic dimension. Accepting that we may be extremely disappointed, we agree to produce things we would not make on our own as it is sometimes more important that the form reflects the collaboration. It may be a paradox, but the longer the collaboration is established, the more one often feels that the form of the artwork commonly produced is fragmented, complex and difficult to read. Conversely, we are more likely to decide the form if we have less time for collaboration. Olivier and I discuss what we offer as a tool available to people and how it might influence the process of common production. We often disagree ourselves, we have tastes that differ, we must negotiate, argue and sometimes we find resolution. On the other hand, we must admit that we are always seen in groups as those who have the knowledge of the visual, of shaping forms, as we are artists. Form is often a compromise between time, means and taste, amongst others things. Common production is not reducible to the form but the form is the part of the common experience that is shared beyond the circle of participants.

Looking at the collaborative work produced in *Utopie et Quotidienneté*, with the hierarchy between amateur and professional that they carry, the question emerges: Would a more performative approach have more faithfully shown the unstable quality of the artistic process? Olivier and I wanted to overcome the formats suggested in the various examples made in *Curating* and the educational turn (2010) such as course lectures and course workshops. We asked ourselves, as Bishop does from her perspective as an art historian, 'What does it mean to do education (and programming) as art? How do we judge these experiences? What kind of efficacy do they seek? Do we need to experience them first hand in order to comment on them?' (Bishop, 2012, p. 246).

'Engaging in the common production of complex artistic forms was important for us in order to communicate the experience, not only to the art

world but also to people visiting the exhibition. Therefore, we favour the production of a common object to avoid the situation described by Bishop, 'When I found projects I liked and respected, I had no idea how to communicate them to others: their dominant goal seemed to be the production of a dynamic experience for participants, rather than the production of complex artistic forms' (Bishop, 2012, p. 246).

She continues, saying:

'The more common tendency for socially engaged artists is to adopt a paradoxical position in which art as a category is both rejected and reclaimed: they object to their project being called art because it is also a real social process, while at the same time claiming that this whole process is art' (2012, p. 255).

A manifestation of the common in the process of production is included in the post-exhibition life of the artworks. Each piece was disassembled and redistributed in different ways. Thus, the wood of Norman and Steireif's cabin (after having been presented in a second part of the project in Aarau in Switzerland) was given to a school near Lausanne; the elements of Rich and Tuazon's playground were distributed to a cooperative of Genevan artists (the Usine Kugler), the slide was given to a self-managed nursery and all the pupils' productions were returned to the students. Some were presented in the schools. None of the works, even if they could sometimes be read as 'artefacts', were artificially shaped into an efficient object (Nicolas-Le Strat, 1998) therefore none of the common productions we convened contributed to a fiction of eternity, evidence or ubiquity but rather served, as experimental or ephemeral that they have been, to construct a common public sphere.



microsilons

Utopie et Quotidienneté (2009-10)

Cartel for 'Wild Translation', trafo K., Gabu Heindl and students

Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva



#### 6.1.5. If we could change it...

During the conception and realisation of *Utopie et Quotidienneté*, Olivier and I were committed to opening out the possibility for a series of changes to be made in the everyday functioning of the institution — classes have been spending days working in the exhibition spaces and offices of the Contemporary Art Center and directly involved in the exhibition process, the graphic design of the institution has been specifically adapted, the curators were the mediation team, the exhibition was including a large documentation to understand the context where the new productions were taking place. Even though it brought the production of art in common with non-artists to the centre of institutional discourse, we realize that the framework of the institution of contemporary art, in which we inscribed the project, was imposing its own existing logic.

Trying to make visible the common dimension of the productions made us reflect on the democratic potential of this kind of practice in such a hierarchized environment. For example, we wanted to display labels where the names of all the participants in the projects would be written in the shape of a timeline. This proposal led us, a few hours before the opening, to be in conflict with the director of the institution. The main obstacle, in her own words, was that the most important thing to know about a work is the name of the artist who made it (this authorship issue became an on-going debate) and that displaying all the participants' names called for changes to the usual corporate visual identity of the labels—while she was arguing people who would visit the exhibition would mostly be interested in knowing who are the artists who designed the pieces.

After a difficult discussion, Olivier and I finally received the authorization to produce labels with the names of all the participants. When describing her four discourses on education, Carmen Mörsch underlines that deconstructive and transformative approaches increase the level of tension between institution and

gallery education department when becoming preponderant, for a self-critical understanding of education and power relations necessarily leads to a deconstructive and transformative gallery education. This completely corresponds to microsillons' relationship with the Geneva Contemporary Art Centre. If *Utopie et Quotidienneté* brought us into the international debate on mediation and situated us in the landscape of critical art education, it was an effective turn in our relationship with the Centre and its director, a move towards greater autonomy that would be stopped by the will of the institution, through its director, to keep the decision-making process controlled. From this moment until the end of our collaboration one year after the end of *Utopie et Quotidienneté*, our relationship with the Centre's management cooled.

At the end of the long and intense process we engaged in for *Utopie et Quotidienneté*, Olivier and I asked ourselves the question, 'what can an exhibition do?' Invited in 1987 to collaborate with the Dia Foundation in New-York, the collective Group Material interrogated the concept of democracy through a four-chapter exhibition, together with town meetings and round-tables discussion that took place before the formal exhibition took place. Entitled *Democracy*, the exhibition in part reflected on how their practice could still be relevant in the framework of a private foundation, after years of developing projects inscribed in the public sphere with local communities, through diverse formats involving the participation of activists or citizens. For Doug Ashford, member of the New-York based collective, 'Democracy was our theme, because it was already our form, the exhibition unanchored from the equation of thesis and promotion' (eipcp, 2010). The collective identified four significant areas — Education, Politics and Elections, Cultural Participation and AIDS, — of what they have called the crisis of democracy<sup>29</sup> that they wished to investigate.

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<sup>29</sup> The crisis of democracy at that time in the US included the obstruction to the access of political power by dominant classes, which reduced the democratic participation of citizens to passive and symbolic involvement, refusing the expression of diverse viewpoints and voices.

The first chapter, *Democracy: Education* (which definitely acted as one of the references that Olivier and I shared for *Utopie et Quotidienneté*) had black, chalk-paint walls, a series of classroom chairs in the middle and art works made by Peter Halley, John Ahearn, Lorna Simpson, Andy Warhol, amongst others, as well as several collaborative pieces realised by art teachers with high school students. A widely advertised town meeting was organised outside the Dia Foundation art space so that could bring together as many people interested by the subject as possible. The text written by the critic David Deitcher for the book published after the exhibition questions the real impact of the town meetings and compares them to rather average community meetings, with cultural actors. In the same book, the town meeting minutes show that the debate is mostly followed and informed by people who are directly concerned by the topic and who are part of the 'cultural sphere', despite the fact that the meeting space chosen by Group Material was not inside the Dia Foundation itself.

Did *microsillons* really, through *Utopie et Quotidienneté*, prefigure the institution of the common through a contemporary art project or was it just a crack in an institution that is meant to function under a certain regime of governance, isolated from the social realm? A possible answer can be found in the many long-term relationships with teachers, artists and researchers sharing a similar ambition to challenge the institutions we inhabit that were initiated through *Utopie et Quotidienneté* and the numerous connexions in multiple directions that have been lasting, in a form or another, years after the end of the project.

Part of the limits we encountered with *Utopie et Quotidienneté* were linked to the difficulty of defending a certain autonomy of discourse inside the institution and to substitute a radical form of commonality for the usual institutional habits. The next analysis, based on the case study *En Commun*, was realised in a different context and modalities, with *microsillons* as guest artists in two public schools.

Jeu 22 Juillet 2010

# EN COMMUN.

## Journal du Bois de la Bâtie

Alors que la Terrasse du Troc s'installe cette année encore au Bois de la Bâtie, nous avons été invités par sa directrice artistique, Laura Goyon Cortes, à développer un projet impliquant des jeunes élèves. Une recherche sur le Bois de la Bâtie et son histoire, nous a amené à définir comme cadre de réflexion l'idée de bien commun. En 1888, des frères, du nom de Turrettini, ont acheté des parcelles de terrain pour les offrir à la ville, à condition que le lieu reste pour toujours un lieu de promenade publique. Quels sont aujourd'hui les usages, officiels ou "briconnés", qui sont faits de ce bien public ?

Auteur de cette question, nous avons proposé à deux classes, l'une du Cycle d'Orientation Montbrillant et l'autre de l'École des Allobroges, de réaliser ensemble un journal où chacun journal s'exprimer sur un sujet en lien avec le Bois de la Bâtie. Suivant le thème de cette cinquième édition de la Terrasse du Troc, "l'esthétique écologique" – qui évoque l'idée d'une œuvre créée en utilisant les éléments trouvés sur un lieu donné – ce journal se nourrit donc du Bois de la Bâtie et de ses usages. Il propose une réflexion sur le territoire complexe du Bois de la Bâtie et invite à réfléchir aux multiples utilisations qui, au fil des années, ont ancré ce lieu bien connu des genevois dans son environnement urbain, entre nature et culture.

Alors que nous assistons à une privatisation de l'espace public, que les brevets sur le vivant et la marchandisation de biens de première nécessité, tels que l'eau, sont monnaie courante, il nous semble pertinent de discuter de ce qui devrait être partagé par tous, qu'il s'agisse de biens matériels ou immatériels.

Pour Antonio Negri, le commun porte en lui un potentiel de changement réel et peut nous aider à imaginer des alternatives au néo-libéralisme et à son mépris envers la Rîes Publica.

(...) partout où des luttes se sont déroulées contre l'Empire, elles ont mis en lumière un phénomène sur lequel elles ont beaucoup investi : la conscience nouvelle que le bien commun est décalé dans la vie comme dans la production, bien plus que le « privé » et le « national » pour utiliser ces termes vieillards. Seul

le « commun » se dresse contre l'Empire. »

Cette question des « communs » a été abordée avec les deux classes sous un angle historique, afin de bien appréhender la dimension fluctuante de cette notion et son évolution au fil du temps. En effet, si ce terme désigne ce que nous partageons au sein d'une même communauté, cette zone de partage est mouvante et en constante redéfinition.

Ainsi, partant des notions de « Rîes Publicae » et de « Rîes nullius » du droit romain, nous avons discuté des banalités et des taxes dont il fallait s'acquitter, au Moyen-Âge, pour utiliser des infrastructures telles que les fours ou les moulins, appartenant aux seigneurs mais cependant nécessaires à toute la communauté.

A certains moments de l'histoire, le peuple a essayé de revendiquer un usage plus direct des biens communs, imaginant un projet de société nouvelle. La Commune de Paris, en 1871, par exemple, pendant laquelle les travailleurs se sont soulevés contre l'État et ont proposé – dans un système qui n'a duré que trois mois avant d'être réprimé – que le peuple gère directement la ville, les écoles, les institutions.

Plus tard, la révolution russe, en appliquant les préceptes du communisme, qui revendique la fin de la propriété privée, a mené à la création de l'Union Soviétique et, à sa suite, à celle d'autres États s'appuyant sur la même politique.

Nous nous sommes demandé ce qu'est un bien commun dans la société contemporaine. La tendance actuelle à la privatisation des écoles, des services de santé ou des énergies est forte. Quelles peuvent en être les conséquences ? La privatisation du vivant est une autre source de réflexion et d'inquiétude : génome, semences, peuvent-ils faire l'objet d'une maîtrise de quelques grandes multinationales, sans qu'il n'y ait de participation du peuple à la prise de décisions pouvant valoir ? Faire bon usage du bien commun, c'est aussi comprendre qu'il faut gérer ce bien, que rien n'est inépuisable. Quelles ressources naturelles devons nous défendre pour le futur ?

Sur le plan de la propriété intellectuelle, nous avons évoqué

l'alternative proposée par la licence « Creative Commons » contre les brevets dans leurs formes actuelles et contre le « Copyright ».

Notre tour d'horizon s'est conclu par une discussion sur les pirates, des mers d'abord, pour qui l'idée de partage des biens et de communauté prévalait au sein d'une même équipe. Pirates informatiques ensuite, par le biais du Parti Pirate, qui revendique « un internet libre, sans aucune licence, dans une société ouverte » au sein d'une formation politique officielle et reconnue, notamment en Suède, où est né ce parti.

Depuis le mois de mai 2010, les deux classes ont été impliquées dans les différentes étapes qui ont mené à cette publication, des discussions sur le thème du travail à la visite d'une imprimerie, en passant par la préparation et la réalisation d'entretiens ainsi que, bien entendu, la conception des articles eux-mêmes. Un soin spécifique a été porté à la dimension manifestation artistique et culturelle. Collages, dessins, cartographie : chaque groupe a travaillé selon un format différent.

Au fil des pages de ce journal, nous vous invitons à partager la vision sur la Terrasse du Troc d'une chauve-souris, à découvrir ce qui pousse dans les jardins familiaux qui bordent le Bois, à partir à la découverte de ses sous-sols et de ses habitants, y compris les plus inattendus, et à "bricoler" quelques informations inédites en passant.

microsilons

Une proposition de microsilons pour la Terrasse du Troc. Projet réalisé avec une classe de SP-EP de l'école des Allobroges et une classe de 6ème du cycle d'orientation de Montbrillant.

SP-EP, École des Allobroges : Yvan Alava, Myriam, Valentin, Cécile, Ana, Reia Da Silva Pinco, Florian Ernest, Yvan Etheve, Florence Heymoz, Bryan Ingo Carva, Tamara Kovacevic, Stephane Lindt Carrion, Sara Marques Rosa Fernandes, Miko Negro, Paul Panico, Ana Carolina Pedrosa Da Costa, Ramata Sow, Elysa Stokaj, Ibrahim Suka, Enseignante : Jessica Agut

6ème, Cycle d'orientation de Montbrillant : Gabriel End, Joseph El Sayed, Christel Ferreira, Fabio Gianninazzi, Rosanne Martin, Diana Miranda Da Venda, Yassin Paul Batista, Clara Penard, Dayana Ponce Carrel, Céline Rocha Conquerra, Oriol Rodriguez, Sofia Rodriguez, Talita Rossi, Gabriela Silva Oliveira, Anaelle Stoppin, Enseignante : Valentin Pini

Remerciements : La Fédération Genevoise des Jardins Familiaux, l'entreprise Parmentier et ses employés, le Service des Pompes Funèbres, Genevèze et Orientation de la Ville de Genève, l'association Stop Suicide et ses employés, le Service des Espaces Verts et de l'Environnement de la Ville de Genève et le Parc Animalier du Bois de la Bâtie, Monsieur Cyril Schenckler, le Service de la Jeune de la Ville de Genève, l'équipe de la Terrasse du Troc, Monsieur Che Habert et Noir sur Noir.

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Imprimeur : Alar



microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Cover page of the newspaper  
Geneva

## 6.2. How can a common artistic production challenge the banking approach of education?

Having worked as artists in the frame of art and gallery education for several years, microsillons' approach of common production was strongly influenced by radical pedagogies. The present analysis, based on the case study *En Commun*, a local newspaper made in common with pupils from two state school classes of Geneva, will deepen how the use of critical pedagogies helped microsillons to foster common production, and pose it as a radical alternative to classical school productions. We wanted to critique the banking model imposed on education, and to imagine other modes of work in school, based on commonality rather than individuality. I will also reflect on how different constraints reduced the possibility to produce sustainable change in the school context.

What is the critical potential of common as the subject of a collaboration with pupils from two public school classrooms, at a time when education, in Switzerland as well as globally, is shaped by the market economy? Can a project looking at the commons as a resource help institute the common as an organisational mode for classrooms? If notions like efficiency, competition, competences or professionalization dominate the contemporary educational landscape, does it make any sense to experiment with short-term projects in schools with alternative discourses and methods defending the collective, the unprofitable and the complex? 'Banking education' is a concept forged in the 1970s by the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire to designate an approach to education that considers the student as the passive receptacle for receiving and holding their teachers' knowledge. In the actual context of 'banking education' microsillons practically questioned the potential of common as a mode of organisation and a vehicle to exchange and produce knowledge with two classes, in *En Commun*, a newspaper published in 2010 reporting on the uses and activities of a large semi-urban area at the border of the city of Geneva, le Bois de la Bâtie. From this specific geographical area and its particular uses, the project tackled the

presence of common in the lives of citizens, through the application of principles borrowed from critical pedagogies. We especially engaged with the concepts of generative theme and untested feasibility (Freire, 2001) and challenged the hidden curriculum<sup>30</sup> of education by rejecting inequalities and dominant social structures that silence or marginalize the voices of many. This ambition was articulated with a series of concrete changes in the two classrooms to make common the organisational mode of the collaboration and the contradictions or limits of this experimentation will form the following analysis. We did use the time dedicated to art practices to open a reflexion beyond creativity or aesthetic, through a format favouring dialog-oriented, consciousness-raising, problem-posing and common production rather than individual performance.

#### 6.2.1. The banking approach within the contemporary landscape of education

When Olivier Desvoignes and I set up this collaboration with two classes for En Commun, we had already had several experiences of intervening as artists in schools. However, it was the first time we intervened as an independant artists' collective (in our former projects, we were formally linked with institutions, either as students or as commissioned artists). We built a reflective framework around the project, which would be shared in part with the pupils but which would also consolidate microsillons' continuous research on education. Concretely, Olivier and I would research how common—as a theme and as an organisation principle for the project—could possibly challenge the dominant model in Swiss state schools. And at a more practical level, we would use the Bois de la Bâtie and link it with the notion of common to discuss how common(s) manifest in our lives and how everybody can engage with and produce the common (by being a member of an

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<sup>30</sup> 'Schools teach much more than the traditional curriculum. They also teach a "hidden curriculum"—those unstated norms, values, and beliefs promoting hierarchic and authoritarian social relations that are transmitted to students through the underlying educational structure' (Giroux, 1977)

association, by observing wildlife in the city, by impacting less on our natural environment, etc.).

When Olivier and I got to know the work of Paulo Freire, this pioneer of critical pedagogy became a central reference point in building microsillons' critical standpoint. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, published for the first time in 1971, Freire depicts the banking system of education (often shortened to banking education). He based his theory on the observation of the educative system in Brazil but the term reappeared a few years ago to designate the spirit of the reform in the higher education system in Europe known as the Bologna Process, which opposed what Freire called a 'dialogical education' (Freire, 2001, p. 97). By this, he meant that the dialog—a real dialog, according to Freire, is founded on love, humility and faith (p.91) from both parts—between teachers and students is the necessary condition for any emancipatory pedagogical process to happen and it brings teachers and students to a form of horizontal relationship (p.91). As defined by Freire, a banking system of education positions the teacher as the only source of knowledge and the only authorized voice in the classroom, 'knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing' (p. 72). Instead, Paulo Freire sees education as a collective and dual journey, where one uses the knowledge they already possess and elaborate from there to acquire new knowledge via a collective process of enquiry. The curriculum is developed with the students and not for them. This process is meant to transform the individuals and the collective, inviting them to actively transform their institutions, to take part in the political decisions impacting their lives. I will later present the concepts of generative theme and untested feasibility (Freire, 2001) as useful for microsillons pedagogical approach against current employment driven and market-oriented educational policy.

Olivier and I encountered the term banking education at a time when we were directly implicated in the concept in two ways, firstly as students at the Geneva University of Arts and Design and secondly as artists working with





Claudius Ceccon  
Illustration of the Banking System of education  
Publication Risk, 1974  
Geneva

educational strategies within the context of the Bologna Process' application. At this point it is worth briefly commenting on the general ambition for this reform. In the 1990s, the leaders of European countries agreed to an harmonization of the European Higher Education, with the implicit objective of constituting a strong and competitive block against the North American educational system, based on the same neo-liberal approach (though several written objectives defend a more humanistic vision of higher education). In 1999, twenty-nine countries signed the Bologna declaration in which six joint actions were agreed upon to make educational policy converge.

Paradoxically, the emergence and application of this new model for higher education was an opportunity for microsillons to research different forms of pedagogy that could possibly resist the neo-liberal agenda imposed on education. In 2005, the production of texts, experiences and debates analysing the risks of validating such a reform and proposing research on alternative solutions created an inspiring momentum. The critics of the Bologna declaration were pointing out its ambiguous and misleading objectives that navigated between a managerial vision of education (the second point of the declaration states that the bachelor's cycle is meant to answer the needs of the labour market) and more humanistic ambitions (favouring the mobility of students and researchers to develop networks of individuals dedicating themselves to the production and dissemination of knowledge for the society as a whole). Numerous protests rose up during the implementation of the Bologna Process in European universities that considered that the humanistic spirit was a Trojan horse for applying the principles of neo-liberalism to higher education. A series of platforms were dedicated to the diffusion of critical texts from theorists, activists and cultural workers (Eipcp.net or Edu-Factory.org, for example). For the opponents to the Bologna Process, the symbol of its neo-liberal spirit was the system of individual validation that it entailed. Students would accumulate a capital of knowledge measured through so-called credits gathered in an account, the ECTS (European Credits Transfer System).

Switzerland is one of the twenty-nine countries that signed the Bologna declaration. The country has built part of its renown on the 'bank secret' system in which the bank sector is central to the economy and the idea of a 'banking system' of education is not contradictory to the already competitive approach of education and the ambition to be highly ranked in the PISA<sup>31</sup> measurement system. European reform was accompanied in this country by a process named HARMOS that transformed / harmonized the content and grades of primary and secondary education between the different Swiss cantons. Voted for in 2006, this agreement ended the traditional autonomy of the cantons regarding the organisation of their educational programme, instead centralising this responsibility to the federal government.

The Bologna Process is part of a wider movement towards the commodification of education in which many countries have shifted their educational policy so that pedagogy's purpose has become about training the worker/consumer (Laval, 2003, p.61). In 2000, the anti-globalization theorist Riccardo Petrella published an article entitled Education is victim of five traps, widely spread by the groups and platforms calling for a resistance against this market-oriented education. Petrella retraces the recent evolution of education at a global level. According to his article, the first sign that education and knowledge were being managed like commodities lies in the importance taken by the notion of human resource. For him, there is a contradiction for any society seeking justice and equality in considering human beings as a profitable resource. The priority of educational policies in the European area is now to educate this human resource through the development of competences adapted to the labour market. This logic can be traced in the Swiss policy in the domain of education, as evidenced by the report made by the Confederation to evaluate the federal education policy published in 2014.

