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microsilions - Marianne Guarino-Huet / Olivier Desvoignes

Autonomy within the institution: towards a critical art education

Since 2005 we work together in a collective called *microsilions*, based in Geneva. At the Geneva University of Art and Design we met as students in the same study program – called CCC (for critical, curatorial, cybermedia) – where we organized a collaborative project with three classes of teenagers. After a series of meetings with the students, around the question of «The Other», the project ended with an exhibition presenting the results of the process.

We discovered how exciting it is to include non-artists in collaborative artistic projects with multiple and complex layers. Since then, we have developed projects, independent of or inside institutions, involving different types of participating groups, always ending with a public presentation, such as an exhibition, a publication or a talk.

Here, we want to focus specifically on our relationship with the institution, presenting two of our projects: *Bureau Mobile* and *A Condition*, which show two different ways how we position ourselves regarding art institutions.

Andrea Fraser, who introduces the idea that one's relationship to the institution is not simply about being in it or outside of it says in a well known article published in *Artforum* in 2005:

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. (Fraser 2005)

Working in the physical frame of art institutions or not, we understand our practice not as a proposal for institutional transformation, but rather as performative work effecting micro changes.

Before we describe the projects, we want to explain how we are linked to different institutions. We define ourselves as a collective of artists/art educators, meaning that we are not distinguishing one activity from the other. We integrate both in our praxis.

We have been collaborating a lot with the Geneva University of Art and Design in our early projects, being students and later assistants there. Since 2005,

we have also been working in close relationship with Le Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, first on a free lance basis and, since 2008 employed to create an art education department for the institution. We are working in this position as a collective and not as individuals. Further, we have been involved in different teaching positions, at the Geneva University of Art and Design as teaching assistants and at the Hochschule der Künste in Bern as visiting artists. Since September 2009, we have been working as head of a Master in Advanced Studies called «Bildern – Künste – Gesellschaft» at Zurich University of the Arts. Apart from these main institutional relationships, we are also working on specific projects linked with other institutions as well as on completely independent projects.

This rather complicated network that we have woven with institutions raises very practical questions regarding our working place, the tools we are using, etc. For each project we set a temporary office in the most awkward places, e.g. sharing space with a technician's tools or with a school restaurant.

Each project we initiate is tailor made, without any pre-established model, each time creating a new situation in a heterogeneous context, with various people.

Trying to imagine a tool that would help us in our everyday practice, we decided to create a mobile structure which would contain the tools we need to work in different contexts, be it in art institutions, in schools, in the streets, etc. We called it *Bureau Mobile*. We applied for a grant for art educators in Geneva with this project. For our application, rather than drawing a sketch of the future office, we worked on a poster bringing together different references, which are important in our thinking. We organized those references according to several keywords that work as statements about the way we are working. The keywords were mobility, modularity, multitasking, decreasing, folding, sharing, in between, and mutualism. We will come back to this last keyword, mutualism, later on.

To us, being mobile means not only to move physically, but also to move conceptually. To be ready to work efficiently in different situations, the Mobile



Excerpt of the *Bureau Mobile* research poster, 2008

Office has plenty of material that allows us to: shoot a movie, mount it and display it, offer a seat, make a coffee or share thousands of files on various topics. A solar supply and a battery provide us with some autonomy concerning energy. So far, we have used the Mobile Office in different contexts: in our everyday work to run workshops, to produce exhibitions, or for specific projects. For example, the Mobile Office was used as a satellite, in public space, for an artistic festival called *Eternal Tour*¹ in Roma, Italy. Each day a new project was improvised and realized in public space, around the themes developed by the festival. We built an exhibition, presented movies, produced slideshows... During those public events, we talked with passers-by about the festival's main topics, tourism and nationalism. The Mobile Office is an ongoing project and we used it for a 24 hours guided tour, inviting different artists and institution to use the Mobile Office potentialities in Geneva during one day and one night.

The second project we present here, exemplifies the collaborations we develop at the education department of the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève. The project is called *A condition (on condition)*. The starting point was the exhibition *Between Art and Life. Performativity in Contemporary Japanese Art* at the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève last winter. The exhibition showed the practice of Japanese living ar-

tists using performances. The pieces were either potentially activated pieces or traces of performances. The point of origin of a lot of the pieces displayed were anecdotes, which were still visible in the exhibition either through the works themselves or through written explanations.

In order to imagine a project around this exhibition, we began to think about the ideas of activation and anecdote. Then, we decided to work with a class of teenagers, and had an opportunity to collaborate with a class from a professional school in Geneva. As in all our projects, the idea was not to talk «about» the exhibition but to talk «from» the exhibition, extending the meaning of Eva Sturm's title «von Kunst aus» (Sturm 2005).

As it is usually the case, the participants didn't know much about art and had no reason to be especially interested in working for a project inside an art institution. So we worked with their teacher to find a way to connect the project to their interest and curriculum. We always try to use the specific competences of different specialists to build a new team for each project. With the teacher, we decided that we would work with a group of actors specialized in improvisation on a performance for the day of the opening (most of the project was done before the opening of the show). The role of the class was to prepare