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<sup>31</sup> The Programme for International Student Assessment is an international survey that measures and compares the basic competences of pupils and students (Varcher, 2002).

It is difficult at first glance to trace the market-oriented agenda for those who are not familiar with what Christian Laval calls, 'the new language of the school, which accompanies a movement of revaluation of the enterprise as the engine and model of the civil society in the dominant representation' (2003, p.62, own translation from French). Constructing a critique of these terms—professionalization, competences, evaluation—is a very complex task because they are double-faced, navigating between a liberal conception of society and the application of a bureaucratic state logic (Laval, 2003). Since the end of the 70s, a redefinition of the school system as an educational enterprise (Laval, 2003) took place in Europe and the vocabulary of management gradually reshaped the educational imaginary, which in francophone areas, was partly drawing on the heritage of the Enlightenment.<sup>32</sup> The objective of the educational process following this new logic focuses on the acquisition of competences articulated with the labour market.

At the core of this new lexical field of education, the term professionalization is especially interesting. The Bologna Process assigns to bachelor's degrees the objective of training students for the professional sphere. While it may seem rather consistent for an educational system to encourage students engaging in courses offering a professional perspective, this objective can lead to the bias that training is determined solely by the needs of the labour market. The raise in fees of many of the higher education institutions of the countries that agreed to the Bologna Process, is producing a situation where student debt is a burning question for anyone taking decisions on their future studies. It seems unlikely that students who have to invest so much money to get a diploma will engage in studies without a clear, profitable perspective (Laval, 2003). In this application of the new spirit of capitalism<sup>33</sup> in education (Laval, Vergne,

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<sup>32</sup> I am referring here to the 18th century international philosophical movement through which intellectuals opposed the oppressive power of church and state with the belief that knowledge and science would educate enlightened citizens. In France, the Enlightenment has constituted a bourgeois public sphere and in part went on to influence the French Revolution of 1783.

<sup>33</sup> The New Spirit of Capitalism, published in 1999, written by the sociologists Eve Chiapello and Luc Bolanski, describes how recent forms of capitalism have incorporated the notion of 'artist critic' from the May '68 movement as a central model of neo-liberalism and its new forms of management and

Clément and Dreux, 2011), what room is there left for critical reflection in education, for fields of study seen as commercially non-profitable or non-specific trainings? How does this approach transform the relation between art and education, whether as a discipline in the primary and secondary levels of education or as a specialised field of studies at the higher level? How can artists detach themselves from this vision by acting in an educational sphere that is asking students to adapt their choices to the needs of the market rather than to their preferences?

These questions formed the background of my post-graduate project in 2006. The same year, the Visual Arts University where I applied for this postgraduate programme merged with the Applied Arts University, as a consequence of the Bologna Process, to become the Haute Ecole d'Arts et de Design Genève (translated in English as Geneva University of Arts and Design). Olivier and I decided to interrogate the status of the arts university diploma in this challenging institutional environment. In a specific moment of transformation of the educational European system, we wanted to raise a series of questions within the institution: does an art degree make sense today? Is it related to real skills or only to a mythology of the artist? What are the expectations of this degree, whether you are a student, teacher, director or employer? Is it possible to imagine a satisfactory alternative?

For this research, microsillons organised several meetings with the students of the Visual Arts University to discuss how art school curricula connects with the notions of competences, professionalization or evaluation in relation to the market economy. We invited activists and students from other universities in Geneva to reflect on the impact of this paradigmatic change imposed on education. We organised a discussion with the director of the Visual Arts University, Jean-Pierre

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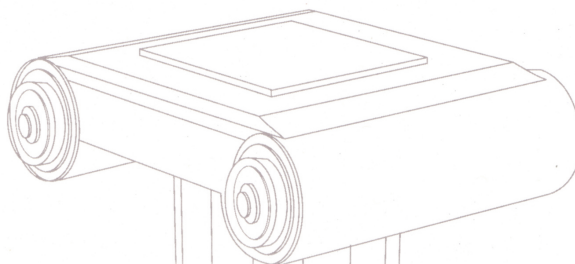
entrepreneurship. By 'artist critic', the authors designate the aspiration to autonomy, freedom, a form of authenticity and liberation of creativity, which opposed, in the 1960s, a very hierarchical capitalism, based on a paternalistic conception of society.

Greff, who was committed to the application of the Bologna process, at a local scale. We notably wanted to discuss the poor recognition of pre-Bologna Process diplomas in the new system of credits (a lot of students will have to do one or two years of study to earn enough credits for their former art diploma to be valorised as a master's degree). The director was strongly defending the concept of professionalization, central to the Bologna Process, and the importance of being able to position the art academy in this professional environment, which to him, meant that young artists should already find their place within the art market during their formative years. His foreword on the university website states that the HEAD —Genève is 'deeply rooted in the business and cultural life of the city, in which it participates significantly' ([hesge.ch/head](http://hesge.ch/head), 2017).

microsilons' final research outcome was a document named the Multiplôme (a folded sheet of A3 paper), articulating the notion of 'pleat' in the Deleuzian sense (referring to the pleat as a representation of complexity and multiplicity) and proposing a dialogical diploma mentioning various activities that were not solely linked to academic knowledge. The spirit of competition is high between Swiss Arts Universities and the challenge is to attract more students, which translates directly into more money from the federal state to the Arts University. This constant injunction to increase the number of students is never backed up as a pedagogical advantage (it arguably could be one). Even though the fees for higher education in Switzerland are still very reasonable compared to other countries, the multiplication of expensive life-long learning programmes is noticeable.

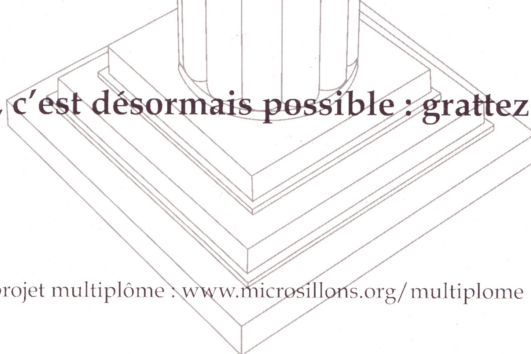
The Multiplôme was presented to the students of the school during a discussion platform around the art diploma. The document was also discussed with the art university director and to the teaching staff, during the July 2006 jury session. A video summarizing the research and the debates is produced and presented on this occasion. In the 2005-2006 newsletter of the CCC, a surprise diploma was published (one would discover its academic title and speciality after having scratched some painting covering the words),

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pointing out some absurd mechanisms related to the diploma and its mythology. Thanks to the multiplication of its formats, a large number of people were able to take part in the debate, within the HEAD — Geneva students, professors, director and guests (on the occasion of the discussion platform, Béatrice Rettig and Jean-Baptiste Bayle are invited to talk about the Contre-Conférence project (<http://contre-conference.net>) and Adrien Laubscher presents the Pacademy, an initiative of the collective Cap from Fribourg).

In part, this lack of criticism can be attributed to the already mentioned ambiguity of the discourses and policies produced on education. Thus, Laval describes these policies as navigating between two logics of transformation:

'[...] one which seeks to ruin what was in the principle of public education, the appropriation by all of the symbolic forms and knowledge necessary for judgment and reasoning and which instead promotes learning that is docile to business and geared towards the satisfaction of private interests' (2003, p. 16).

And the other:

'[...] which would aim to improve for the majority the conditions of assimilation and acquisition of knowledge essential to a professional life but also, much more widely, to a intellectual, aesthetic and social life as rich and varied as possible, according to the ideals (...) of the emancipatory school' (Laval, 2003, p.17).

These ideals cannot be compatible with a school that serves the development of the economic and professional sphere and this universalist vision must make room for what Laval calls, 'a worthy universal education, as an ultimate collective work' (Laval, 2003, p.17), positioning the common as the pivotal principle to reinvent educational policies.



This ambivalence is readable in UNESCO's recent publication 'Rethinking education. Towards a world common good?' (2015). This report supposedly serves as a document to open debate on public policy related to education. UNESCO calls for an urgent rethinking of the objectives of education. I was thrilled to learn about UNESCO's proposal to move from a mercantile conception of education into education as a world common. The text navigates between wishful thinking and a form of ideological conformity, articulating at the same time the need to make environmental sustainability a priority for educational programmes and the acknowledgement that education must contribute to the model of development based on economic growth.

In this context, it is vital that a concept such as banking education re-enters the scene and serves as a tool to interrogate the role of education within society. However, even if Freire has become a central reference for many socially engaged artists and critical mediators, the context in which he wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in the 1960's, when he was exiled from Brazil to escape the military dictatorship, must be adapted to be of any interest in the practice of an artists collective working today in Geneva, Switzerland, one of the wealthiest city in the world (although I do not want to play the game of evaluation and classification, the good health of Switzerland's economy is interestingly accompanied by similar cuts to public services like other European nations with huge debts). This work of adaptation has been undertaken by microsilons since 2005 and we have participated in the debate around Freireian ideas in artistic contexts in Geneva. For example in the context of the Geneva Biennale of Independent Art Spaces of 2015, a discussion on the subject of cultural audiences was organized with the heads of Geneva's independent art spaces. These discussions were based on an illustration of the concept of banking education produced by Claudius Ceccon, a friend of Freire, also exiled to Geneva in the 1970s and an image illustrating the idea of present publics in the annual report of the Geneva Department of Culture. This allowed us to show the extension of a consumerist vision of culture and to discuss

with these actors their conception of the relationship between the local alternative art scene and audiences.

These images bring me back to the context in which microsillons developed *En Commun*, by illustrating a direct impact of the banking approach on education—the emergence of a ‘predetermined future’ (Freire, 2000). In the words of Freire, by placing students in a position of passivity at school, society reproduces itself through education despite it claiming the chance of equality for every student. This ‘myth of the equality of all individuals’ (Freire, 2000, p.139) can be translated in contemporary Switzerland. Pupils have to go through, three times during primary school cycle, a series of external school examinations. These frequent and standardized evaluations facilitate the regulation of the student mass by measuring the level of students and assigning them to different categories. 40% will join a ‘pregymnasiale’ section, intended to gather students who will later go to university. The other students go the ‘general’ section where they will be again subdivided between two groups, depending on their results in the tests. The students will then stay in the same category until they leave school and choose a professional orientation, which arrives earlier for the pupils who are considered less efficient. Many of these students will enter an apprenticeship around the age of sixteen, which is the main training path for workers in Switzerland (CRSE, 2014). The Swiss educational system is often described as being very efficient. The training of an adequate work force is assured in part directly by companies and it is just as economically advantageous for the educational system as it is for these companies. The student/apprentice is often pleased to earn money at a young age becoming independant from their parents. The low unemployment rate in Switzerland (3.2% in 2017) is validating this choice of the Swiss Confederation to make professionalization a pillar of its educational politics and is envied by its neighbouring countries, like France.

In the case of *En Commun*, we intervened in two classes that had low expectations for their pupils. The younger students were already in a specific class

for children with learning difficulties; the second group were a class of students who would rather be directed towards short and professional studies via an apprenticeship. The students are nowadays supposedly very active in the construction of their personal educational path, instead of the passive students described by Freire, though it is more a shift from the system to make every student responsible in succeeding or failing, to emphasise a process of individuation and competition. With the perspective of developing competencies aligned with the labour market, the teacher's role has evolved towards that of coach (Laval, Vergne, Clément and Dreux, 2011, p.208). This coach evaluates the adaptation of students to a set framework, rather than using education as a tool to develop critical minds, and encourages the student/subject to believe that it is one's individual responsibility to adapt to society through the educational process (Laval, Vergne, Clément and Dreux, 2011, p. 254).

The feeling Olivier and I got from our first discussion with the primary school teacher is that we would work with a group already perceived as marginal, those already out of the competition. We wanted to develop with them research on the common to possibly open discussion with the students on their perceptions of this competition. In schools, the notion of common is too often reduced to principles or rules (the necessity to have a common base of knowledge, the regulations of the playground). The problem with such a top-down approach is that the students are always left apart from the decisions that will affect their life yet, paradoxically, are held responsible for their situation. If the educational system is supposed to value the acquisition of knowledge and competences, it is also valuing things that are not possible to acquire, like inherited and incorporated cultural capital and, through this valorisation, reproduces social inequalities. The two classes working on *En Commun* were placed in socially mixed Genevan public institutions. But both classes are for students who are not going to pursue their studies at university. The students in these classes come mainly from working class or lower income backgrounds, their school results reflect their living conditions and their daily lives sometimes appeared in the activities we carried out together. One

girl talked to me about her mother's pregnancy (I was obviously pregnant at that time) who was tired because she had to do cleaning for eight hours a day. Another told us that he had to translate the permission for our school outing for his parents so that they could sign because they do not speak French. Unlike other classes with whom we have worked before, these students do not travel in different countries as tourists, they go to Portugal, Morocco or Kosovo in the summer visiting their grandparents. They do not visit museums, outside of school outings, and they do not attend libraries or theatres. I make the link with the issue of cultural capital and school as a tool of social reproduction made by Bourdieu from the 60s. According to his analysis the chances to access higher education for a son of a worker were forty times lower than those of a senior executive. He analyzes data to link the educational level of parents to that of their children and concludes that the chances of entering and succeeding in secondary or higher education are fundamentally a function of the cultural level of their environment at the time of entering Junior High School (Bourdieu, 1966). Children from privileged backgrounds, as he demonstrates, acquire through their environment, habits and training that they can use to advance their learning. In addition, they inherit knowledge, know-how and tastes that the school context often values as gifts. Thus, for Bourdieu, the role of the education system is to reproduce the distribution of cultural capital among the different groups of a given society. The deep inequalities revealed by Bourdieu's work was the subject of much criticism but also triggered fundamental reflection on the French education system and the supposed 'equality of opportunity', which is in fact based on profound inequalities, since it is the valorization of the transmission of cultural capital from generation to generation that produces these inequalities. In an article published in 2017, researchers from the University of Social Sciences in Geneva carried out similar research and observed that social and cultural reproduction is reinforced—and therefore also inequality—when the students are organised into different segments (like in the canton of Geneva) depending on their results (CSRE, 2014). These were the conditions from which microsillons had to work while we were developing En Commun. To challenge this neo-liberal approach of education, we directly experimented with methods and modes of

organisation defending education as being not merely a form of transmission but as a process of emergence of the common.

#### 6.2.2. The common as a possible

The process of reflecting on how we could challenge the above-described pedagogical landscape starts with an examination of microsillons' status and positioning in the educational institution. Institutions function as an apparatus ordaining the amount of qualifications attributed to each individual and distributing the ability of doing and thinking amongst these individuals (Nicolas-Le Strat, 2016, p.123). In imagining how the common could be the organising principle of the institution, how common could be instituted, we need to rethink how the institutional division of abilities could be challenged. How do we move from a space in which exchanges are both hierarchical and functionalized in order to acquire skills to fit a neo-liberal society to a space in which exercising thought is a collective act that draws out different perspectives from those already legitimised? A first step in this process is to position microsillons' perspective as artists in relation to the teachers and pupils we have worked with. How is microsillons producing art and what kind of art is produced? Answering these questions (that we ask to ourselves) is how we opened the discussion in our first meeting with the classes in the project En Commun. We spent time explaining that microsillons is an artist collective in order to describe a form of art practice that is not the most commonly known by the students or their teachers. Discussing this term we answered questions on how we share our tasks, the money we earn and our material ('Who keeps the beamer at home?'). We explained that we are invited to intervene in their schools but that we have autonomy within this school framework, that they will not be evaluated or marked. However, we are aware that this autonomous position is relative and arguable. Both Olivier and I believe in the importance of reflecting on how public services can really be at the service of citizens and this is precisely what our enquiry into En Commun will consist of.

Pivotal to Dardot and Laval's ideas for how the common could become the governing principle of society, is the concept that public services must be transformed into the common and organised as such. They emphasize the dual nature of these public services, which are both the expression of state power over certain domains and the design of common services to benefit society (Dardot and Laval, 2015a). Dardot and Laval emphasize the complexity of questioning the role of public services in the production of common in the context of neo-liberalism's extension. This context calls for a defence of services that are useful to society as a whole, but it would be impossible to change the way in which our society is organized if social and public services are not included in this reflection. Dardot and Laval think that the role of the state should be rethought as a legal and symbolic framework and that greater autonomy must be given to local structures, though it would not guarantee equality. Public services must serve citizens and not the other way around, turning them into common services.

Transforming public services into institutions of the common may be thought provoking, but it seems to correspond little with the situation in which microsillons developed *En Commun*—namely a commissioned artistic project with pupils. However, microsillons seeks as much as possible to make these projects and interventions a space where implicit and explicit norms can be questioned by imagining and practicing alternatives. When we intervene in schools, we are not hired as teachers, but as an independent collective of artists, benefiting from a comfortable freedom, mainly because art is a marginalised discipline at school (Grossenbacher and Oggenfuss, 2012) while the notion of creativity is becoming transversal to other disciplines. Looking for the relational modalities we wanted to set with institutions in general and schools in particular, microsillons gathered examples of projects where the artists have developed structures for exchanging knowledge horizontally. Many of these structures have defended the idea of becoming institutions, putting a certain weight behind this term, in that which Irit Rogoff named 'criticality', in her text *From Criticism to Criticism to Criticality* (2003). According to her, visual culture cannot be a process of accumulation. Existing

structures cannot simply add new perspectives that have been discovered recently. It is necessary to 'unlearn' the old structures in order to rethink new ones. Doing so transforms the simple criticism of these structures into an act of criticality. This is to say, that to rely on the knowledge of criticism to analyse and critique the conditions in which we find ourselves, while recognizing that we, as cultural agents, are an integral part of these structures. Rogoff states:

'It seems to me that within the space of a relatively short period we have been able to move from criticism to critique to criticality—from finding fault, to examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic, to operating from an uncertain ground which while building on critique wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis' (Rogoff, 2003).

microsilons is committed towards this form of giving voice to a critique in which an action may possibly initiate an alternative functioning of structures that organize our lives, a combination resonating strongly with the process of instituting the common.

In their call for an institution of the common, Dardot and Laval refer to the French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis. Castoriadis advocates for the power of collective imagination to, among other things, reinvent institutions and break with alienating situations that occur, according to him in, 'the imaginary moment in the institution's becoming autonomous and predominating with respect to society' (Castoriadis, 2005, p.132). To him, institutions should emerge from the people, from the institution of their imaginations, forming into what he calls auto-institutions. microsilons borrowed this term for a written article to designate a series of our projects (microsilons, 2013) that reflect on challenging the practices and operations of educational institutions following the principle of Rogoff's criticality. From the Freie Klasse at the Berlin Arts University, to Aulabierta in the

University of Granada, or Critical Practice in London, students, artists and cultural activists have developed experiences of politically radical educational practice within institutions and imagined resistances to the neo-liberal policies effecting higher education in particular.

Within this perspective, I think school, as part of public services, can really be envisaged as a space, as an institution concerning all individuals of a given society, to relay marginalized histories and to develop an imaginary of the common, i.e. a framework favouring the practice and the production of this common. In our desire to make a newspaper and to define the group formed by pupils, teachers and microsilons as a team writing a newspaper, lies the idea that we could develop an institution in the institution, with different rules and conditions. We materialized this dimension by changing the physical organisation of the space and redistributing the roles and responsibilities within this space. The second layer of our common production took place in our reflection together about what would come out of this activity in terms of content.

#### 6.2.3. Fostering common school activity through generative theme

Building a school activity on and through the common has implied the use of a series of tactical tools to carry out this double ambition. The situation I briefly described in the field of education is alarming and it is crucial to define other objectives for schools other than being the antechamber of the employment market. The following analysis of En Commun is addressing those who are directly concerned by these transformations, namely pupils and teachers.

If the education system is 'banking' as described by Paulo Freire, it is by the establishment of a dialogical problem-posing education that the Brazilian pedagogue sees the possibility of a reversal. Freire defines this problem-posing education as aiming at the emergence of a critical consciousness by focusing on the issues of how to live together beyond domination, individualist competition,



liberal democracy and market capitalism. If it is a central reference for microsilions as for other artists interested in education, it is because, more than other pedagogues perhaps, Freire was able to bring to the heart of his approach a strong vision between theory and practice, with a clear political position. Freire detailed, in the third chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2001) all of the steps necessary for practicing this problem-posing education. Freire always refused to designate this series of steps as a method, underlining the fact that this was a contextual educational experiment, combining literacy (only people considered as 'literate' by the state had the right to vote at that time in Brazil) with consciousness-raising (realized in Brazil, with peasants from the Nordeste, at the beginning of the 1960s). From this experiment, Freire drew a series of concepts central to the practice of critical pedagogy.

One of his principles consists of identifying themes—the generative themes in the words of Freire—connected with the life of the learners through a period of research involving an interdisciplinary team and based on field trips, interviews and observations. A series of meetings between the educators and the learners bring problems or contradictions, or the nucleus of contradictions in the words of Freire, encountered by the group in their everyday. The group of learners, accompanied by the educators, engage in the production of visual elements—named codes—bringing the encountered problems to a stage of physical representation. Then, the codes are decoded in the group, through collective discussion. This decoding process, which forms part of the educational programme itself (within the research circle), must enable the participants to consider their vision of the world in a different way. This acts to challenge fatalism and to foster the emergence of an untested feasibility (Freire, 2001), that is, a hitherto unimaginable action that may be accomplished by those who have engaged in the educational process.

Rethinking contemporary issues in the conceptual framework of another era is not a nostalgic or a fetishist gesture, but rather a desire to communicate, critically reread and update concepts that open up the possibility for alternatives to all forms

of hegemonic power. What Freire developed in a specific cultural and political context must of course be critically reviewed and augmented. Still, through this trans-generational relay, microsillons is attempting to show how situations can echo through space and time. We acknowledge that the political project found in previous theories of education seem adequate to oppose the imposition of a profitable and utilitarian pedagogy existing today and defend the (re)emergence of a politically situated conception of education that recognize the importance of common in the making of a radically democratic society.

For En Commun we, in part, applied strategies derived from Freire's concepts of a consciousness-raising pedagogy (though he is often associated with this notion, Freire never qualified his pedagogy as emancipatory). In En Commun, common is more than a generative theme emerging from our field trips, it was a call to question the everyday of the pupils at school and furthermore, the transformation of education from individual competition. In researching the common, the project touched on many different fields of study, (history, economy, sciences, etc.) and somehow this multi-disciplinary dimension also carried the potential of being problem-posing and consciousness-raising. It produced a differentiation from 'normal' modes of study that entail viewing an issue through only one subject or lense, limiting the way in which it is seen, analysed and described.

microsillons found the pedagogue's ideas of great help for creating a nuanced understanding of the interconnection between the pupils' and our own conception of common(s). The question of how Freireian concepts resonate with microsillons' approach of common as an activity, a transformative process for individuals and communities, can be found in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2001). Freire writes, 'Hence, the radical requirement—both for the individual who discovers himself or herself to an oppressor and for the oppressed—that the concrete situation which begets oppression must be transformed' (Freire, 2001, p.50). This co-dependancy between the oppressor and the oppressed and

education as a process of transformation from a hierarchical relation towards an horizontal one is naming, in different terms, the process of common production.

Common as a principal generative theme acted as an entry point for microsilons to research with pupils. It was also a starting point from which other themes would emerge—Freire insists that 'plurality' produces generative themes that in turn create a thematic universe. Plurality in the case of the newspaper project began with the variety of places (which we could view as codes) that we investigated together in order to write articles. It was essential that the knowledge and interests of the students were valued, in a shift that clearly distinguishes this activity from the usual school functioning where content is too often generated by 'specialists' organized according to a programme that students have no impact on, but which they need to absorb in order to succeed. The framework of En Commun is a reversal of these standards. Thus, the themes of inquiry emerged from the dialogue with the students. It is in this first dialogue that our common imagination is built, also defining the content that we will communicate to our readers.

Over the course of our different projects, Olivier and I have paid special attention to the type of material we bring into the classroom and how it is used to open up dialogue with a group. En Commun is no exception and the first content we presented included references that are visibly different from those usually found in the school curriculum. Typically we valorise mass culture or use the Internet as an explicit resource. We also value sources that come directly from the students, inviting them to feed the common production. The pupils presented us with content from the Internet that they were interested in and we can see, over the course of the sessions, that students took possession of the tools and classroom space, which they usually only have restricted access to.

When our first discussion around the common took place, each suggestion, each possible track we could go down to feed our vision of the common at the Bois de la Bâtie, was valued by being noted down on the blackboard and discussed. The

content was decided on by the students, in dialogue with microsillons. Even though microsillons arrived with a frame, the students took decisions on many aspects of the collaboration and discussing these decisions is part of the general process. We used different tools at different moments. For example, pupils voted individually to select the topics that they wanted to know more about, then they voted in groups to choose the issue within that topic that they wanted to work on. They also individually volunteered to document the field trips. We made sure that we valorised different modes of enquiry and discussed their own processes in order to gain knowledge about something, we looked for information on the Internet—seldom valued by teachers—we navigated sites that we suggested together and from there, started a discussion on how certain sites offer a more valuable resource for our common research and production. We present the Wikipedia encyclopaedia to them, discuss usage of—back then emerging—social networks. The layout of the articles and the type of writing they used (some choose a fictional mode, others an interview, sometimes only a series of keywords) was the choice of each group, as was how they would delegate tasks in the group. Olivier and I would interfere only if there was a demand from the pupils (we would not let violent behaviour manifest, but we were never confronted with such a situation). What frequently did occur though is that some pupils would apparently not direct their energy into making the project. I believe it is part of the group dynamic to deal with such a situation and it is impossible in the long term for the concerned pupils not to do anything, for the project offers lots of possible ways to contribute. For example, two boys from the primary school class were busy discussing their trading cards while their classmates were working on the illustrations for their articles. Olivier and I discussed with the group for a moment the importance of collecting the cards and what they would learn from this process. After some time, the discussion reconnected with fact that the newspaper is a way to contribute to the production of knowledge about the city and its uses. The entire project depends on the involvement of each individual towards the collective objective. To foster this involvement, the collaboration of students in the construction of their curriculum is an approach defended by Ira Shor, a North American teacher who studied and



microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
 En Commun (2010)  
 Picture of the mushroom farm realised by a student  
 Carouge



microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
 En Commun (2010)  
 Picture of the mushroom farm reworked by the students to illustrate an article  
 Carouge

worked with Paulo Freire. He uses his teaching experience as the material that he based a series of theoretical works on, making them tools for those who wish to understand and engage with the practice of so-called emancipatory pedagogy.

Shor describes the way in which he suggested, in the 1990s, to students attending his courses in a community college, that they think about how responsibility and authority can be negotiated within the classroom. He made this request in the context of a literature workshop built on the concept of utopia. The writing of a common contract between the students and their teacher makes it possible to decide on common rules relating to the evaluation. Then, starting from utopia, students are invited to propose topics that interest them more specifically and which will be developed in class. In his experience, Shor points to an element that seems to me completely related to what Olivier and I have experienced, in part, through the discussions for *En Commun*. For him, such a sharing of power and responsibility in the classroom could not have been produced if he had not made use of his institutional authority. Without this the students would not necessarily be ready to question the traditional system. In our case, what allowed us to engage the students concerned this institutional authority as well as our symbolical power due to our status as artists (I will come back on this point when discussing contradictions found in microsillons' approach at this end of this section). Giving the students the opportunity to question authority is essential in the process of the common activity, it distributes the responsibilities to the group at large and the principle can be extended to other circumstances. Olivier and I have assumed our role of 'Editors in Chief' but discussed with the students the limits of our role in the making of the articles and the importance for them to take responsibility for their part of the newspaper. The consequences were direct and solutions were found and discussed together. For example, the photographs taken by the students in the mushrooms farm are not focused, so the group decided to apply a software to make the photos look like drawings.

We are among the many who have been inspired by and borrowed from Freire and more broadly from the field of critical pedagogies to develop art projects and to then rethink the use of these theories in the contemporary context. Among the practices that we believe are most relevant, Ultra Red is a London-based collective active since 1994 and developing projects entangling art and politics in collective experimentations including a sonic dimension. In *Radical Education* (2012), a workbook published by the Ultra Red collective, there is a chapter titled 'Pedagogies of the Oppressed', which includes an account of an experiment using English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes based on a Freirean approach, but reinvented and transposed for the context of a language school for immigrants in the United Kingdom. During several months, a group of English teachers in ESOL engaged with their classes in a process of naming and asking the government about cuts in the money allocated to such courses resulting in the writing of a letter and different actions of protest against the cuts and their consequences for the students and the teachers. Janna Graham, who is writing this experience into a report, was also running The Center for Possible Studies at the time. In a conference presentation she gave in Geneva, she explained about the approach developed by the Centre's team:

'We were also working in schools and thinking a lot about Freire and other practices of school-based interventions, student self-led committees [...] taking control of the space of education for themselves in various ways, of using things like collective printing as ways of bringing multiple voices into the project, and also we were thinking about that relationship to what became this [...] idea of institutional pedagogy, so the way in which these kind of questions of shifting institutions, of making change in institutions, in understanding institutions as performative kinds of spaces, were important to us also thinking about our relationship to the Serpentine' (Graham, 2015).

Thus, the generative theme tool is particularly interesting because it will allow not only greater understanding of a given context but also because it may

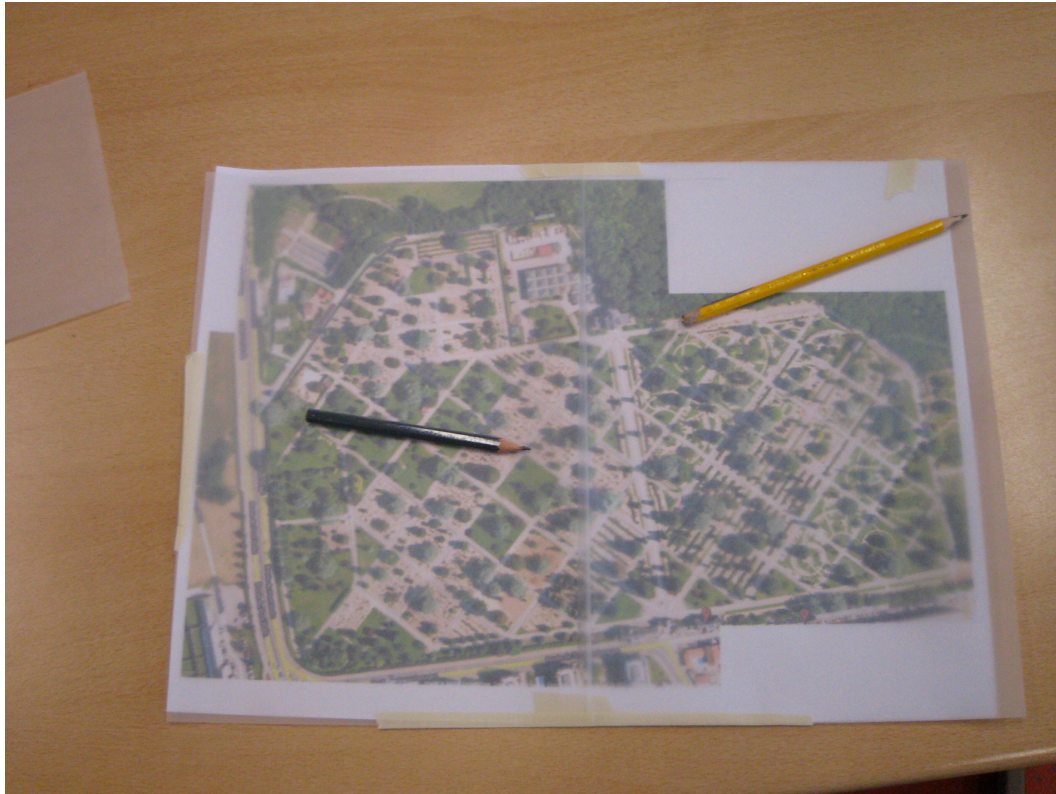
allow the emergence of something new and valuable that had not been planned. This process is not only describing what the pupils are experiencing, it also refers to Olivier and I learning with the students. During one of the sessions at the junior high school, a pupil asked us if we were really committed to the production of common because we were paid and they were not. This was the time for a discussion about this inequality, on the function of school in society in relation with the employment market. It was clear for us that we would not pay the pupils while they were working on their school hours, but it introduced an internal discussion between Olivier and I as to how we could ethically answer a similar question in projects engaging volunteer participants working in their free time, outside of their job and personal life while we were being paid. I will come back to how we addressed this situation in the third case study analysis *Vive le Théâtre Questionne*, a project involving a group of women with immigrant backgrounds.

#### 6.2.4. Connecting (with) the local network

In the process of collaboration, *microsillons* always seeks to involve a network of resource persons, capable of nourishing the current project and the questions they raise. Thus, for *En Commun*, meetings outside the school with a series of associations and public services, who interact with the Genevan community as citizens, allowed us to address questions that a library or Internet search could not answer. Through these interviews, the students could shape an understanding of their local community as well as see how different people can share the same place while carrying out different activities, which are not mutually exclusive.

We had only planned two sessions outside of the school. These outings were differently lived by the adults and by the students; the adults are concentrating on avoiding any accident while the pupils are enthusiastic and more talkative than usual. Outside of their classrooms, the pupils are keen to show what they know about their neighbourhood. One pointed out the building where his





microsilons with students from C.O.Montbrillant and Allobroges Primary School  
En Commun (2010)  
Mapping in class to prepare the outing at Allogroges Primary School  
Carouge

mother was working, another showed us the daycare centre where her little sister is spending the day. If outings are a 'traditional' school feature, they are mostly centred around a form of activity or cultural consumption (going to the park, visiting a museum, seeing a theatre play). When we all went to the Bois de la Bâtie, the pupils were in charge of producing something from that experience, of actively gathering information, images and notes. microsillons conceived the outings for En Commun in the spirit of Colin Ward, a British anarchist educator. His practice and writings are focused on the relationships between architecture (he was trained as an architect) and education, on learning practices outside of school. *Streetwork: The Exploding School* (1973) collects innovative experiments produced in the United Kingdom in the field of education. The main focus of the book are projects that take the position that, '[t]he city is in itself an environmental education, and can be used to provide one, whether we are thinking of learning through the city, learning about the city, learning to use the city, to control the city or to change the city' (Ward, 1978, p. 176). The topics we chose for the newspaper articles were tackling various issues and the process of gathering knowledge to write down these articles was largely dependent on these outings and encounters. Knowledge could be generated and spread out by the students, together and from our close environment. We have gone through a process that made us realise common was not only referring to a set of rules or resource but our effort, despite tensions and mistakes, to sign a common project everybody could be proud of.

We were in a similar situation to the one described by Ken Worpole, a close collaborator of Ward, 'The point was to help get children out of school and into their communities, to talk to local people, and explore their neighbourhood, its amenities and utilities, and understand how buildings, streets, landscapes and social life interact' (Worpole, 2010). En Commun sought to value a specific type of interaction in the social life of the city and to investigate spaces that are not regulated by market logic (microsillons has, in other projects, sought to discover a neighbourhood through the shops that occupy it), instead placing the common at the centre of our collective concerns. What we were trying to achieve in the

different moments articulated here about making En Commun is really close to the educational webs imagined by Ivan Illich (1970). He saw them as alternative structures to replace school with an educational society. For Illich, school was a harmful institution that he accused of positioning itself as the only structure able to educate when it was, to him, merely committed to reproducing social inequalities. For Illich, a way to end this hegemony was to separate the school from the state and to call for a 'deschooling' of society, using other channels to provide access to education, 'The current search for new educational funnels must be reversed into the search for their institutional inverse: educational webs which heighten the opportunity for each one to transform each moment of his living into one of learning, sharing, and caring' (Illich, 1970, p.2). Illich then introduces the idea of an education based on the combination of four approaches towards potential resources that make up the educational web. He imagines services organised to provide access to formal material for learning. Libraries or museums could provide those services but factories, airports and farms can also be a place for apprenticeships in this way. The second element is to make available lists of skills of people who can be reached to transmit their abilities to others. The third approach is to build models of communication that create peer matching. And finally, a directory referencing people named 'educators at large' by Illich, namely professionals, 'paraprofessionals and freelancers, along with the conditions of access to their services (Illich, 1973a, p. 81). If the possibility of developing curiosity and knowledge by being directly confronted with people making material this knowledge, then the limit of Illich's vision lies in the strong links he makes with the professional field and the importance of life-long learning, which have now become the keywords of a neo-liberal approach to education:

'Deschooling education should increase — rather than stifle — the search for men [sic] with practical wisdom who would be willing to sustain the newcomer in his [sic] educational adventure. [...] the operation of learning webs would require some of the skills and attitudes now expected

from the staff of a museum, a library, an executive employment agency, or a maître d'hôtel' (Illich, 1971, p.77).

With these precautions in mind, the outings we had with the classes were very instructive and pleasurable at the same time, a moment of shared discovery, the same was true for the adults of the group as for the youngest students. The conversations we held in the woods were with a diverse range of people—from volunteer to amateur, those representing public services and associations.

Moreover, the actions of the associations or structures we had worked with were inspiring examples of how a local network of actors can foster common in a given territory. This was also what we intended to make visible with the project we developed a few years after *En Commun* in a contemporary art centre, le 116, based in Montreuil, a city which is historically part of the 'red belt cities' around Paris (These cities, Pantin, Saint-Denis, Aubervilliers, etc. inhabited mostly by working-class people were ran or are still ran by leftist municipal governments). Titled *Commune De Montreuil*, it was produced as we were artists in residency at the 116 for sixth months. For the opening of the art centre, *microsilons* proposed a dispositive following a double-strategy: to inscribe the art centre in the urban territory and make the inhabitants of Montreuil visible within the walls of the institution. Referring with a tongue-in-cheek to the bourgeois atmosphere of this massive bourgeois house that was transformed into an art centre, the aim is to constitute an armorial from the neighbourhood. Realised from a series of interviews with different groups from Montreuil, this collection of blazons was a reference to the style of the old masters' mansion that was transformed into an art centre. Each person or group interviewed was asked about their activities, their place in the city and in the district, and their vision of the possible roles of an art centre in the neighbourhood. Everyone was also invited to propose a motto and an animal symbolizing their activities (from a Club De Pétanque to self-organized anarchist bakery or an association dedicated to supporting homeless teenagers). The blazons were composed by applying the symbolic colours of heraldic science and divided



microsillons with associations, clubs and  
Commune de Montreuil (2013)

Blason realised for the Association des Femmes Maliennes de Montreuil  
Montreuil

into four categories: public service, associative structure, cooperative trade, other. A web site accompanying the piece was displaying information collected during the interviews.

#### 6.2.5. Common production as an untested feasibility

Illich and his concept of an educational web seems to predict a new form of organization for education, based on the idea of network, in a projection of the Internet as a model of exchange of knowledge. The format chosen for En Commun might seem anachronistic in comparison, now that tools like the wiki allow us to build a more dynamic and perhaps less authoritarian approach to collaboration. However, the constraints, especially in terms of time, posed by the festival who invited us to do this project, justified the production of a tangible object that everybody could identify with. The wiki seemed to involve working for long periods of time, requiring a form of dynamic activity and we did not want to suggest it as a format we may have to quickly disband if it did not work for the needs of the project. *microsilions* chose to work together to produce a newspaper for two reasons. Firstly, this format is part of a very specific history of pedagogy that was carried out at the beginning of the twentieth century by Célestin and Elise Freinet. The Freinet pedagogy is based on the idea of the organization of work and cooperation between students; the classroom space becomes a workshop. Freinet places the realization of a newspaper into the centre of the pedagogical project, all stages being carried out by the students (including printing).

Freinet opposed the now current values in education of competition, the commodification of knowledge and individualism, instead valuing mutual aid, the sharing of knowledge and cooperation. For Freinet, it was essential that those using the school, including the educator, managed its organisation, 'We want to teach free activity and the whole current economic system is based on the passivity of a minor proletariat, we would like to train our students in cooperation and everything around them is competition and individualism' (Freinet, 1932). More

generally, the way we worked with the two classes is close to the pedagogical approach that Freinet called for, 'a collective realization that is built from documentation and field research, named "survey", that conducts a production, which is called "masterpiece" in reference to companionship, a form of peer learning that has existed since the Middle Ages' (Freinet, 1949).

Our proposal also tries to avoid certain expectations regarding the type of production that could emerge from the collaboration of two artists and a class. Art at school is still related to the idea of making handicrafts to develop motor skills. Instead we use this vantage point to address questions of taste, to evaluate the concept of individual talent and less obviously, to engage with issues around urbanism, ecology and law.

Therefore, to come up with an artistic activity that consists of a long sequence resulting in the printing of a newspaper foils these expectations (the primary school teacher told us that, 'I did not expect that you would work like that, there is not even an original drawing made by the children in the newspaper!'). The act of doing together, of reproducing mechanically what we do, of distributing it for free, is the opposite of the practice of visual arts teaching at school and, to us, a coherent vision of what could be a common artistic production. This whole process is making the emergence of an 'untested feasibility' (Freire, 2001) possible when, very often, art activities in class tend to be framed between a certain need to conform with expectations and the expression of a form of talent. In *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1994) Paulo Freire tells an anecdote that happened to the son of his friend Claudius Ceccon, exiled in Geneva during the 1970s. One day, the young Flávio comes back from school sad and discouraged. His teacher had torn apart one of his drawings. His father meets her to discuss the case. She praises Flávio, his talent and autonomy. Then, she proudly shows him a series of almost identical cats realized by the pupils from the observation of a statuette. She explains, that copying is a way to avoid 'terrifying situations for the children' where they must choose and create. Therefore, she

could not accept Flávio's cat, which had 'impossible colours'. Freire presents this anecdote as a metaphor for the school system as a whole, a system fearing liberty, creation, adventure and risk that leaves no space for anything unexpected to happen. Believing in the necessity to leave space for this 'untested feasibility' to manifest and consciously favouring the unexpected, and the possible tensions it could produce, microsillons has investigated how common can be produced in a school environment instead of reproducing a certain mythology of what arts could or could not do.

microsillons has adopted a rather sceptical approach about the relationship between the practice of arts and the oppressive notion of talent that is still very much present in the discourse on arts in school contexts and became a way to justify exclusion and to, 'ignore or downplay the role of social context' (Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2015). Working in two classes already labelled as 'low ability', we wanted to avoid reinforcing the feeling of inadequacy with regards to the school's expectations of the students. The design of the articles was made through a series of steps to finally become an image everybody in each group was agreeing on. For example, the illustration on the family gardens article started with a series of drawings. Olivier and I asked the pupils two questions: firstly, what did they remember from their visit at the gardens; secondly, what would they like to grow in such a garden? The response to this second question ranged from a pizza tree to giant bees and spiders. The pupils drew their answers and the results were shared in a collective moment of presentation to the class at the end of the session. The following week, we started from these sketches to realize collages with images taken from books, magazines or the Internet. The collages were scanned and reworked with software and we adjusted the different elements with the group members before making a final consultation with the whole class to agree on the final state of the illustration. We are aware that this process, as open as it might be, places us in a situation of expertise in terms of image production but as I mentioned it before, each specific situation with the images generated an answer from each group of redactors. We are the artists and the weight of our advice is



important in the moment of decision-making. Olivier and I did not want to remain silent, preferring to assume our implicit difference of status, and it did sometimes influence the outcome, yet there were so many aspects to negotiate in the process that the final result is balanced. This unpredictable process of production is greatly challenging the usual expectations of a school exercise that seeks a specific, expected result. The school system valorises convergence towards the right answer to a set problem and alternative paths are often dismissed. microsillons adopt an attitude that opposes this approach in which we experiment in the joy of not having to conform.

Developing a sense of critique, expressing affects, accepting the possibility that people are not sharing the same opinion on a specific point, are crucial elements that constantly shape common production. The aim of schooling can be seen as the distribution of the same knowledge to every child of a given age group, in a will to reduce inequalities within society. These objectives are quickly lost in the everyday routine of the class, where roles are attributed to pupils sometimes from when they first enter the classroom until their last day of school (the 'good' student, the troublemaker, the chatterbox, the silent one, etc.), transforming the practice of critical debate in the classroom into a game with loaded dice.

#### 6.2.6. Limits and frustrations: can we change it?

Through En Commun, microsillons proposed working with tools and methods different from the school, and to reflect on how this institution can interact with the local community. Altogether, we would work with the pupils during forty school hours. It is much longer than the usual amount of hours given for artistic intervention in the classroom, but far from being enough to avoid a certain 'manipulation' of the pupils' work. It was already quite an opportunity that we could finance so many working sessions as well as the 'professional' production of the newspaper. Despite this, we felt frustrated at going only once to the woodlands and that we had to organise so much of the outing there ourselves. Due

to such a constraint, for example, the group working on the animal park had to use pictures of animals taken from the Internet as the student in charge of the photographic documentation decided to take only pictures from behind the group, which made the rest of the class laugh when we looked at the photographs in the classroom. Olivier and I felt we had to be more authoritarian with the children as time was running out, even if, at the very beginning of the project, we clearly defined our position and communicated it to the pupils: We are the editors-in-chief and you are the team of journalists. We wished that more time could have been spent on discussing the links between the different articles, we wished that the two classes could have worked together rather than only meet at the opening—and only two pupils in the end joined for the opening of the art festival, which was in the middle of the school summer break. This very low attendance to the moment where the common production is made public is deceiving but usual. It is for me a manifestation of the banking approach of education. If the school is counting everything, then so do the pupils. A school project that asks them to be present on extra-school hours is submitted to this counting system that destroys the spirit of engagement and generosity needed for any public debate to take place.

I sometimes have the feeling of being 'stuck' between the expectations I place on how a common process can produce results that are more interesting than the juxtaposition of individual proposals and the practical conditions for the common production to take shape. The question of what the students are left with after such a collaboration, of what possible sense can they make of it, apart from the tangible object produced, is difficult to answer. While we were discussing during the last session, I remember that one of the pupils was asked by the teacher what he would remember from the collaboration with microsillons. The answer was, 'I already knew that plants needed water to grow and now, I know it again'. At first, this sentence, which was not meant to be mean or funny, somehow pointed to the failure of our approach to produce anything different than the usual school programme. Can a radical concept discussed over the course of two months make any change in the numerous years a student spends in the educational institution?

Is the application of concepts from critical pedagogies brought the students to feel in anyway empowered? Elisabeth Ellsworth's text *Why doesn't it feel empowering?* (1989) makes the provocative argument that, 'key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy—namely, 'empowerment', 'student voice', 'dialogue', and even the term 'critical'—are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination' (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 303). In the 1980s, she gave a course at the University of Wisconsin on media and anti-racist pedagogies. She explains how applying the theory of scholars propositing to practice a liberatory pedagogy for this course, 'exacerbated the very conditions we were trying to work against, including Eurocentrism, racism, sexism, classism, and 'banking education''. Ellsworth makes a very valuable point here and addresses one of the core paradoxes encountered in our practice. It is one thing to discuss with groups of peers, people who are equipped with the tools of academic discourse, the transformative potential of critical pedagogies and another thing being in the process of making an art project with young students. Ellsworth explains that the objectives of the course were to study how racist structures and practices operated and to engage in political action to challenge these structures and practices. As she was discussing with her students the objectives of this course, she had to explain several times what she meant by the use of the word critical and she realized she was not feeling able to really make use of the abstract terms she could read in the literature on critical pedagogy neither was she feeling at ease with the hidden political agenda carried by the term, therefore she removed critical from the title of the course directly naming what it was about: anti-racism.

In the case of *En Commun*, the political dimension of our proposal was clear for us, but was read differently by the various actors taking part. It is obvious that the pupils invited to develop the newspaper did not read this research as an invitation to extend the practice of the common to their everyday, nor did the teachers see what we did as deeply transformative. The classroom practice somehow forced us to unlearn the pedagogical tactics identified in literature and to improvise on many occasions a solution to answer different and contradictory

expectations—ours, the students, those of the teachers and the institution. The project attempted to open the space for a 'complex thought' (Morin, 1990) to emerge from the entanglement of the different perspectives crossing through the project (the institution, the individual, the pupils, microsillons). We, the conception team of the project, were expecting nothing but a modest impact of our action. Experiences with artistic forms cannot be guaranteed; even with the most carefully planned arts-based interventions, an experience cannot be predicted or assumed to be good just because it involves something called 'the arts' (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013). Having the possibility to develop this project in good conditions, was in part possible because microsillons uses the ambiguous symbolical power attributed to art practice and its ability to gain the confidence of the education department of Geneva City (we would never have received a penny if we proposed an activist project on the common). We have to recognize that, 'to be in such a position always implies power— not always economic but most certainly always cultural and in what Bourdieu (1993) calls a "homology," or a corresponding position to the field of power' (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013, p.672). The strategies we deployed for making this common production emerge from the official institutions of knowledge and are certainly not sufficient to produce a durable change.

Artistic practices that support a collective, anti-capitalist, process-based approach have been a site from which to plot alternatives against 'banking education'. There are multiple initiatives that have been developed by numerous structures, associations and collectives, outside or on the margins of the institution. Therefore, educational structures can also be challenged through experiences devised as forms of exit from the neo-liberal structures organising the production and dissemination of knowledge. In this way Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen, founders of the Copenhagen Free University, act outside of the system of education, to propose a programme of workshops, seminars and conferences in their private apartment. Using the word 'university' is extremely tactical, as a self-run free university in the context of the Bologna Process made a strong political

statement, which quickly attracted students and researchers from different horizons to join the project:

‘On a very practical level, people from across the globe started to write to us, applying as students and lecturers; people were using the CFU as a means of getting into increasingly privatized archives, people were using the CFU to obtain job references, people were using the CFU as a means to get into the fortified first world’ (CFU, 2007).

This appropriation of the authority of the term university refers to a set of references linking Joseph Beuys’ Free University, the Flying Universities in Poland and movements of popular education. microsillons developed its practice in a very similar way and we could easily caricature our practice by saying that we transform the art spaces in which we intervene into classrooms. Our ideas of what a classroom should be include space for dialogue, common production of knowledge, forms and affects, questioning how we relate to outside the classroom. We actively seek to collaborate with state schools, to address people other than our usual allies, people who do not feel interested (and who are basically not informed) in alternative educational structures developed by artists. microsillons therefore uses the context of the institution to connect different communities, groups and associations to work together towards the production of common. But in doing so, we must convey exit doors, ways to escape the institution that lead to the possibility of reimagining how we can challenge it. This was one of concepts of Copenhagen Free University along with the idea of the fugitive as the figure who reflects on the possible role of the commons in relation to the academy.

I would also like to relay the position developed by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, who state that they act and reflect from a symbolical space within the margins of the university, which they refer to as undercommons. From there, they imagine fugitive modes of functioning, taking inspiration from the Marrons, in reference to the enslaved people who fled to rebuild free communities. The undercommons suggest a criminal relation with the university institution in which

they invite us to think about teaching beyond the limited space of the classroom, to view self-organization and occupation as central forms of knowledge. They call for a multiplication of these spaces in which those they call, 'the marron community of the university' (Moten and Harney, 2009, p.26) can meet and bring together their marginalized histories, tactics or knowledge. This connection with the narratives of slavery, the various struggles that led to the official abolition of this organized social violence, is utilised because escaping is searching for alternatives to a situation of oppression, where creative capacity and agency are denied. I recently heard a lecture by a philosopher named Dénètem Touam Bona, who has just published a book on the 'marrons'. Some of these communities gained their autonomy through these escapes (while many were chased down, hunted and persecuted) they became a symbol of escape as resistance and have played an important step in the debate on the abolition of slavery. If the symbolical use of marron community is provocative (the marroons were engaged in a vital struggle and living very difficult lives) I believe the interest of the hypothesis of Moten and Harney lies in the idea of forming communities, and this to me directly refers to the undercommons described by the authors: we need to form communities to produce the common.

Olivier and I have borrowed to the Afro-American feminist scholar bell hooks (interestingly, her pen name is an homage to her enslaved grandmother) the idea that a 'community of learners' has to be built, borrowing to bell hooks the idea that 'students and teachers are equal to the extent that (they) are equally committed to creating a learning context' (hooks, 1994, p.153). Community in this sense is not a close and homogeneous group of people but rather the recognition of a shared commitment in a context normally competitive and individualistic. As we were engaging more in our practice as artists, art educators and educators, the words of hooks we enjoyed reading as we started to work together made more and more sense 'the feminist classroom—is and should be a place where there is a sense of struggle, where there is a visible acknowledgment of the union of theory

and practice' (hooks, 1989), we committed ourselves to bring struggles, tensions and exclusions caused by an oppressive model of education at a stage of visibility.

As *microsillos* was invited to take part in an exhibition at the art gallery of the arts university just after the application of the Bologna Process, we used this frame to continue asking questions on the future of the University and education in general, in the era of the commodification of studies. We invited an organisation of students called *Education is Not for Sale* who at that time occupied classrooms at the University of Geneva to protest against the implementation of neo-liberal measures such as increasing fees or making associative organisations disappear from the university, to the benefit of services delivered by private companies. The group was mostly confined in a seminar room at the university, filled with sleeping bags and empty pizzas boxes. We went to several of their meetings to discuss ways in which we could help communicate their movement. In the end a collection of their leaflets were presented in the exhibition and a series of encounters with students and alumni from the art university were held in the space. It seems to me that it is by relaying and interconnecting marginalised discourses that we can practice an education based on the reflection of the desires and needs of all those who are engaged in a process, whether formal or informal. Eventually, multiplying these alternative practices can slow down the neo-liberal evolution of schools. For sure, it will at least help to identify people sharing similar objectives and reiterate the fact that there are alternatives. With this piece, the growth and the acceptance of the commodification of education – particularly in the context of art studies - were tackled. One of its main challenges was to establish links between students of different universities from Geneva. The use of the exhibition space as a room where participants could meet and discuss concrete strategies to fight against the application of neoliberal measures in education and produce a political content that can return to the public sphere without being completely neutralized by the art institution.



microsillons with students from HEAD and University of Geneva  
Success and Career (2010)  
Exhibition view L'Intermédiaire, LIYH, HEAD – Geneva



The time constraint in En Commun obliged microsillons to take a lot of decisions in a non-consultative way, despite many of the steps being discussed in details. Although common was the research theme, it was sometimes very complex to apply it to the actual school context. We would have loved to really leave space for difficulties that were emerging in the course of the project to be solved in common and were frustrated to decide for the sake of having a production to present in the frame of the festival that invited us to propose this collaboration. Olivier and I felt the need to find situations with a possibility of more open results. The following project analysis is based on a project that lasted more than a year with a group of migrant women, an agenda that was set by the needs of the group rather than by an institutional actor.





microsillons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
Text embroidered on theatre seat  
Théâtre de Carouge

### 6.3. Diverging perspectives in a common process of production

from case study #3: *Vive Le Théâtre Questionne* (microsillons, 2012—13)

Challenging existing cultural participation models through the development of a month-long project in common with a small group of marginalised persons—migrant women in the case of *Vive le Théâtre Questionne*, was an objective that, throughout the collaboration, was nicely reinforced by the contradictions of microsillons proposal forged by the group. Part of challenging the models then lay in recognising how divergences can nourish the common production. The fact that the group was composed of women and that we were reflecting in common on the figure of Antigone, brought me to also reflect on how feminist experiences and theories have been contributing to imagine a common society. Finally, bringing together the different elements observed in the experience, through the lens of this analysis, I saw that the concept of agonistic mediation forged by microsillons throughout the years was useful for implementing common in a capitalist and individualist society.

At the centre of this thesis lies the question of how common production can be experimented with in relation to cultural institutions. This takes place as the organisational principle of artistic production realised with non-artists, with the ambition of critiquing and challenging dominant social models and norms. As I have already observed, answering this question through the practice of microsillons resulted in a complex intertwining of references, experiences and dialogues addressing political, economic, emotional, historical and intellectual aspects of our contexts of intervention. The project *Vive le Théâtre Questionne* constitutes a case study to understand how differences (of gender, race, knowledge or opinion) in relation to issues of domination, cultural hegemony, and oppression can influence a collaborative artistic process. *Vive le Théâtre Questionne* questioned the role of arts and culture in our society. For example, the separation between mass culture and cultivated culture (Caune, 2013), culture as a vector of integration, the voices of women in the public sphere, feminisms, the degrees of visibility of certain

groups of people and their exclusion or marginalization. The challenge was to build up a common context where the different positions, which emerged throughout the process of production, would be recognized as manifestations of a vibrant agonistic public sphere (Mouffe, 2013), a radical democratic space for debate between different perspectives.

Through this year-long project, microsillons gained a more self-critical vision of our position in contexts of inequality and privilege and of our responsibilities towards the group of volunteers who accepted to engage in the collaborative art projects we set up.

#### 6.3.1. Challenging existing cultural participation models

The conception of this common production was questioning and challenging existing models of 'cultural participation'. Defining cultural participation precisely is as complex as defining culture and before becoming focusing my reflexion to the specific context of *Vive le Théâtre Questionne*, I propose to start with this twofold definition from Unesco (2014):

- culture as a way of life, values, knowledge, attitude, skills, individual and collective beliefs and
- culture as an organised sector of activity

Cultural participation, Unesco, leans on the definition of the art historian Tony Bennett, indicates : Participation in the arts and everyday life activities that maybe associated with a particular culture. It refers to 'the ways in which ethnically-marked differences in cultural tastes, values, and behaviours informed not just artistic or media preferences but are embedded in the daily rhythms of different ways of life; and of the ways in which these connect with other relevant social characteristics—those of class and gender for example.' Cultural participation translates in a variety of national policies and is intrinsically linked with the idea of measuring, evaluating effects. Which effects are expected from a cultural

participation process? For Unesco, choice-based cultural participation 'contributes to the development of critical thinking as well as to a continuous learning process about creativity and cultural diversity; it 'offers experiences of what is meaningful for each person, and therefore leads to the constant construction and transmission of individual and collective values'. It also 'provides opportunities for individuals to experience positive social connections with their community as well as cultural diversity, which fosters feelings of integration, inclusion and mutual respect.' (Unesco, 2014, pp 83-85). This discourse navigates between a defence of cultural diversity as a necessity on the one hand and the importance of participation as a mean to integrate individuals and communities, which suggests, without naming or representing that a form of hierarchy exists between different practices or forms of culture.

A similar duality can be traced in the cultural policies developed in the French-speaking sphere in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the concept of the democratisation of culture and that of cultural democracy. These two paradigms played a central role in the project *Vive le Théâtre Questionne*, an experiment combining the approach of Mathieu Menghini's expertise in the field of theatre and microsilons' practice of artistic forms of mediation. It was developed under the commission of the Théâtre de Carouge and involved eight women originating from non-European countries over the course of the year, facilitated by Camarada, a dedicated social and legal support centre for immigrant women. It is important to understand the context of this collaboration to explain these two concepts, which were modelled on the French concept of *culutre* (and regions dominated by French culture for decades) (Moulinier, 2016). It is in a cultural landscape and the institutions shaped by these concepts that my relationship to culture has been forged. The project with Camarada users has been a stimulating framework in which to experiment, critique and overcome these paradigms.

The French republican ideal is built on the principles of freedom, equality and fraternity. Culture and arts play a central role in this republican project and,

since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a policy of developing cultural facilities (theatres, museums, libraries, etc.) took place with the desire to facilitate access for all citizens to the works of artists, intellectuals and scientists. Describing the project of the intellectual to spread culture and a state budget Victor Hugo, in a discourse (which reemerged during the struggles of cultural workers from 2003 in France to defend their specific legal status) pronounced in front of the Assemblée Nationale (French parliament) stated, 'Schools, libraries, museums, theatres and bookshops must be multiplied in order to bring light into the minds of the people everywhere' (1848). The emergence of leisure time that accompanied the industrial boom also placed culture as a major tool to form the enlightened citizen. Therefore, the French constitution drafted at the end of WWII states in its preamble that the nation guarantees the, 'equal access of the child and the adult to education, vocational training and culture' (1946). Here we see the emergence of a political and social mission for culture and the arts in the formation of the national identity that led to the creation of the first Ministry of Culture in France, under the leadership of André Malraux, a writer and intellectual who took part in the Liberation of France in 1945, with the General De Gaulle. The figure of Malraux embodies a certain conception of culture, which is still very present in the francophone sphere. With his collaborators, Malraux developed a cultural policy whose main characteristics were based on an assimilation of the definition of culture with the definition of art in an hierarchy of cultural values and the ambition to give the people access to the most important—according to their values—artistic culture. Malraux and his partisans believed in the existence of a universal understanding of culture, of arts, shared by all humanity (Caune, 2005). Seeking to defend principles of equality, fraternity and freedom, universalism aims to unite the national community beyond particularities of religion, class or ethnic origin. Malraux defended free access to cultural heritage and the importance for everyone to be able to develop a sense, even a love, of art just by being confronted with it. Thus, the policy of the state was to create more structures, in the entire French territory, to promote this great artistic culture. This paternalistic model was criticized at the end of the 1960s, a period when many artists returned to forms of creation outside institutions, in a desire to share their

practices and find ways to produce cultural objects with amateurs breaking with bourgeois culture (Martin and Poirier, 2013).

Without seeing the disappearance of the model of the democratization of culture, the concept of cultural democracy emerged in the 1960s, both in France and in a global political context of struggles and contestation of hierarchical order, raising the question of making institutionalised culture closer to the practices and cultural tastes of the people. This reflection on culture also took place in the frame of a broader examination of constructing the common: the European project. A colloquium of the European ministries of culture was held in Arc-et-Senans, France in 1972 to discuss the status of culture and to organise a conference on the role of culture at a European level, held in Helsinki the same year. The final declaration of the colloquium stated that, 'It is about recognizing the right of Man [sic] to be the author of lifestyles and social practices that are meaningful. It is therefore necessary to preserve the conditions of creativity wherever they are, to recognize cultural diversity by guaranteeing the existence and development of the weakest social environments' (Girard, 1972).

The principles voiced at the Arc-et-Senans colloquium were further developed in various other European conferences; Marcel Hicter, one of Europe's leading political advocates, gave a speech in which he outlined his concept of cultural democracy as:

' [...] neither culture for all, nor culture for everyone but culture by each and everyone with a perspective of a development of all. [...] this culture [...] requires towards others an attitude of hospitality, of dialogue; [...] it is a question of questioning the patrimonial notion of culture and replacing it by a definition of culture by the population itself' (Hicter, 1980, p.353).



This discourse affirms the principle of plurality, diversity and equality of cultures, in opposition to the vision of universality defended by Malraux. Nevertheless, the French state cultural policy did not prioritise this approach, categorised as a form of animation rather than creation (Wallon, 1982) and did not engage really in developing mechanisms modifying inequalities (Caune, 2006, p. 28) and the Ministry of Culture continued to prioritise the support of supposedly universal forms of culture. Augustin Girard, who was the director Studies and researches service of the Ministry of Culture between 1963 and 1993, provocatively recognized that the cultural industries have more contributed more to democratise culture in France than policies of the Ministry itself (Girard, 1978).

It must be stressed here, however, that the Swiss political constitution is different from that of the French, for a greater autonomy is left to the regions and cantons in their cultural policy and a greater balance has been maintained between different popular—even traditional—forms of culture and a more elitist versions (Moeschler, Thévenin, 2009). Furthermore, citizens are often express opinion about the development of cultural amenities through voting. The urbanized and francophone canton of Geneva is, however, for geographical and linguistic reasons, connected to the cultural production of France, even more when it comes to the field of theatre. In the two approaches of culture and its diffusion that I have just described, the art of theatre occupies a specific place. Popular and cultivated forms are studied in schools and these different forms are valorised through differing channels, which is one of the reasons that made Olivier and I accept Mathieu's invitation to collaborate on a project based on the theatre as a discipline and as an institution. The theatre network in Geneva is amazingly dense and active for a city of its size and more than a third of the public funding for culture is dedicated to supporting the performing arts (OCSTAT, 2012). Despite this, neither Olivier or I have a solid knowledge in this particular field and we were keen on the idea of building a project without being experts in this area, allowing Mathieu to assume this role. He was really committed to demonstrating theatre as an artistic form deeply linked with the practice of democracy. The link between theatre and

democracy is anchored in ancient Greece and, according to Hannah Arendt, theatre is 'political art par excellence' (1998, p.188) as its very form focuses on the subject of relationships. Choosing the classical Greek tragedy *Antigone*, the version written by Sophocles, was a way to open a series of questions on citizenship, laws, and agency. In ancient Greece, theatre was one of the institutions of democracy and tragedies were conceived as an experience of democracy in which citizens were involved as actors in a process of self-acknowledgment as members of the community (Meier, 1993). A play was the occasion to gather different groups of the Athenian society, to represent and experiment with the city symbolically. If tragedy constituted a shared self-representation of the community and engaged the spectators in a reflection about themselves (Kottman, 2003), to present the tragedy of *Antigone* in a theatre today cannot entail the same political dimension. The spectators of the Carouge theatre do not come to see *Antigone* in order to take part in a political debate or to participate in an experience of democracy. Recognizing that theatrical practices developed with political consciousness and transformative objectives—like Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed in Brazil developed in the 1970's, the San Francisco Mime Troupe from the end of the 1950's or the Théâtre de la Carriera in the 1960's in France—have served as a communication tool for the struggles of marginalised groups, we recognised that we were far from these experimental and politicised forms of theatre. *Vive le Théâtre Questionne* took place in an institutional theatre, with the aim of transforming its socially elite image.

For myself I wanted to learn more about the figure of *Antigone*, who she was and how her story resonates with the question of feminism. I was raised in a middle class family who did not attend evenings at the theatre, not by lack of means but by lack of real interest. As children, I remember seeing a few theatre plays on television. My main interaction with traditional theatre consisted of reading some of the classical repertoire while studying at high school, according to a programme established by the Ministry of Education. It was in the 1980s and I remember being twelve years old when my class had to study a play by Molière,

Les femmes savantes. This 17th century theatre piece appeared on the French curriculum for my age group. The play—written by the most popular author and actor of his time and appointed official theatre writer for the court of King Louis XIV—features three women under the influence of a pseudo-scientist and is written in the register of a comedy. The women are blinded by the pedantic philosophical considerations of this character, whose efforts are mostly turned towards subtracting their money. The play, like all of Moliere's texts, is part of the French cultural heritage and is studied by many pupils, boys and girls, in France, each year. With the issue of women's education at its centre, the play seemed to carry a negative message, which was that women should concentrate on domestic tasks and education beyond this objective would be a waste of time or an error.

In order to accompany our reading, each student in the class had to obtain, at the request of our teacher, a book which proposed an interpretation of the work studied, an interpretation which pupils were led through in a series of exercises, accompanied by the experts' answers. I could not understand how a precise discourse could be made about a work that had been produced in a completely different context, excluding other interpretations. Thus, one of the objectives of this reading guide was to reconnect with the context of the time. I regret that the interpretation expert that I was using to study Molière's play lacked an expansive critique, especially when describing women's will to access academic knowledge and the boundaries of their ability to do so due to societal domination. The reading guide never mentions alternative interpretations, yet these women could be described as oppressed, as categorised by a patriarchal system, or the misogynist dimension of the play could be explored for the understanding of contemporary readers (as is often the case in more complex analyses of the play). Under the pretext of helping the pupils to read a text, the somewhat cynical exercises ('How would you interpret the behaviour of Bélise in the play?') sounds like an open question but there was one answer that was 'right'. I had many questions: Who chose this piece as an object of study? What is the relevance of reading this text written for a King three centuries after the fact in a state school? Why should

women see their salvation in marriage (as some of my classmates would later do) rather than emancipate themselves through knowledge? But I silenced myself and memorised the official interpretation of the text for my test. I draw on this anecdote here to illustrate the difficulty of naming what it is that oppresses us in a certain context, which makes us silent. Even when we feel a certain violence, we do not always have the tools and allies to name this violence. It is therefore interesting to go through moments where we can discuss these issues in groups, going beyond isolation, to dare to address the institution that participates in the reproduction of this oppression. I would have loved if a debate on the text of the play could have taken place, if pupils could have imagined several interpretations on the text of the play and that I could have shared my disagreement with the interpretation made in my schoolbook and reiterated by my teacher. I would have loved to be seated in an agonistic classroom.

Antigone was a completely different figure and, as a woman, several feminist thinkers have used her as a figure of resistance towards patriarchal power. The story of Antigone sees this young woman opposing her uncle's law—to the point where she dies. The uncle is a tyrannical ruler of the city of Thebes who impeaches her to bury her dead brother, executed for treason against the city. In the course of the conception of the project, I read the analysis made by the philosopher Judith Butler (2000) on the figure of Antigone in which she describes the Antigone attitude in the way that the young woman defies and symbolically appropriates power. According to Butler, 'The legacy of Antigone's defiance appeared to be lost in the contemporary efforts to recast political opposition as legal complaint and to seek the legitimacy of the state in the espousal of feminist claims' (Butler, 2000, p. 1). I remember thinking that this was a sticking point in regard to the kind of consensual approach that we had been using to conceptualise the project. Mathieu drafted an approach that could be seen as the perfect combination of the ambition both for the democratization of culture and to create cultural democracy. During the preparatory sessions for *Vive le Théâtre Questionne*, Olivier and I expressed a series of doubts to Mathieu. We shared with

him how we felt that our common proposal was already entangled in a series of paradoxes: Why would we impose a feminist dimension only because we wanted to work with a group of women? How could we imagine producing anything critical from a canonical theatre play? Can we address people through a form of essentialisation (women, migrant) and engage in a process of common debate and production? I was interested to see if I could challenge the contradictions I had not been able to name when I was in French class as a teenager. Olivier and I hoped that a production in common could address the limits of these models while seeking to invent new ones, where forms of privilege and exclusion could be named and relayed in the protected—in the sense of privileged and exclusive—sphere of the Théâtre de Carouge.

#### 6.3.2. Agonistic and still common?

A key aspect of the common production process for the Théâtre de Carouge was how different perspectives coexisted without losing their consistency. It was necessary to discuss the differences of imaginary, status, and experiences and to recognize that complexity cannot always be resolved in a united utterance, that voices can be contradictory and disruptive, that cultural institutions can be a site where these differences are expressed publicly by people who are not exclusively cultural actors.

The process through which the different voices met in *Vive le Théâtre Questionne* was long and complex. After this project, Olivier and I started reflecting on how we could name the principle that emerged throughout the process of common production with the users of *Camarada* that we made visible in the final result. The concept of agonism as theorised by Chantal Mouffe (2013) seemed to be a worthy translation and we came to the idea that, between a model of cultural democratisation and a model of the democracy of culture, an agonistic approach of artistic mediation can emerge. But what does Mouffe mean by 'agonism' and how does she relate it to the field of culture? Mouffe anchors her

concept in the obligation to live in a multipolar world and the understanding that our existences are part of pluriverse. Mouffe's terminology is really fertilising for the imagination, for it draws lines between conceptions from the past, which, through a continuum rather than a rupture, she transforms into a new perspective. Thus, the concept of the universal entailed by the notion of the democratisation of culture, its binary approach to the production of artistic work, seemed out-dated. On the other hand, although the more fragmented approach of cultural democracy does offer the possibility of dialogue and diversity in cultural policies, it has been inflected by a discourse of neutrality and flattened differences that favour a consumerist vision of culture.

Mouffe believes in the model of agonistic democracy and she asserts that European citizens live under the regime of close, liberal democracy (Mouffe, 2005). In this system, there are many signs of disaffection with institutions including the success of populist and/or extreme right politic parties with their promise to break with 'traditional politics'. People are expressing more and more a form of cynicism towards politics. There is a disconnection between a professional sphere of elected people reproducing the consensus that liberal democracy is the only valuable model. Mouffe describes this aggregative form of democracy and its emphasis on self-interest where the organisation of party politics is led by individual interest, a mode that discourages, 'popular participation in the taking of decisions' (Mouffe, 2005, p. 82). Elections are the procedure through which an 'illusory consensus' (p. 82) emerges. New models have been trying to reactivate, within the framework of liberalism, forms of citizenry representation that could allow the emergence of common good and values from a deliberative process. Mouffe exposes the differences between two visions of how deliberative democracy should be practiced and which values it should foster. Thus, according to Mouffe, the conception of the future of liberal democracy proposed by John Rawls lies in its capacity to recover a moral dimension, to reach a consensus that would be deeper than, 'a mere agreement on procedures' (p. 83) and to reach forms of agreement both rationally and democratically legitimate through a deliberation involving

citizens and not just a few elected delegates. The notion of rationality is central to Rawl's vision of a democratic consensus. Yet, for Habermas, the question is about creating a model that is more equal and impartial in which the more open the process of deliberation is, the better the conditions are for ideal discourse. There might be obstacles but Habermas understands them as empirical in relation to the need to still express individual interests. Compromise is the only solution to assemble groups with diverging interests. Deliberative democracy for Mouffe is trapped in a paradox for it is not really changing the structures being discussed, nor is it interrogating the conditions from which people would otherwise be able to freely reason and neither does it question how this problem of equality can be solved. Mouffe points out that Rawls suggests the formation of 'neutral institutions', but neutrality is not possible, politics cannot be a 'neutral terrain' (p. 92). (Interestingly, the notion of neutrality is a founding parameter of Swiss policies...). Above all, for Mouffe, deliberative democracy cannot go beyond the paradox lying at the heart of liberal thought, which is based on two political traditions, defending on the one hand individual rights and on the other democratic self-governance. For Mouffe, the vocabulary of these two traditions are incompatible and it is impossible to reduce this tension, so one must rather confront them by asserting the limits posed by these divergent conceptions. Liberal democracy understands citizenship through a conception where the individual is prior to society, and denies social and power relations when acknowledging them could actually revitalise the, 'set of practices that make agency possible' (p. 94). Mouffe is calling for the recognition of, and a practice of, pluralism but to fix limits to the confrontations and to recognise the political rather than moral or rational aspects of these limits. For her, democratic politics is about negotiating this paradox and the articulation of precarious solutions, daring to ask what are the existing conditions for the democratic subject. Mouffe proposes as an alternative, to multiply institutions rather than making all citizens legitimise a few, 'discourses and forms of life that foster identification with democratic values' (p. 96).

Observing the public sphere, Mouffe notes a progressive decomposition of political oppositions, serving a neo-liberal pseudo-consensus that discredits any alternative. Mouffe insists on the possibility of artistic actions to experiment with alternatives. For her, conflict, the confrontation of different political ideas, is not only inevitable but also an essential component for a real practice of democracy. She thus defends the idea of an agonistic pluralism, a radical democratic space in which political debate can create, 'a vibrant agonistic public space of protest, where different hegemonic political projects could confront each other' (Artandresearch, 2007). Agonism, for Mouffe, is therefore the confrontation of political opponents, who agree to share and respect a common space for debate (even if they defend different modes of organization for this space). Mouffe differentiates agonism from 'antagonism' in which we no longer find adversaries but enemies, enemies who cannot share a common symbolic space.

This conception of agonistic pluralism is of specific interest for microsillons, which seeks to produce spaces where differences and divergences are neither flattened nor unacceptable in the pursuit of dialogue to shape, 'institutions allowing [conflicts] to be expressed' (Mouffe, 2005, p. 30). We work on differences and conflicts as the site of the emergence of vital questions and detachment from conformity or consensus. In order for different points of view to be expressed and confronted, we work towards enabling a space of possibilities, and it is perhaps in the setting up of this common space that a work of artistic mediation can be played out.

Mouffe's position coincides with that of Dardot and Laval (2015) as well as that of with Nicolas-Le Strat (2016), since it is from activity and forms of practice, and not purely from argumentation or protocol, that a form of democracy can emerge that integrates all components of society. Interestingly, the common is acknowledged by Nicolas-Le Strat as a process that cannot be accomplished without conflict or friction. However, he distinguishes, based on the position of Chantal Mouffe, opposition from the dominant order. He defines this dominant



order as an antagonism that derives from a relationship of debate between supporters of the same project. However, agonism is a consequence and a component of the implementation of the common as a governing principle of society and its institutions whose perspectives differ on issues such as the individual's relationship to institutions or different licensing regimes in the world of free software (a relationship that can be qualified of agonistic for Nicolas-Lévy). *Vive le Théâtre Questionne* is definitely not a project developed by a group of people homogeneously believing in the idea of the common. The project was part of *microsilons'* agenda and we were aware that it was up to us to create the framework for this common to be built, as much as it was to question our own interest and privileged position. Still, the question of the common remains a reflexive dimension of the project more than an explicit mode of organizing its different elements. Olivier and I are, for example, defending a different approach to culture than Mathieu and we would often question if and how these differences could be made visible. Our perspectives are different but do not prevent us from making common work and discussing these differences with respect and interest. Thus, rather than merely oppose elite culture in relation to mass culture, we all sought to produce a productive conflict between these two poles from which a possible vision of the cultural institution as a common public space could emerge.

Similarly, users of *Camarada* who do not necessarily support the same personal or political positions were able to share the same space and the same activities. Mathieu Menghini, Olivier and I, in dialogue with the association, did not ask for any personal information about the women beforehand such as their family names or their legal status in Switzerland. The *Théâtre de Carouge* was our common point of departure, the first material of our exchanges and a good vector to elaborate questions so that we could imagine our common proposal. It is in a form of agonistic pluralism that the contradictions of the liberal democracy can be addressed, accepting the frictions necessary for the construction of any social project and arriving at forms of conflictual consensus (Mouffe, 2005, p. 102). The concept of agonistic mediation that emerged from the practice of *microsilons* is

based within this arena, a tension that corresponds well to the reality in which *microsilons* is confronted with itself by intervening in various cultural contexts connected to institutions, which are for the most part based on a similar paradoxical mode of functioning. *Vive le Theatre Questionne*, similarly emerged from two models—the democratisation of culture and cultural democracy—embedded in the pseudo-neutral idea of cultural participation. In an attempt to challenge this pseudo-neutral approach to culture, *microsilons*’ acknowledged the pluralism of political opinions expressed in the course of the project.

By bringing the concept of agonism as a counterpoint to the idea of cultural participation, we try to challenge the dominant norm of the cultural field, especially in the field of mediation. Thus, this project made Olivier and I reflect on how we could name the process of entangling these different approaches of culture and how they could be confronted through dialogue to form what I would name an agonistic mediation. These contradictory terms interweave the idea of mediation—and its supposed neutrality serving the resolution of a conflict—with a deconstructive and transformative approach. This echoes a tension experienced by many critical mediators or socially engaged artists aiming to simultaneously meet the expectations of institutions seeking to increase their attendance or to improve their image, and the desire to transform these institutions by criticizing the cultural status quo.

In her text, *Artistic activism and agonistic spaces* (2007), Mouffe writes, ‘If one follows the agonistic approach, critical art is an art that foments dissensus, which makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to hide and annihilate’ (Artandresearch, 2007). For *microsilons*, such an approach makes it possible to look for transformation on two levels. Firstly, envisioning differences, dissensus, feelings of exclusion or even hostility towards elitist culture is a way to question the discourse of cultural institutions and how they are reproducing a certain feeling of belonging, and consequently of exclusion. In this sense, *microsilons*’ approach meets the criteria of a transformative mediation, transforming institutions into

spaces where 'cultivated' culture enters into dialogue with 'popular' culture, as a site for political debate. In this way, this form of practice refuses the modernist myth of the autonomy of art vis-à-vis the outside world and creates spaces where one can rethink the norms of gender, class or race. In spaces where citizens can be involved in the production of speech, this critical dynamic is necessary to prevent—as Chantal Mouffe observes on the subject of neo-liberalism in politics—a single discourse from becoming dogmatic where any alternative is qualified as 'populism'. Secondly, to occupy cultural institutions as places of agonistic pluralism is to enable new forms of democracy to be experienced. The museum or art centre can thus become a laboratory for transforming not only culture but also society. Mouffe (2013) proposes building a relationship with the institution rather than carry out an exodus. Rather, she invites a radical rethink of institutions in the construction of a common vibrant space. Mouffe emphasizes the importance of the cultural field in the construction of 'common sense' as defined by Gramsci (1975), which results from institutions and producers of knowledge who promote a particular, hegemonic, vision of the world. It is necessary for Gramsci to create other common senses and to affirm, 'the necessity of new popular beliefs, that is to say, a new common sense, and, consequently, of a new culture and a new philosophy that take root in the popular consciousness with the same strength and the same imperative character as traditional beliefs' (Gramsci, 1975, p. 1400). To participate in the emergence of these new common senses, Gramsci defines the model of the organic intellectual, someone who is not only committed to expressing ideas or concepts but who is also involved in the production of practices. Mouffe (2013), advocating for a creative way to engage with Gramsci's concept, sees cultural workers, and more specifically artists, involved in reflecting and acting to break with hegemonic order as contemporary organic intellectuals. It seems that the character of Antigone, as a basis for helping, 'us to understand who we are and where we stand' (Calvino, 1986), acted as a relevant vehicle to discuss our relationship with the law from a gendered perspective. The young woman is opposed to the power and family norms of her time, she manages through her act of resistance to stir debate in the city of Thebes and destroy the authority that her uncle seeks to

impose. These conflicting family relations, and the refusal of oppressive laws, formed the central themes of our discussions with the women at Camarada.

I believe that Antigone as a figure of defiance and opposition to norms pushed to an ultimate point of radicality (she dies from refusing to conform), is inspiring. However, Antigone's relation to her uncle Creon is completely antagonistic, whereas the discussion shared in the spaces of Camarada produced the multiple nuances and differing opinions that a situation of oppression actually creates, all of them entangling the political with the personal. The sharing of lived or narrated experiences, of aspirations or regrets, opened discussions in which diverging opinions were expressed, without one trying to convince the other of what is right but using a principle of cohabitation. For example, one woman in the group, the mother of a teenager, declared that she would take him to the police if he committed a crime, whereas another was surprised that maternal feelings could come second to respect for the law. A discussion ensued in the group between these two divergent opinions, where the question of the law and the actions of family members varies. In the opinion of participant F., 'It depends on the act, even illegal, as the seriousness could be more or less'. 'Even if I have not done anything wrong, I do not feel comfortable when I come across a police officer in Switzerland' says D. For A., 'If it's my niece, it would not be exactly like my daughter. It's different'. Such discussions and many others showed microsilences that we could not have produced anything in common without agonism. An agonistic debate drew together each person by entangling the political and the personal and by defending the validity of altering opinions with voices varying in their intensity, rhythm or accent.

### 6.3.3. Reflecting the role of feminism in the agonistically produced common

In 1969, the North American feminist activist Carol Hanisch, in *The personal is political* underlined the political aspect of consciousness-raising groups<sup>34</sup> as an answer to other militants from the Women's Liberation Movement who were criticizing the therapeutical aspect of the approach, 'there are things in the consciousness of "apolitical" women (I find them very political) that are as valid as any political consciousness we think we have. We should figure out why many women don't want to do action' (Hanisch, 1969). From the first discussions on *Vive le Théâtre Questionne* between Mathieu Menghini, Olivier and I, it seemed to us that combining the perspective of the group of migrant women with the figure of Antigone would bring a feminist agenda to the centre of the discussions. This feminist dimension, as important as it was in building the common production, manifested itself in an agonistic way.

Feminism is, to me, a beautiful word, for it carries a long history of political struggles, of resistances and claims for equality, but it is also a movement, an action, a positioning. Beginning the project with *Camarada* it was clear for us that working with a particular group of women inscribes, by default, the project in a feminist light. I should rather write 'feminist perspectives' against the common assumption:

'[...] that there must be a universal basis for feminism, one which must be found in an identity assumed to exist cross-culturally, often accompanies the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form discernible

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<sup>34</sup> Consciousness-raising groups were a powerful tool developed by women to discuss their situation in North America during the 60s. These groups offered platforms for women to express their frustrations, criticisms and experiences of various situations of oppression. Some of the groups were very large (several hundred women) but most of them were quite small-scale groups that met on a regular basis. Those small and active cells, present in many North American cities, formed a strong network (for example West-East Coast Bag). For more information see: 'Consciousness-Raising Rules' (Chicago, June 1972): reprinted in *Feminism-Art-Theory*, ed. Hilary Robinson (Oxford : Blackwell, 2001) 85. In *Education*, ed. Felicity Allen, 2011, London: Whitechapel Gallery, 134.)

in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination' (Butler, 2007, p. 5).

Replacing one form of oppression with another was absolutely counter-productive and although we discussed directly the link between Antigone and feminist struggles, none of the women in the group self-identified as feminist and it would have been problematic for us to have claimed they were. Though, with different intensities and styles, they were all courageous, daring, independent and polemic. If it is impossible to state that every woman in the group was a feminist, discussing and working with them proved that feminism played a role in their respective histories. From the point of view of the conception team, the understandings of feminism were also different, with microsilons' particular reading of different feminists scholars, pedagogues and artists. Despite what I would rather describe as an already solid knowledge on the history and important concepts in the field, we had certainly discovered through *Vive le Théâtre Questionne* that feminism is a site of debate and complexity that forced us to address power relations inside the group as well as in dialogue with the institution. The conception team was composed of two men and one women. All the women outside of the conception team were from non-European countries. The group involved in the coproduction was comprised of nine women and two men. The Théâtre de Carouge director was a man. A woman interpreted the role of the rebellious Antigone. A man played Creon, the leader of Thebes. This was the kind of observation we would share as an element of the discussions, so that our common activity looked at different aspects of the play.

The feminist scholar Elsa Dorlin insists on the fact that feminist strategies and perspectives can offer tools to analyse, starting from a critique of patriarchy, the privileges and power relations structuring capitalism and, therefore, contemporary society. It is often debated that maybe it would be more inclusive to use terms—like humanism or egalitarianism—that would indicate the will to see equality extended to each human group. Some feminists would also argue that the

existence of 'women' as a category is in itself problematic. This paradox is at the centre of Denise Riley's important historical and philosophical work on 'woman' as a category that is:

'[...] historically, discursively constructed, and always relatively to other categories which themselves change; "women" is a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject of "women" isn't to be relied on; "women" is both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity, while for the individual, "being a woman" is also inconstant, and can't provide an ontological foundation. . . . that "women" is indeterminate and impossible is no cause for lament. It is what makes feminism [...] On such shifting sands feminism must stand and sway' (Riley, 1988, p.1).

In a similar way, Judith Butler considers feminism as a valid discourse and proposes to move from a feminist theoretical frame that would relate to a fixed identity to the concept of queer theory, 'Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, women, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety' (Butler, 2007, p. 4). Today, feminism has been fragmented into different positions and struggles and we can talk of multiple feminisms seeking to act on behalf of women and beyond, to resist domination—from cyber-feminism to afro-feminism. The value of the word feminism lies in its capacity to make women visible, to name silenced oppressions and generate actions. Hopefully, or not, it is just a question of time before we can consider feminism a specific historical moment, but the task of the 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2010) to reveal and resist oppression is still cruelly accurate, from my perspective of woman and mother of a young girl.

When I decided to study in art school and to train myself as a professional artist, I wanted to become a feminist artist, to inscribe myself within this genealogy of women who have produced their own representations of femininity and reclaimed equality. Sadly, I felt my years of studying in the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux Arts de Paris led me to internalise a form of binary vision of feminist art practices, between a suspicion towards the appropriation of craft by women artists and an essentialist feminism perspective. Later, when I met Olivier at the Geneva University of Art and Design, in the frame of the CCC, a programme claiming its feminist ethos and built on post-structuralist and queer references, we discussed our feminist positioning and the importance of integrating a feminist standpoint into our collective. I envisioned the possibility of building a feminist practice that would not solely address the question of representation but embrace feminist references and experiments as a way to reflect the interactions and relationships we develop through microsillos' common productions, starting from our own internal relation. Olivier and I have built a dynamic in which the different aspects of our work are shared via a negotiation which includes professional and personal aspects of the practice—the conceptual and the practical, the visible and the invisible—and we expand our way of functioning to the different contexts in which we work as much as we can. Olivier and I acknowledge the fact that we have different voices, as does each member of the group involved in our projects, and we need to reflect on how we can construct a common activity and production without producing false expectations or interpretations, merely based from an essentialist perspective.

This became a strong issue for *Vive le Théâtre Questionne*: by addressing exactly the same groups that are the institutionally expected target audiences, how can we pretend to shift anything? As underscored by Carmen Mörsch:

'Although these attempted reversals maintained a critical position in regard to an almost unrecorded history of gallery education—that of audience development—they could do little to change the underlying paradox: the question of how to plan in advance with a particular interest



group in mind, without cementing any identity ascriptions [...] [T]his dilemma is unsolvable, for it generates a conflict that is fundamentally at the heart of gallery education' (Mörsch, 2009a, p. 105).

But it is possible to reduce this contradiction depending on the:

'[...] degree of collaboration with those who accept the invitation. How such cooperation actually unfolds determines whether paternalism, emancipation, or even indifference will prevail. Most of the time, all three aspects are at play—negotiating between them is part of what the job is all about' (Mörsch, 2009a, p. 106).

I agree with Mörsch's acknowledgement of the responsibilities of the mediators or socially engaged artist, but it is sometimes difficult to make the feeling of discomfort Olivier and I share when we are confronted with an institution's director advocating for the emergence of authentic voices of silenced women through artistic practice when we know it is partly the reproduction of a biased patriarchal position.

Feminism is an important standpoint in the struggle for equality and justice and is constantly updated in the light of thinkers coming from more and more diverse horizons, leading to a consideration of feminism from a perspective that includes the notions of postcolonialism and class (women make up the largest share of the working poor). Talking in the name of Others with 'good intentions' is a frequent institutional practice, an expression of patriarchal power. With regards to this will of the institution to communicate on the presence, through specifically designed formats, of Others, I am interested in the radicalism of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's position. In a 1989 essay 'Who claims alterity?' (1989), Spivak points out some limits regarding the representation of Others in cultural institutions and prefers to defend the (university) classroom as a place where time and space can be given to complex counter narratives to hegemonic discourse rather than on

processes of reparation. In 'Can the subaltern speak?' (1988) Spivak names primarily 'subaltern' women from the Global South who cannot access social mobility or the cultural sphere. The term subaltern is derived from the philosopher Antonio Gramsci's work on cultural hegemony, which identifies social groups who are excluded from a society's established structures for political representation. If a subject cannot speak because colonial and patriarchal discourses are manipulating them, what kind of ethic can be developed for them to voice anything? How might a specific time and space be dedicated in the institution to enunciate the different realities they experience, without only considering them as representatives of a loosely defined group? Spivak (1988) critiques the position of Western intellectuals who claim to give voice to the subaltern, pretending they are transparent in this process of voicing. To her, the identity of the subaltern is characterized by its irreducible difference with the intellectual who, therefore, cannot be a transparent spokesperson. To recognize this situation of inequality between microsilons as artists initiating the project with the women from Camarada in *Vive le Théâtre* Questionne was an important step in reflecting the status of the final stage of the common production and how it could be presented at Théâtre de Carouge.

The theory of rhizovocality formed by the North American feminist scholar, Alicia Youngblood Jackson could be applied to the final medium and objects we produced. Youngblood Jackson, drawing on Spivak, acknowledges the fact that language is unstable and thus, it cannot express an absolute truth. If there is no 'authentic voice', no 'voice' that can be representative for others, then, 'Rhizovocality [...] offers a vision of performative utterances that consist of unfolding and irrupting threads' (Youngblood Jackson, 2003, p. 707). We see clearly that the differences, the arguments around this or that point, create the richness of the project, where it deviates from cultural participation to become the activity of common, which asks us to think about everyone that this project will have an impact on: the women, the association Camarada and its employees, Mathieu Menghini, Olivier, me, the theatre's director, its employees and public. We

wanted everyone to be able to read, recognize or question oneself from what it was that we made public, what we brought of our experience in the contact zone.

In an essay titled 'Art of the contact zones' (1991), Mary Louise Pratt, professor of linguistics, tells the story of a text written by an Andean citizen, Guaman Poma, in the seventeenth century, a few decades after the Spanish domination destroyed the Inca Empire. This text is a long—more than a thousand pages—illustrated letter to the King of Spain written in Quechua and an ungrammatically correct, expressive Spanish. This manuscript remained unknown until an academic in Peruvian studies found it at the beginning of the twentieth century and it was only considered historically and culturally valuable decades later. Pratt describes this text as an, 'extraordinary intercultural tour de force' (1991, p.34) and a product of the 'contact zones', which she defines as the, 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power such as Colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths' (p. 34). For Pratt, Guaman Poma, the author of the letter, is perfectly exemplifying the sociocultural complexity produced by contexts of conquest and imperialism and, interestingly, she names him a mediator, a link between the Andean people and the colonial administration. He operates a form of reappropriation by choosing a particular genre, the chronicle, which was the official form of narrative produced in the colony for the Spanish public at that time. Through this genre, he proposes his vision of a Christian world integrating Andean people, culture and customs.

For Pratt, through the production of this auto-ethnographic narrative, Guaman Poma is not describing 'dans l'absolu' (this would be self-representation to her) but is consciously forming a response and opening a dialogue with the texts and material produced by the Spanish conquerors. She writes:

'Autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expressions, these are some of the literate arts of the contact zone.

Miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread masterpieces, absolute heterogeneity of the meaning, these are some of the perils of writing in the contact zone' (Pratt, 1991, p. 37).

Languages, in written or oral forms, were important in the process of common production. Only, it placed us in a rather hegemonic posture. On the other hand, French was the common language between all of the group members yet only Mathieu Menghini and microsillons had French as their mother tongue. What touches me in the story of Guaman Poma is how he thinks about how society can be constructed in common, observing what has been imposed through violence as a start to initiate equitable relationships through a hybridized form. microsillons' projects seek to produce the same movement, to commit ourselves and to look for possible tactics to break with the reproduction of violence and reframe organisational structures, going through the acknowledgment of our specific status of art educators between the different entities and individuals involved. The fact that Guaman Poma uses different languages to describe the more equal society that he aspires to is also a form that seems to me to resonate with the project. Our project aimed to foster dialogue between different languages (institutional and associative, spoken and oral, cultivated and popular) and, by their interconnection, open possible areas of life in common.

The story of Guaman Poma as written by Pratt raises the question of the cohabitation between different epistemologies. It fantastically addresses what microsillons has been implementing since 2005, which is creating dialogue from art practice with people who do not define themselves as artists to produce a new cultural object, which itself can be the object of other readings and interpretations. A paradox lies in the way that I call for a transformation of systems that I am fully part of, as an active, conscious agent. My interest is double: first, a need to understand what is 'oppressive' and to deconstruct the mechanisms of oppression, then to imagine from this context how to begin a transformative process that can also be carried out with some of the agents of these systems. This is what Guaman

Poma, who addresses his chronicles to the King of Spain, does when he uses the colonizers narrative system of reference to describe the changes, which seem necessary to build cohabitation between the Inca population and the Spanish conquerors, outside of oppressive relations of domination. As Pratt suggests through this history, a process of cultural mediation (p.40) is essential in the dynamic of a contact zone, which is for me another way to evocate an agonistic public sphere. She nevertheless reports that Poma's narrative remain unanswered and was forgotten for centuries, other less critical narratives have been valorised (p. 37).

We agreed that the richness of our discussions was based on the possibility for dissensus to be expressed within the group. We wanted to communicate that dialogue can emerge from difference and bring different points of view to a similar experience, which is also a particularity of feminist praxis. How could we turn the portmanteau sentences into elements that we could display in the theatre? I remembered the work that I had spurned at the Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris and, discussing it with Olivier, we saw an interesting track to investigate. We could somehow imagine how to strategically associate the marginalisation of certain artistic practices with the marginalisation of the voices of migrant women in Geneva. Therefore, we made a selection of works from several 'craft' artists and collectives and presented them to the women, tracing a line between borrowing from traditional craft and these art forms occupation of public space and the story of Antigone. Our idea was not to mimic the work of these artists, but to imagine how we could combine form and content, starting from a form connected to the feminist approach of the project. Similar strategies were adopted by Susan Lacy in the project *The Crystal Quilt* (1985-87), focusing on how North American women of different classes and origins deal with the process of aging. She worked with more than 400 women over the course of two years and the final step of this process was to make these women visible through a performance broadcasted on North American television on Mother's Day (Lacy commonly uses mass media to relay her work and I see here an interesting tactic to infiltrate forms of expression that

address large groups of people). The women, through choreographed gestures, reproduced the shapes found on a quilt, which could be seen from a bird's-eye view. Referring to the practice of quilting, a traditional art symbolically and practically related to the lives of women in different cultural contexts, I think Lacy is accurately interrogating what it is that all the women have in common and, by inviting visitors to share a dialogue with the women (a piece of fabric reproducing the quilt motif was given to each visitor by one of the participants as a symbolic act to open the conversation), practicing an art of contact zones necessary for this common to emerge.

Using craftwork as the common medium emerging from the collaboration, we also wanted to inscribe the object in a genealogy of practices with an ambivalent status. The feminist art historian Rozsika Parker has underlined this ambivalence by retracing the history of embroidery from medieval times until today, focusing on how it has impacted the social role of women and has forged a certain representation of femininity, 'it became both a means of educating women into the 'feminine' ideal and a weapon of resistance to its constraints: a source of pleasurable creativity and oppression' (Barnett, 1995, p.77). This ambivalence manifested itself in the last phase of the collaboration.

The realisation of the objects, after they were designed in group, were delegated to different amateurs, who received an hourly wage for this task. Olivier and I contacted them via Carouge-based clubs for cross-stitching or sewing. We also spent one day cross-stitching a sentence onto a public rubbish bin. This was a decision taken with the group of women, as only two people in the group suggested realising the craftwork objects themselves. In response, microsillons put forward the idea of this delegation and we discussed the fact that many artists do not produce with their own hands the work they sign. There were still those in favour of an internal production of the work but the majority, at this specific moment, tipped the balance in favour of outsourcing this labour. Though it was not our plan, Olivier and I felt that it was a good decision, at that point, to externalise



microsillons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group

Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)

Text stiched on a trashbin in front of the entrance

'La liberté de voter c'est LA DEMOCRATIE n'est jamais accomplie.

(Freedom to vote is DEMOCRACY it is never realised.)'

Théâtre de Carouge

the realisation of the objects after eight months of collaboration. We thought it could add to the complexity we wanted the public phase of the project to present.

#### 6.3.4. If we could change it...

The project integrated an agonistic dimension at the core of the common activity. If the visual production integrated and visualised the dialogue, which was at the same time agonistic and productive, shared between all the producers —the women and us— we also had the feeling that we should have followed a similar process with the theatre director in order to expose our different conception of mediation. Perhaps this would have impacted on a specific situation that demonstrated to us the director's lack of understanding in our process of mediation. After the public presentation of the embroidered objects we discovered that the Théâtre de Carouge had hired a person, just after we had finished the project, to continue the partnership with the women from Camarada by offering free tickets, silencing the critical perspective microsillons adopted for the project. Interestingly, Camarada refused the offer (the employees told me that they had learned to develop a strong suspicion against political recuperation when we discussed this specific point). Choosing to develop a relationship based on a form of productive conflict rather than valorising a neutral approach of cultural participation between the democratisation of culture and cultural democracy, was apparently not a long-term option for the Théâtre de Carouge and this might be a possible limit of a strategy of agonistic mediation. When the common production was over, Mathieu Menghini, Olivier and I received cards from the women and from Camarada's team telling us how much they appreciated going to the theatre and discussing together. This could be read as a consensual conclusion but I like to think that the cards are a temporary consensus, the recognition that the experience we lived was overall worth the different difficulties encountered by the group in the course of the project.



A tension emerged a few months later, when editing an article for a scientific publication on mediation. It was impossible for microsillons not to include Mathieu in the writing of this article, but our differing positions were smoothed out in a tone that was maybe too neutral (and thus hegemonic) and it was harshly criticised by a colleague who proofread our text. Olivier and I had the unpleasant feeling of not having gone far enough in questioning our own privileges and false expectations. From my point of view, this project has been highly thought provoking but it has also had an impact on my thinking and feelings about the project in different, sometimes divergent ways. How to pretend to work together when the inequalities are so strong, when the positions of privilege are reproduced, integrated and framed in the words we pronounce? And can we really shift between a vision of culture as inherently 'good' to a more critical approach? If we silence the conflicts inherent to our practices, we cannot expect that institutions nor non-artists engaging in our projects will do and there are few chances that a challenging common production could emerge from the confrontation of these different actors.

Did we only place a sticker with the words 'Question authority' (Sedgwick, 1988) to the back of our vehicle? Is it really, besides between Olivier and myself, that productive in pushing a political dimension, towards the emergence of a language of resistance when the real pleasure for the women was to go to watch plays in a group and to discuss whether we enjoyed it or not? Bourdieu suggests that if, 'the basis of the performative efficiency of the words is the order of genres [...] it is also this order which resists the falsely revolutionary redefinitions of the subversive voluntarism' (2002, p. 141). Maybe microsillons denied the resistance of the women to distinguish themselves from the categories that they had been assigned (by codes, words and rules), categories that they certainly had not created for themselves (but which defined their existent affiliations, boundaries and roles) rather than to venture towards inventing new ones? It seems to me that there is absolutely no simple, single response but that there are in fact as many responses

« La connaissance et les expériences  
enrichissent l'être humain. Profitons  
donc au maximum des personnes qui  
ont rendu possible cette participation.  
Grand merci de nous entraîner dans  
cette formidable aventure!

 Lucifania.

microsillons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
Card written by women from the group  
Théâtre de Carouge

Je vous remercie beaucoup, C'est très  
gentil de votre part de nous avoir  
emmener au Théâtre. Pour moi, C'est  
la 1ère fois que j'ai assisté à une  
Pièce de théâtre, à Genève.  
Je vous en suis très reconnaissante.

Damyq

microsillons with Mathieu Menghini and the Camarada Women's Group  
Vive le Théâtre Questionne (2012-13)  
Card written by women from the group  
Théâtre de Carouge

as people who participated into the project.

With different consciences, desires and affects, we tried to say the same thing: we will not make it without speaking to each other, without seeing each other and without sharing common spaces. From *Vive le Théâtre Questionne* onwards, microsillons forged a greater awareness of our contradictions, which made us adopt a very modest approach regarding the possibility that we would produce any change by developing common productions in relation to cultural institutions. After this project, we would always be very clear with the inviting institutions of the fact that we do not work towards developing an audience, and this led to several occasions of conflict with partner institutions who wanted to capture an image of diversity without investing in it long term. We refuse to work in conditions where a group, our work and its discourse, is manipulated to serve a form of consumerist or paternalistic approach of culture. We insist that our role is rather to work with self-aware groups forming an audience engaged with alternative points of view and interpretations. We believe we can use the symbolic capital of artists to multiply these experiments of self-organisation and shared authority with citizens in institutional cultural frames.

## 7. Conclusion

I have shown in this thesis how, starting from a desire to develop an artistic practice based on common activity, *microsilons* has constituted a stream of experiences from which we could isolate specific terms, forming our instituting imaginary, in the words of Castoriadis. To form this imaginary, we aggregated particular terms from others artists, researchers and educators—co-authorship, socially engaged art, transpedagogy, transformative mediation, self-institution, critical pedagogy, generative theme, untested feasibility, contact zone or conflict—to help us define our territory. What I have tried to illuminate in this writing is how Olivier and I have used these concepts in practice and that it is from our practice that the terms of agonistic mediation is emerging. Not only is it an important step in *microsilons'* research to produce a concept that grasps the complexity of producing art in common, but I hope that it can serve other artists, researchers and educators to engage in subverting, 'the ever-present temptation existing in democratic societies to naturalize frontiers and essentialize identities' (Mouffe, 2009, p.105).

Thus, in defining our artistic work as a place where the common could emerge through working with non-artists, *microsilons* first invested the territory of cultural mediation. Despite the consensual dimension of the term, it was a highly productive frame to collaborate with non-artists and to involve these non-artists in an innovative dialogue with the institutions in which the projects we developed took place. Thus, the common as we have been able to define it through the practice of *microsilons* inscribed itself in forms of mediations, bringing people together to generate concepts, ways of doing and sharing with others. However, far from the idea that mediation serve to valorise tastes or values already established by the institution and its agents (see the definition of the term on the first case study, we have chosen to show that mediation could be a space of conflict and productive friction and that it is even these conflicts that favour the emergence of interesting forms to share with a larger circle of persons.

microsilons' projects and the present thesis brought me to understand that, if the common is a principle driving our actions, a form of permanent activity, we must confront the difficulty of making divergent perspectives come together into a form. Thus, throughout our experiences, Olivier and I have realised that the conflicts, the tensions, the paradoxes, played an important role and constructed our desire to approach the mediation discipline with a form of critical radicality. This critical position, where our practice is located, could only be in the relations with the institutions we worked with, with the groups we invited to work with us, between the groups and the institutions, between members of the same group. Agonistic mediation becomes a central process to build the common, to share issues, to identify. By considering the misunderstandings, the discomfort, the tensions, the differences, as key elements à to integrate in the common production — they were not anymore of a burden but a vector of change. Thus, the first idea is to open a dialogue that will allow these tensions and disagreements to feed a common activity, one of the possible utterances of the common. If they are open, the recent definitions of the term given by Dardot and Laval or Nicolas-Le Strat are no less radical because they recognize in the common this dimension of process. microsilons was not interested in the confrontation of institutions that we see as immutable with groups that are essentialised, but rather in the movement between different entities and actors, by the shared will, beyond possible divergences, to produce in common during a given moment.

For Chantal Mouffe (2005), it is necessary to move from a model of democracy based on an individualistic conception of citizenship to one of democracy based on a diversity of collective identifications and to support the emergence of conflictual consensus. It is in this spirit that I propose the notion of agonistic mediation, resonating with Mouffe's idea that democracy has as its condition of existence an agonistic pluralism. It is this vision of democracy that microsilons tries to defend by placing ourselves as intermediaries between institutions and society, instituting the common as a necessary principle of socially engaged artistic practice. This agonistic mediation is based on the necessity, the

evidence for microsillons, that one cannot produce in common without confronting different conceptions of the same concept or object, without going through moments of disagreement, or conflict. These tensions testify not only to differences of opinion but beyond this, to differences of power or conditions of existence.

Thus, Mouffe's conception of agonistic pluralism opens the possibility to think of an instituting practice from the perspective of artists, that which the common and Dardot and Laval's (2015) theoretical perspective did not necessarily allow for. We were hardly able to respond to the ambition set by Dardot and Laval of a world federation that would make it possible to overcome border and identity issues. At our micro-scale, however, this is what we have sought to do and practice, in what could be seen as a network-federation of participants, peers and allies, who also seek alternatives to norms and rules enforcing competition and individualism. In this network, people do not write constitutions but we do produce statements, research, articles, conferences, projects and social spaces, which inscribe in the institution this praxis of the common. Mouffe (2013) compares the role of artists to those of organic intellectuals, who act not only from the outside but also possibly inside institutions in order to subvert their functioning and produce an immanent critique of the hegemonic order (Mouffe, 2013, p.118). The artist as intellectual organic must contribute to the multiplication of spaces where hegemony is questioned. Mouffe's proposal draws a role for the artist in the constitution of the common agonistic space that seems to provide an answer for, 'the function and the type of symbolic mediation between men [sic]' (Laval, 2012, p. 28) needed to develop social links through common activity, beyond a direct economic interest. Even if Laval's use of the word mediation is not specifically linked to the idea of culture—like in cultural mediation—the use of this term reinforces, in my eyes, the accuracy of the notion of agonistic mediation as one of the processes of the common.

Through an agonistic process of mediation between different social and political actors, power relations are named and differences in the conditions of existence,

questioned, possibly challenged. Tensions or conflicts can arise between Olivier and I, between microsillons and the institutional structure that supports us, financially and symbolically, in the collaboration between microsillons and groups of co-producers, between co-producers or peers. Rather than neutralising the situation, we must look at these conflicts as the moments where the blind spots of collaboration can possibly emerge. This conception is similar to that identified by Bishop, for whom practices that address their structures, as in their conditions of production and reception, are entangled with social concerns, 'however uncomfortable, exploitative, or confusing it may first appear—[it] is the only alternative to the well-intentioned homilies that today pass for critical discourse on the social' (Bishop, 2006, p. 183). What she describes corresponds well with the complex feelings microsillons experienced in the course of the different collaborations we conceived. But I would not say that we deliberately planned to turn towards this practice. It was a slow, non-linear, sometimes frustrating but mostly thrilling and, above-all, never-ending process of trial and error. After the turn, there are practices and artists who are trying to be consistent and to be more conscious, more self-critical, more complex and more resistant.

These tensions, though unexpected, finally serve the construction of microsillons' specific position, by nourishing the constitution of our own lexical field, in a form of agonism towards the neutral, yet oppressive language of the different contexts I have presented here. Thus, 'Even if the contrast is often striking between the ambitions of the rhetoric and the modesty of the implementation, the emergence of a new grammar of public action must be taken seriously' (Blondiaux and Sintomer, 2002, p.19). Olivier and I are both seriously engaged in this transformative task and I have aimed in this thesis to illustrate how microsillons has deployed this grammar in contexts oriented towards a consumerist approach of art, education or cultural participation. Through our projects we have tried to show how other values and ethics of artistic practice—common, shared, disputed—could consider affects and desires as the expression of political standpoints that go beyond love of art or knowledge serving as a tool of social distinction.

Seeing microsillons' projects become sites of tension between different conceptions of society has overturned a series of beliefs or assumptions for me. The first chapter of this thesis describes the specific activity of developing an autonomous discourse from the field of mediation (one that has undergone a critical and experimental turn) from the situated and political perspective that microsillons helped to develop in Switzerland. From this standpoint, we proposed an exhibition, *Utopie et Quotidienneté*, that would at the same time reflect on and be about art, education and mediation as tools to transform the way art is produced and perceived. For the time period of the exhibition, the institution really was transformed into a public sphere, welcoming dozens of people who co-generated the content of the exhibition. The second analysis explains how microsillons set up the frame of a school project that would strongly valorise dialogue, self-organisation and the collective, non-evaluated, generation of content. This evaluation also shows the limits of this project during a time when expectations of the school curriculum turned towards the growth of the economic sphere. The third analysis detailed how, through a project where the expression of dissensus is allowed and encouraged, the expected form of cultural participation can be overcome and turned into a situated, agonistic and thought-provoking public art project.

If the first case study analysis exposed which kind of mediation we have been defending within the institution, the evolution of this research shows how our own concepts have become more nuanced along with the language that we use to express them. We have been seeking to define more precisely the type of relationship (with the participants, with the institution, between cultural actors) that this approach of instituting the common favours, rather than simply applying this function of mediation within the institution. Thus, if microsillons served as an example of practice that illustrates Mörsch and Settelle's (2012) 'transformative function of mediation', we have been considering conflict as a necessary component of this transformative mediation. Thus, if mediation still resonates today



as a complex term, I am certainly more interested in affirming this as, 'an activity which directly expresses otherwise unexpressed relations' (Williams, 1976, p. 206). To defend the agonism in such activity affirms the complexity of expressing these relations for as long as is necessary for this process of a common public space to be maintained and revitalised.

This text also reflects the awareness we gained of our own position, our privileges, our biases and our contradictions. We are aware—as we experienced them—of the possible (re)appropriations, of playing the game of the new spirit of capitalism and incarnating the artist critic (Chiapello and Boltanski, 1999). We know that we are acting within a neo-liberal context and that there are more chances of being 'absorbed' by the market than to effectively challenge the current situation. But if there is no longer a political avant-garde, Mouffe (2013) assures us that there is not only a process of recuperation by the market, but that artists can really contribute to subvert neo-liberal power. Making art together with non-artists was for *microsillons* a powerful way to open spaces for democratic experience.

This reflective evaluation of the practice of *microsillons* has evolved towards considering how this agonistic mediation could be applied to our different frameworks of intervention. Today, Olivier and I are both employed by Geneva University of Arts and Design, a position that leaves us little time to develop projects involving long-term, non-artist participants. As the coordinating team of a master's degree in socially engaged arts practice, *microsillons* is now in charge of training art students while pursuing our research, both inside and outside the institution. The group with whom we have built a common activity over four years, has been the twenty students who applied to the TRANS master's programme, most of whom are not experienced in the practices we advocate in the presentation text of the programme. As Olivier and I state in this text:

'The teaching team — coordinated by the artists'  
collective *microsillons* — and the guest artists, curators and educators,

accompany the students in a reflection on collaborative art production, on the questions of address and reception and on art as a possible tool for institutional or social transformation' (Geneva University of Art and Design, 2017).

Through the use of the term 'accompany', we wanted to define our relation to the students more as a path we would make together rather than an imposed curriculum with fixed tools and references. While the existence of this training is undoubtedly in part a response to the demand for socially engaged art practices and their teaching, we also believe that the TRANS— master's programme is a strong frame for continuing the activity that we started in the first years of our collaboration, that I describe through the case studies present in this text. Olivier and I often discuss the paradox of being identified as teachers with an expertise of these practices when the purpose of this thesis was to describe the long and experimental process and constant search for redefining the parameters that underpin the notion of common practice within the curriculum. As a core project within their period of study, students following the TRANS— programme have to develop with their classmates a collective project, linked to a specific social environment (from working with classes or community groups to structuring services for immigrants or those with specific health needs). These collective projects are meant to articulate for the students that building the commons consists at the same time of resisting the diminution of the public sphere under the pressure of neo-liberal policies as well as joyfully engaging in alternative modes of (self) organising our lives, environment and relations.

To conclude this thesis, I would like to return to the time of the formation of microsillons, when Olivier and I were on the Critical Curatorial Cybermedia study programme at the Arts University in Geneva. This programme gave us the opportunity to engage directly in dialogue with artists, researchers, teachers, and activists, who shared an interest in the commons. From Antonio Negri to Julie Ault and the two initiators of this programme, Catherine Queloz and Liliane Schneiter.

We benefitted from exemplary positions of insight and commitment that strongly influenced our approach and the founding principles of our collaborative pedagogical practice.

I refer daily to my five years of frequenting the programme not from nostalgia but rather from a desire to celebrate the way this programme trained generations of artist-researchers who are developing alternative positions to that of a university engaged in competition, with other art schools or by engaging with the art market. I see the way that these alumni occupy different positions within the Geneva University of Arts and Design and other institutions, spreading a commitment to developing research by the means of art as a common activity, an emanation of the common and its production, in a constant movement. Thus, over time, the CCC has formed an infra-institution, not merely critical of the institution but actively participating in its transformation. This indicates to me that an agonistic mode of relation, critically positioned towards the neo-liberal dimensions of the institution through a collective practice, can possibly institute the common and participate in constituting the vibrant agonistic public sphere.

It is important while I am closing this thesis to say a word about the concept of hope, central to Freire's pedagogy and, I think a necessary feature of any socially engaged art practice. The feminist writer and journalist Rebecca Solnit (2013) wrote an article in which she traces back the genealogy of micro-elements that lead to important political and social changes and underlines the importance of hope as a central vector in changes that have taken place in the public sphere. She underlines the importance of hope, which she clearly distinguishes from optimism (the belief that everything is going to be fine) as a motor for acting, for doing, without knowing what can come out of the process. She writes that, 'Hope is a sense of the grand mystery of it all, the knowledge that we don't know how it will turn out, that anything is possible' (Solnit, 2013). In the same article, she gives an account of how the desire of people to break with unfair laws and inequalities can be traced back to very personal anecdotes linked to a cultural experience. She reports the story of

Charles Black, who fought segregation in the US during the 1950s, who, as a teenager, was listening to the music of Louis Armstrong, 'so much so that he began to reconsider the segregated world he had grown up in' (Solnit, 2013).

The word 'microsillon' was first used to describe vinyl records, a mode of diffusing music based on the resonance between diamond and the engraved surface of the disc. We took this name to produce actions that are modest in their scale ('micro', as in micropolitics) but that are willing to leave traces, (the 'sillons', groove in english). It is through the small-scale, local actions that we engage in, in parallel with others, that resonate wider vibrations occurring over time. In January 2014, the singer-songwriter activist Peter Seegers died. I was listening to a tribute radio broadcast and someone reported a story that Seegers had once told him:

'I tell everybody a little parable about the 'teaspoon brigades.' Imagine a big seesaw. One end of the seesaw is on the ground because it has a big basket half full of rocks in it. The other end of the seesaw is up in the air because it's got a basket one quarter full of sand. Some of us have teaspoons and we are trying to fill it up. Most people are scoffing at us. They say, 'People like you have been trying for thousands of years, but it is leaking out of that basket as fast as you are putting it in.' Our answer is that we are getting more people with teaspoons every day. And we believe that one of these days or years—who knows—that basket of sand is going to be so full that you are going to see that whole seesaw going "zoop!" in the other direction. Then people are going to say, 'How did it happen so suddenly?' And we answer, 'Us and our little teaspoons over thousands of years'' (Seegers, The Rutherford Institute, 2014).

This is a wonderful parable, full of hope for those who see themselves as part of the teaspoons brigades. I would add that that some people would not know where the seesaw is, that they will refuse to be part of any kind of 'brigade' but could contribute to the collective effort another way, others would like to throw

pepper instead of sand, some have twisted or broken teaspoons... And some people might place rocks in the rocks basket because they do not fully understand the consequences of their actions or just because they have never been exposed to another way of living. These differences are important, they should be named, visualised and discussed if we want to imagine a society in which common would be a governing principle. The concept of agonistic mediation is my theoretical framing of how microsillons has contributed to this process.



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Annex : two articles from microsillons mentioned in the thesis:

microsillons (2013) ' Inhabited, familiar, disrupted. An «other» institution of contemporary art in representations of gallery education?' Lüth, Nanna, microsillons & Fürstenberg, Stephan (ed), Kunstvermittlung zeigen – Über die Repräsentation von pädagogischer Museumsarbeit'. Art Education Research , #7, Institute for Art Education, ZHdK, 2013.

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# Art Education Research No. 7/2013

microsilons: Marianne Guarino-Huet and Olivier Desvoignes

## Inhabited, familiar, disrupted.

### An «other» institution of contemporary art in representations of gallery education?

In viewing gallery education<sup>1</sup> (the word used in the original text is the French: *médiation*) material that is produced by art institutions dedicated to contemporary art in Switzerland, it appeared to us that there is an important difference between these and the «general» representations of these institutions. Describing the specificities of these two structures of representation and proposing several interpretations of them is the objective of this article.

We started working with a relatively complete gallery education sample (collected for the purpose of the group research) for the past six years and have chosen, for the «general material», to concentrate on a collection of documents from the institutions' internet sites, which offer a condensation of the institutional discourse and are often the first interface of the institution with the public.

We have identified, among the photographs extracted from the collected documents, recurring patterns that seemed to be significant to us. Starting from our observations, we have interrogated the manner in which these representations of the institution articulate themselves and formulated some hypotheses on the reasons for this differentiation. What symbolic roles might the institution attribute to the representations of gallery education without mentioning this specifically in their written communications?

From our hypothesis, it seems possible to pose a central argument that we are developing in this article: the representations of gallery education show a museum distinct from its traditional representations and propose a specific vision that at times suggests a type of irreverence towards the traditional missions attributed to museums. We will discuss later the possible functions of this distinction.

#### IRRECONCILABLE MISSIONS?

In *The Birth of the Museum*<sup>2</sup>, art historian Tony Bennet proposes that museums have difficulty in reconciling two different roles that are almost antithetical: that of an elitist temple of art and that of a useful instrument for «democratic» education. For him, there exists a conflict between an engagement professed to be in favor of universal address and the fact of the limited audience of that address, which speaks only to/for an elite.

Conscious of this difficulty, those responsible for cultural politics and institutions of art charged with applying these politics have tried for many years to overcome the difficulty of addressing all.<sup>3</sup>

«Innovative, wide ranging art education program»<sup>4</sup>, «Guided tours and educational programs for various target audiences»<sup>5</sup>, «Diversified didactic practices»<sup>6</sup>, «Place for enlightenment and education in art»<sup>7</sup>: these mission statements of museums and spaces of contemporary art in Switzerland show that the role of education remains a central preoccupation of the institution.

In fact, a large part of the visual material serving to communicate about gallery education seems to have as an objective making the museum more accessible, even familiar, especially for people who are unfamiliar with it and have an elitist image of museums.

Considering this brings up numerous questions. Does the representation of gallery education describe an «other space» of the institution? A place where it would

<sup>1</sup> See the general introduction for a general description of the material and our methods of research.

<sup>2</sup> One course for future research would be to study and reflect on the reasons that lead to whether gallery education is represented as part of a larger document or in the form of independent documents.

<sup>3</sup> Specifically following Pierre Bourdieu's reflections. See the French example of the Commission of Cultural Affairs from the VI plan (1969-1971).

<sup>4</sup> Aargauer Kunsthaus.

<sup>5</sup> Kunsthaus Langenthal.

<sup>6</sup> Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Geneva (Mamco).

<sup>7</sup> Center for Contemporary Art, Geneva.

be possible to live experiments which would be simultaneously exceptional to the expected use of the museum as a place of preservation while being, paradoxically, more in touch with everyday life, thus permitting those who are perceived to be excluded from this «temple of the elite» to embark on a process of identification with it? Could one, in the following, interpret the production of documentation specific to gallery education as a means for keeping apart two poles of tension inherent to institutions of art, assuming different codifications and ways of addressing these roles? Or to the contrary, could the representations of gallery education – in moving away from a classical conception of the museum, and in proposing a more «democratic» vision – be a tool for reducing this tension? This is what appears to suggest the usage, of the French word «médiation»<sup>8</sup> to designate the activities targeted towards public attention, since the word contains the idea of «resolution of conflict».

Is gallery education, for the institution an «internal other», the former procuring for the latter that which it is lacking? Can gallery education, perhaps, in return, benefit from a certain freedom and transgress institutional norms? In this case, in what way would these transgressions – and their representation – be beneficial for the whole institution? Does the representation of gallery education serve as an alibi for the institution in order to evade reconsidering seriously its relationship to the public?

## THE MUSEUM: A SANCTUARY?

The hypothesis according to which gallery education makes a differentiated representation of an institution – of which it remains, however, a full component – calls for a reflection on the manner in which the institution of the museum is generally perceived. We are proposing to broach this question through the connection commonly made between the museum and death.

In an article comparing the points of view of Valéry and Proust on the museum, Adorno writes that museums are close to tombs:

*«Museums are like the family sepulchers of works of art. They testify to the neutralization of culture.» (Adorno 1981: 173-185)*

The historian Krzysztof Pomian, in his analysis of the collection, identifies a principal commonality of collections of objects – in any type of collection : their usage value is paradoxically annulled as their exchange value rises.<sup>9</sup>

In a dialogue with Robert Smithson, the performer Allan Kaprow opined that, even in their attempt to be

more alive, museums only propose a «canned life» (Kaprow and Smithson 1967: 57). This argument recurs in the studies and reflections of artists on the museum<sup>10</sup>.

One could accurately state that this perception of the museum as a tomb is not the only existing perception and object that – if we try to relate this vision with our material – the function of modern and contemporary art (for a large part) has never been other than to be exposed in a museum. As a consequence, the first function of art objects has not been suspended by entering the institution, as this has been the case for other objects in other types of institutions<sup>11</sup>.

At the same time the museum-death analogy is still made by a number of theoreticians of culture, including modern museums and contemporary ones. The artist and critic O' Doherty in *Inside the White Cube* was one of the first to make an analogy between the modernist white cube and the sanctuary.

*«Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial, the space is devoted to the technology of aesthetics. Works of art are mounted, hung, scattered for study. Their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes. Art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and though there is lots of «period» (late modern), there is no time. This eternity gives the gallery a limbo-like status; one has to have died already to be there. Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not- or are tolerated only as kines-thetic mannequins for further study.» (O'Doherty 1976: 15)*

If the perception of the museum remains in part tied to the notion of death<sup>12</sup>, the idea that this must be corrected, that a particular effort should be made for re-injecting some life into the museum, goes along with it. Here looms a role for gallery education.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The most common term in French to refer to «gallery education».

<sup>9</sup> «On the one hand the collected works are temporarily or permanently kept out of the circle of economic activities, but on the other they are subject to special protection, which is to say that they are considered to be precious. And they actually are, since they each correspond to a sum of money. In short, they have an exchange value without having being valuable in terms of usage.»

<sup>10</sup> On how the museum «places in suspension» the works, see for example Déotte 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Déotte (Déotte 1992: 188) underlines the specificity of the art objects: «Differing from museums of history, of archeology, of ethnology, of antique or exotic art, etc., that collect objects that have had a destination, a usage, a function and that necessarily suspend these finality (in exhibiting the exhibits), the museums of contemporary art collect works the destination of which has been suspended in entering the game.»

<sup>12</sup> For example, George F. MacDonald and Stephen Alsford (Macdonald and Alsford 1991: 305), attempting to define the transformations that museums have to take on in order to better adapt to the digital age: «Traditionally, museums have focused their attention on the past. Their preoccupation with the material remains of the past has made them object-oriented. This is reflected in the list of key functions of museums: To collect, preserve, study, exhibit, interpret; all are activities performed.»

<sup>13</sup> Even if contemporary art and their institutions, notably by the renewal and frequently by the nature of the works presented themselves, bring certain institutions to define themselves as «in motion».



View of the Pamela Rosenkrantz exhibition. From the website of the Kunsthalle Basel, 2012.



Picture from a Kunsthalle Basel leaflet, 2011.

## ANOTHER IMAGE: THE INSTITUTION OF ART AS A LIVELY PLACE

The underlining of a connection between museum and death can be observed equally in popular culture. A series of US American films, *Night at the Museum*, for example, is based on the idea that the inanimate and silent occupants of the museum come to life at night. The scenario rests on the common conception discussed above and on the idea that this conception can perhaps be reversed so that the museum becomes a place full of adventure, surprising and fun. This transformation can take place only at an «other» time, at night, the moment of transgression par excellence, when the museum is no longer open to its visitors.

As we will see, presenting institutions of art as «inanimate» places remains the norm in contemporary art institutions representations in Switzerland, and differs a lot from gallery education representations, which present a lively institution. Following a psychoanalytical approach, Karl Josef Pazzini underlines that gallery educators' actions are situated between the inert objects of the museum and the pedagogical injunction to «be alive».

*«Death is omnipresent in the museum. For this reason, it is almost invisible. And the museum must – following the theories of current museum pedagogy – be alive.» (Pazzini 2003: 44)*

This imperative to *be alive* seems to traverse representations of contemporary art education in Switzerland. In this way, of the 2129 images in our sample, 1975 represent at least one person. In addition, a strong tendency to represent institutions as full of activity, with users listening, discussing, playing, walking, working is noticeable.

One can see a connection between this tendency to present gallery education as a fertile activity that «makes the museum lively» and the strong feminization of this field<sup>14</sup>. Not only might it be possible to make a symbolic connection between the female capacity to «give life» and the mediation that «brings life» to the museum,

but the numerous «human» competencies attributed in a stereotypical manner especially to femininity are placed in the foreground of representations of gallery education: listening, caretaking, hosting<sup>15</sup>.

## A) REPRESENTING AN INHABITED PLACE

In his essay *Performing the Museum* the artist Charles R. Garoian defends the idea that the museum must be a performative place, produced by its visitors. He proposes that the authority of the institution – notably the intrinsic value of works of art – be challenged, in favor of a critical dialogue.

*«(...) the performance of subjectivity as a strategy through which viewers can engage museums and their artifacts critically (...) broadening the museums institutional pedagogy to include viewers' personal and social knowledge and experiences introduces critical content to museum experiences.» (Garoian 2001: 234-248)*

Such a position argues in favor of a vision of the museum as being alive. This performative, activated museum, constructed by its visitors, is very present in the representations of the gallery education we collected. A first blatant element, as we have mentioned, is the presence of persons in the represented spaces. This contrasts in a strong way with the other images produced by the institutions, where the representations of the spaces containing nothing but artworks (or even entirely empty views) largely dominate.

When the art historian Mary Anne Stanizewski worked on the archives of the MoMA museum to study the history of exhibitions of this institution, she noticed the quasi absence of images showing visitors – except during exhibitions of «popular» design and events for children. She considered this absence to be a characteristic of

<sup>14</sup> As is the case for the ensemble of the pedagogical field. It must be observed at the same time that this feminization reduces itself as the salaries grow. See: Mörsch 2012: 34.

<sup>15</sup> These competencies are at the same time at the center of the process of «feminization» of work, as is described by Pen Dalton (Dalton 2001: 112) «Richard Gordon has identified feminized work as those tasks and restructured jobs that have traditionally been carried out by mothers in the patriarchal household: cleaning, catering, nursing, entertainment (...).»





Picture from a publication presenting the gallery education activities of the Atelier des Musées from Neuchâtel, 2007.

modernism<sup>16</sup>. The same tendency emerged in the material we studied. In consulting the start page of websites<sup>17</sup> of the 32 surveyed institutions, the users of the museum are only visible on seven of them. Of these seven exceptions, the represented visitors are participating in a gallery education event (clearly described as such) in four cases and are the clients of the bookshop in another one. Only two institutions show some visitors in the exhibition spaces without their presence being related specifically to gallery education activities. Beyond that, it is interesting to note that these two exceptions concern institutions with a particular status<sup>18</sup>.

The great majority of the institutions – be it on their websites or their «hybrid»<sup>19</sup> documents – favor representations of their exhibitions without a single visitor. In addition, several institutions place a particular accent on the architecture of their building and their exhibition spaces themselves.

By contrast, in the documents specifically presenting gallery education activities, the tendency is to represent numerous persons. This can be observed in almost all<sup>20</sup> of the documents we collected, where many individuals, but also groups and crowds are represented. This discrepancy between views of empty spaces in the general communication of the institutions and the numerous persons that figure in the representations of gallery education

constitutes a central element of our analysis.

One important characteristic of the manner in which the users are represented is the emphasis placed on bringing movement to the space. Whether it might be walking, playing, dancing, the movements present the institution as a space to activate rather than a static place.

It must also be noted that – even if numerous institutions realize projects outside their walls – the published images do not present these projects – apart from a few random exceptions, and only show situations taking place inside the institutional spaces. Thus, the idea of activating those spaces seems to prevail over the idea of exporting the activities to other places.

In addition, the gallery educators are represented almost exclusively<sup>21</sup> in situations of direct relation to a group of visitors or participants. The reflexive part of their work and the connected activities (research, conception, evaluation, exchange with peers) are never represented – even though these are considered as essential in the field<sup>22</sup> – and the emphasis is most often placed on the direct interaction with the public.

## B) INJECTING EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES

If the museum is traditionally presented as a space filled with inactive objects, timeless and isolated from the «real world», the space of gallery education is most often described as an inhabited and lively space. At the same time, beyond a simple opposition of empty space/inhabited space, the actions portrayed by the represented persons bear witness to the desire to convey a specific view of the institution.

In the general documentation of the institutions (notably the mission statements) the adjectives currently used for presenting art objects and the experience that they convey underline an exceptional dimension: *remarkable, of quality, ambitious, important, of international renown, innovative, inspiring*. Another type of keyword comes to the foreground as soon as one examines the texts that present gallery education, where the emphasis is placed on the idea of proximity: *conviviality, encounter, familiar, personal experience*.

In a space that is dedicated to the presentation of cultural productions distinguished as exceptional, the simple fact of sleeping, eating or cleaning becomes something extraordinary as well. One therefore finds numerous images in which everyday gestures are performed inside the framework of gallery education activities.

It is possible to make the assumption that the use of this type of image was intended to surprise – in terms

<sup>16</sup> As Brian O'Doherty also comments. (O'Doherty 1976)

<sup>17</sup> Viewed in June 2013.

<sup>18</sup> The *Haus für elektronische Künste* (House for electronic arts) in Switzerland benefits from a specific perception, reflected notably in a particular financing, see the project site mapping <<http://bak.admin.ch/themen/04112/04139/index.html?lang=fr>>, and the *Museum Rehmann*, has a particular tenor in its communication, on its sculpture park, of the idea of an exhibition opened to the outside.

<sup>19</sup> This means: the general documents including representations of gallery education activities, which were collected by the research team.

<sup>20</sup> The *Kunstmuseum of Lucerne* is an exception, at least in its most recent documents. In the material published for this institution on gallery education between 2004–2009, the images placed emphasis on groups of persons with a high percentage of children. Since 2011, a rupture appeared and for this year and the following, not a single participant or mediator was represented.

<sup>21</sup> One image in 2129 collected presents a mediator sitting in an office.

<sup>22</sup> See for example the programs of the events *Kunstvermittlung in Transformation* in Lucerne <<http://kit.kunstforschung.luzern.ch/2011/12/tagung-kunstvermittlung-in-transformation-am-9-und-10-märz-in-luzern/>>, last viewed in June 2013, or *Transmettre! Plus que de simples recettes* (*Transmit! More than simple patent recipes*) in Basel <<http://www.prohelvetia.ch/Symposium-sur-la-mediation-cul.2183.0.html?&L=3>>, dernière visite en juin 2013.



Picture from the Website of the Paul Klee Center, 2012.

of the idea one has of the museum and the way one is expected to behave there – and therefore to interest the reader. One can also think of these representations as attempting to activate a process of recognition: If one imagines the museum as a location where one can practice everyday activities, it becomes easier to come in.

Gallery education thereby brings the art space closer to the domestic space, in a movement that can, again, be thought about in relation to the feminization of the field.

### C) CHANGING THE OBJECT OF CELEBRATION

In the general communication of the institutions, the celebration of art lies at the center of the discourse. In the material we collected, the most current of these types of representations are photographs of the works themselves, which can be seen as a kind of celebration. The numerous images of institutional buildings place the emphasis on the «box» necessary for the conservation of these «jewels». These images are often accompanied by commentaries insisting on the great value, the high quality and the rarity of such works.

In the communication specific to gallery education – if the work of art possibly remains in the center – the object of celebration can sometimes change. An example of this is the representation of birthday parties at the museum, as offered by some gallery services (five public or private institutions, in our sample). In the image above, no element indicates that the party is taking place in the museum (the architecture might as well be that of a community center for example) as if what has to be celebrated, from now on, were the children themselves.

### D) TRANSGRESSING THE RULES OF CONSERVATION

Swiss contemporary museums of art do not seem to specifically represent their mission of conservation. In the collected material (including the documents presenting the institutions in a general manner) – and on the websites of the institutions – only one image explicitly concerns conservation, in showing some art storage.

Moreover, this image comes from a book documenting a gallery education activity, where some groups of participants were invited to work with the collection of the museum<sup>23</sup>.

The works of art generally appear exclusively as objects of admiration, objects that are not submitted to material contingencies.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the images produced by the institutions usually present the pieces in clean and secured spaces, appropriate for presenting and conserving art works.

If the museum's mission of conservation appears only in the interspaces of the documents presenting its general activities, it is clearly thwarted in several images coming from our «gallery education» sample. Several images in our sample, with dirty hands as central motif, illustrate this well. These images are not exclusively taken in the studio, but sometimes in patrimonial spaces.

Other images evoke the possible proximity of the spectators and the art. These representations, for example, make clear that it is possible to play close to the works, even to touch them.

It is noticeable that color plays a primary role; not just in these representations but also in a number of images showing the visitors participating in the studios, what has been produced there, or even the walls where paper sheets are attached for painting. The chromatic variety proposed by these images contrasts with the white which stays the dominant shade in exhibition representations.

Another current motif of representation of mediation is that of a group working on the floor (with or without protection) within the space of exhibition itself. The groups involved in activities within the spaces constitute a potential threat to conservation and generate a number of disturbances, including noise. Pazzini, in his description of the omnipresence of death in the museum, writes:

*«The museum is an institution that produces order. With order, the silence appears almost simultaneously.» (Pazzini 2003 : 44)*

Silence is often a rule – written or not – that is to be respected in the institutions of art. The representations of gallery education, here, again, comes in to disrupt this state of affairs, often using images in which persons are visibly laughing, screaming or making music in exhibition spaces.

### REPRESENTING AN «OTHER» INSTITUTION: A ROLE FOR GALLERY EDUCATION?

By promoting a lively space, by presenting in a positive way some infringements on the usual rules of museums and in replacing the art with the visitor as the center

<sup>23</sup> The project *Blicke Sammeln* (Collecting Gazes) of the Artmuseum in Thun.

<sup>24</sup> On this question, see: *Viewing Matters: Upstairs*, by Hans Haacke, a project in which the artist has exhibited paintings in an exhibition space of the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen of Rotterdam, reproducing the manner in which they were stacked in storage.



Workshop within the framework of the Amalia Pica exhibition. Chronic listeners. Production of a megaphone. Picture from the website of the Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen, 2012.

of the ritual of celebration, one might think that these representations of gallery education depict a space of transgression – or at least of difference – within the institution.

Similar to Foucault's description of heterotopias, gallery education could be seen as an *other space*, a *counter site*.

*«There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society— which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.» (Foucault 1984 : 46-49).*

Within representations of gallery education as we have seen, the discourses of the institution – as for Foucault the actual locations within counter sites – are at the same time represented, contested and inverted. Often at the margins of the museums, gallery education and its representation could be perceived as a space from which could emerge a critique that could lead to a transformation of the institution itself.<sup>25</sup> Working permanently within the institution can certainly enhance the development of what Beatrice von Bismarck calls a «game within the game», the extension of the strategies of artistic institutional critique and the questioning of the specific functions of the institution, in the optic of an interventionist change (Von Bismarck 2013).

At the same time, it must be noted that these representations of gallery education are not only tolerated

but also validated and promoted<sup>26</sup> by the institutions. If gallery education and its representation could be seen as an «other» within the institution, it is only as a tolerated, framed and even sustained «other». An internal «other» in some way, as a cultural worker cannot be «against» the institution, since *she/he is institution* (See: Fraser 2005).

In addition one might ask about the freedom the gallery educators enjoy in terms of representing their activities and the role that the directors of institutions play in the process of documentation and selection of the images. One might also ask oneself why the institutions produce these alternative representations, parallel to their general documentation. In what way are these specific representations necessary for the institutions to address a variety of publics and justify their social role and, thereby, their public financing?<sup>27</sup>

One anecdote, reported by a gallery educator during the encounter organized for the research group in Bienne<sup>28</sup>, bears witness to a complex relationship – between differentiation and adhesion – that the gallery educators often maintain with the institutions they work for: When choosing one image for representing the gallery education service of the museum, she hesitated to use a photograph showing a girl touching a sculpture and smiling. The image gives the impression of a great connivance and proximity of the young public with a work of art and would support the impression she wanted to convey of the department of gallery education. At the same time, feeling that she has to be answerable for the general institutional discourse, presenting this image could invite bad behavior by giving the impression that the works might generally be touched. This dilemma illustrates the ambivalent position occupied by gallery education: it is supposed to provide an image of difference, even of transgression, while at the same time, being a voice of the institution.

In addition, if the documents on art education that we have collected present a viable and beneficial alternative vision of contemporary art institutions, they do so in avoiding at the same time any representations that could contain a dimension of direct criticism towards the institution or one that contradicts the image of gallery education as an intrinsically positive, welcoming and benevolent activity.

In this way, the representation of gallery education seems to appear as a means for presenting an «other face» of the institution; in embodying notably those

<sup>25</sup> Dalton (2001: 151) shows the potential of education – feminized and often relegated to the margins – as a space for transformation «It is partly from positions of structural weakness that feminists have found ways to be effective. Teaching, with its emphasis on feminine qualities of care and its socially unglamorous image, has traditionally been one of the areas where women have been allowed to carve out a space for themselves, and the teaching of art has always had its significant female and feminist art educators. (...) it is from these margins and spaces between the disciplines that fertile ideas come.»

<sup>26</sup> Mediators present at our encounter in Bienne have confirmed that in the majority of cases the direction of the institution had the last word in the choice of images published in order to represent the activities of gallery education.

<sup>27</sup> In order to show to which point the pedagogical activities can be important for receiving recognition and support, we can note, for example, that in the ordonnance du Département fédéral de l'intérieur (ordinance of the Federal Interior Department) a regime of encouraging museums (2012-2015), in five criteria for a contribution the following figured : «the importance of the collections for teaching, research and the public» and «the attractiveness of gallery education activities».

<sup>28</sup> See the general introduction to the present edition.

«human» qualities that are deficient in its general communication. In this framework, accepting or promoting other functions or other usages than those which are traditionally assigned to it could be interpreted as a means for an institution of art to reproduce habits beyond the «exception» made for «gallery education» – while appearing to solve the historic conflict evoked by Bennet between a factual elitism and the theoretical democratic mission of the museum.<sup>29</sup> It can therefore benefit from the image that circulate through gallery education representations, (from here arises the capital importance of the representation of these activities) of an open, dynamic and democratic institution, an image useful for its legitimization on a political level.

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<sup>29</sup> See note 1.



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# NEGOTIATING COMMUNITY STRUCTURES

microsilions,

artists collective and Critical friends  
for the project in Cosmo City

## Desire to work together

In French, the term "community" is often regarded as a form of defiance, and the fear of "communitarianism"<sup>1</sup> is never far away.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, the idea of "community" is generally perceived in a positive manner in the English-speaking zone, and "community art" is no exception. This difference in perception is clear if we were to compare the discourses related to universalism in French with those related to Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism. The critical understanding of the term "community" is, however, equally supported by English-speaking authors, notably in American feminist thinking. Thus, for example, Iris Marion Young describes the ideal of community as being "[...] understandable, but politically problematic [...]] because those motivated by it will tend to suppress differences among themselves or implicitly to exclude from their political groups persons [with whom] they do not identify"<sup>3</sup>.

In our own practice as a group of artists developing collaborative projects with groups of people who are not necessarily artists, we always prefer the idea of "community of interest(s)" rather than that of "community". It does not consist of identifying a predefined common interest within a homogeneous group of participants; rather, it consists of bringing together people who have the mutual desire to want to develop a project together. Even if their motivations are different, they can still work together towards the achievement of a shared objective. As is the case for Janna Graham and the Centre for Possible Studies<sup>4</sup>, working together must, for us, be seen as a potential activity rather than as an obligation<sup>5</sup>.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychiatrist Félix Guattari support the idea that desire precedes need: "Desire is not bolstered by needs, but rather the contrary. Needs are derived from desires: they are counter-products within the real that desire produces"<sup>6</sup>.

1 For Jacques Barou: "Policies of integration often tend to present community relations as incompatible with republican citizenship" (own translation). Barou Jacques, "La communauté contre le communautarisme", in: *Informations sociales*, 5/2007 (n° 141), p. 55.  
2 Even though the origin of "commune" is closely linked to the democratic process.  
3 Iris Marion Young, *The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference*, 1986.  
4 See: Graham, Janna (2012) *What is a Possible Study?* In: Serpentine Gallery and the Centre for Possible Studies On the Edgware Road. London: Koenig Books. pp.21–25.  
5 Regarding the idea of potential and the importance of keeping the possibility open of "not doing", see also: Rogoff, Irit (2007) *Academy as Potentiality: Summit, Non-Aligned Initiatives in Education Culture Internet*. Available from: <<http://summit.kein.org/node/191>> [Accessed 27 March 2015].  
6 Deleuze and Guattari (2004), *Anti-oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated from the French by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane. London, New York: Continuum, p. 28.

Following a similar vein of thought, we try within our projects – moving away from discourses that would want "socially engaged art" or "community art" to be aimed mainly at working on resolving problems – to make (often contradictory) desires emerge within a group and work from this foundation.

## Identifying desires

A question does, however, arise: how can people and their desires be reconciled? How can we reconcile our desires as cultural workers with that of people from "civil society"? This question leads to another: how do we do it without reducing the complexity of the motivations each one has and set up a "community of interests"? This is a long process, which must take into account several tensions. According to the context described, it is possible to identify the social players who will be the "resource persons" of the project.

At first sight, these are the people with the most audible voice representing a group for a political, social and cultural reason. Paradoxically, the first step is often to approach the most visible people to then help enable other people who are not in the habit of expressing themselves publicly, and are therefore less identifiable, to express themselves. These forms of communication are indispensable, because through them the collaboration proposal can involve a larger number of people. But these people are also institutional and political agents of discourse whose interests may be in conflict with the interests of the project, and this could lead to neutralisation of the content to the extent that the project is used as a form of political instrument or is taken over. Therefore, it appears that there is tension between the need to involve these communicators and the difficulty of integrating them with other people in an egalitarian dynamic.

Under the name of *microsilions*, we are identified by our practices of social engagement, a cross-section of art and pedagogy. Our projects are mostly long-term and implemented in Geneva. We discuss at international level with our peers through conferences or workshops. For us, the format of collaboration with VANSA, as Critical Friends<sup>7</sup>, is unprecedented, and we often get the feeling we do not grasp all the political implications of the debates. But we are aware that we are at the core of a fascinating experience of radical democracy, bringing together common issues of culture, heritage and autonomy. Cognisant of our position as outsiders, we are listening, taking the time to try to understand the undertones of the discussions.

During a project we are implementing in Geneva in collaboration with the users of an association that specifically offers language courses to immigrant women<sup>8</sup>, we discussed with those leading the association the fact that, at a time when the matter of immigrants is subject to a federal vote, it was of primary importance that our project not produce (even less make public) any discourse that runs counter to the interest of immigrants in general, even if this would mean silencing the voices of some of the participants. If this rule were not respected, we would have run the risk of the project being counter to the discourse produced by the association. Furthermore, a project proposal might have been taken over by parties from the extreme right, putting the association at risk at a political level.

7 Critical Friends are artist as project guides and critics.

8 Camarada Association. Regarding the project, see: <http://www.microsilions.org/DOCUMENTS/groupevalentin.pdf> (dernière visite 17 avril 2016).

It is the responsibility of the artist engaged in a collaborative practice to build a dialogue with these resource persons out of respect for their knowledge of the field, while maintaining an autonomous space where his or her project can be developed. In her text *Arts of the Contact Zone*<sup>9</sup>, Mary Louise Pratt supports the idea of the need for "safe houses", which she sees as "social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, temporary protection from legacies of oppression"<sup>10</sup>. According to Pratt, it is after working in these "safe houses" that a group will be ready to talk publicly in a "contact zone", where one must be ready to protect one's position and where internal tensions can be allowed to emerge. Inspired by this design, we are always seeking to work with groups we are involved with in a relationship of trust, deciding jointly and internally on the most appropriate means to speak publicly.

### Cosmo City Knowledge Project

In Cosmo City, the initial work of VANSa consisted of a long process of tracking in which the identification of resource persons such as community leaders played an essential role.

It is through these forms of communication, policies and networks that residents were then able to be included in the project. Most of these residents were at first connected with the community leaders involved, notably through the organisation Oasis<sup>11</sup>, but also through other partnerships that took into account the concerns of the representative approach adopted by VANSa.

In the Cosmo City Knowledge Project, the idea of a possible emancipation from these community leaders was central: how could we ensure that all residents or groups of residents who were interested could propose research on a specific aspect of Cosmo City and obtain the necessary support to carry it out with equal opportunities and equal treatment?

Through discussion, Critical Friends decided that the appropriate solution would be to establish a committee representative of the political diversity of Cosmo City with the mission of selecting research projects proposed by residents, as well as facilitating the realisation of the projects.

To ensure a transparent process and facilitate the emergence of new projects, as well as keep track of all the stages of the process, the establishment of research archives was also considered. These archives are regarded as freely accessible in a public place in Cosmo City and as the common property of the residents of the city.

We – Vaughn Sadie, Tilo Steirif<sup>12</sup> and *microsilions* – proposed a possible structure to the rest of the group. We believed the process could take place by following these stages:

<sup>9</sup> Pratt, Mary Louise (1991) *Arts of the Contact Zone*. Profession, pp. 33–40.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Oasis South Africa is an NPO youth formation in Cosmo City that facilitates the development

of young people through the teacher development programme, sex work initiative, and youth leadership.  
<sup>12</sup> A Swiss artist recommended by *microsilions* and invited by VANSa, which is particularly interested in anarchist and libertarian pedagogies.

- A resident or a group of residents decides to form a research unit by preparing a research proposal.
- During a public meeting with a committee, the research unit presents its project, and a short description of this project is entered into the archives.
- The committee confirms that the conditions are fulfilled. If they are, they advise the research unit and resources are provided (such as financial support, assignment of a specialist to the team, advice) to carry out its work.
- The research unit carries out the first phase of the research.
- An intermediate meeting takes place with the committee, and a description of this meeting is entered into the archives.
- The research continues.
- A public event is organised to present the research. The documentation is entered into the archives.

The key idea of this structure was to facilitate the emergence of desires and enable the realisation of research on various themes, satisfying the relationship each one has with their environment in a decentralised manner. Resource persons could be part of the committee and place their skills at the service of projects, but they should no longer be the necessary starting point for all new initiatives. The matter of public access of archives and communication around the project was crucial: even if each resident did not have direct contact with community leaders, he/she should be able to know about the existence of the project, consider its potential participation, and benefit from the opportunities it provided.

When we presented this outline of a structure to the Critical Friends – by insisting on the importance of developing a mode of selection and validation that did not give the impression that some politicians made decisions on their own – the discussion crystallised around the matter of the selection committee. A long discussion took place, advancing the conceptual and political interests of working with new democratic structures and new forms of joint decision-making while properly identifying the difficulties of their practical application.

The team of Critical Friends discussed for an entire day the role of the committee in the development of research and its "ideal" composition. No satisfactory solution was found, but we had the inspiring feeling that a radical approach of democratic representation had been put into practice in a particularly stimulating manner.

The discussions that followed these initial efforts helped specify what this selection committee should be and what role it should play:

- It must represent the diversity of Cosmo City, and be balanced in terms of gender, race and age. It must represent the active organisations in Cosmo City, but also include people who are not part of these organisations.
- It must include experts in the fields of culture and research.
- The idea of a selection committee consisting of 20 people (10 representatives of civic organisations, four Critical Friends from Cosmo City, three young Critical Friends from Cosmo City, and three habitants) is formulated.

The role of representatives of civic organisations in the selection process quickly became a stumbling block in the exchanges.

The Critical Friends agreed that if a member of the committee had a confirmed political membership (adding that no one could be politically neutral), he/she must make decisions

for the good of the citizens he/she represented and not follow the political programme of his/her organisation. They insisted that whoever was not ready to take on this commitment would not be welcome. This position took on additional weight within the scope of a reflection on the progressive withdrawal of VANSa: it needed to help avoid a takeover of the project by existing political forces in play.

However, in practice – within the scope of the Critical Friends and even before the committee was formed – this ideal was strained. The presence of community leaders, clearly identified as representatives of one organisation or another, prevented certain people from being involved. Furthermore, it accentuated an idea that was difficult to dispel: that the project was reserved for specialists from political organisations and culture. At the time of creating an extended committee, this perception would constitute a serious obstacle.

### "Unpacking the history of shit"

The matter of decision-making within the scope of the committee also appeared to quickly become a key element in the discussion. The idea of using the vote only as a last resort and of seeking consensus was frequently put forward, but it did not seem to be appropriate for all situations. Furthermore, the manner in which the consensus should be reached and validated needed to be specified.

One could imagine the potential danger of a decision-making process based on consensus within the scope of a hybrid committee such as this: representatives of political organisations who were more used to talking and formalising their ideas, could take over by dominating debates and force consensus if the other members of the committee were not sufficiently prepared to debate in this type of setting. This form of induced inequality would make it difficult for a study to be supported by the committee if it was not approved by those people most efficient in the art of convincing. The vitality of exchanges and the involvement of a variety of players made the process of establishment of the Cosmo City Knowledge Project unique. The search for a consensus, presented as such, did not hide the diversity of points of view or the wealth of a truly democratic process, when the debates were lively. The aim was to achieve a form of agonism – a democratic process where conflicts are taken into consideration rather than obliterated, and where political adversaries confront one another instead of reaching vague consensus.

Speaking about the task we had to tackle, one of the Critical Friends used the expression "unpacking the history of shit" – disentangling the complexity of relationships and histories without hiding past and present problems – which shows the extent to which the idea of agonism<sup>13</sup> is relevant within the contemporary South African context. Faced with the fear that some people involved in the project had that they would act too much like loose cannons, Sadie's response to them was equally a revelation of the importance this project gave to the diversity of points of view: "You don't have to present as unified friends. You should never force yourselves to be on the same page. It's wrong."

### From the terrain

The structure we had designed, however, would not hold up when it was tested in reality. It quickly becomes evident that it was difficult to conduct meetings of a group of 20 people

with sufficient frequency. The idea was formulated to create – in addition to the selection committee – smaller work committees consisting of remunerated persons generating the work with the researchers daily. VANSa would ensure a transfer of knowledge with these groups, always with the idea that the project could continue under the direction of the most involved persons once the organisation had disengaged itself.

The role of community leaders engaged at the level of the selection committee was thus reduced, and the training dimension of the project was accentuated. The complexity of the initial structure – arising from the desire of an ideal level of representation and an ambitious democratic exchange – was thus reduced to a more organic construction in which the stakeholders had the desire, the time and the interest (in intellectual, political, formative and financial terms) to be involved, and this became more important than the community leaders who were initially contacted. In terms of the residents of Cosmo City taking ownership of the project, this shift constituted an encouraging transformation. For these working committees to be able to function so that the selection committee could be truly representative of diversity and research projects could be formulated, an important challenge arose pertaining to making the project publicly visible and letting everyone see that it was of an open nature. The people involved – including the community leaders who were so important in starting up the project and who affected a maximum number of residents at the beginning – the vocabulary used, the established structure, the places where meetings took place: all these aspects contributed to giving the Cosmo City Knowledge Project an impressive image. The continuity of the project is dependent on the transformation of this image.

### Conclusion

At a meta-discursive level, discussions on committees, decision-making forums, levels of representation and the sustainability of the activities are very rich and made this project a rare example in the world of art, which one could describe – using the famous Arnstein participation scale<sup>14</sup> – as "citizen control". The difficulties encountered – which would have been avoided if a preconceived model had been imposed by the organisation, if a false consultation of citizens had been used or if the work of a professional artist had been placed at the centre – show the high level of democratic and intellectual requirement the project demanded.

In projects where cultural workers collaborate with non-specialised groups of people, the question of the aspect left to the unforeseen is crucial. The acceptance of the unknown is necessary for the establishment of a truly dialogical process, where the participants are not simple implementers of a project produced by specialists. Here, numerous transformations of models established throughout the process – in governance and decision-making modes, in selected subjects, in research modes that have been established – represent a true consideration of the variations because of the complexity of the context and the aspirations of all the people involved. The contributions of researchers, the archiving of projects, and the work of conceptualising decision-making and organisational structures by the users themselves have the potential to make this project a true example of citizen museography – a museography with no fixed abode, arising from the terrain and the desires of the residents of a place, in which the discourse is produced jointly and is based on a process of selection and validation that is truly democratic.

<sup>13</sup> A concept developed by the philosopher Chantal Mouffe. Voir : Mouffe, Chantal, *For an Agonistic Public Sphere*, in : Documenta, 2002. Documenta 11: Platform 1: Democracy Unrealized, Kassel: Documenta.

<sup>14</sup> Claire Bishop, who carries out studies of collaborative artistic practices, refers to it while being attentive to the fact that it should not serve solely as an unique assessment tool which will hide other dimensions to be considered when judging an artistic project.





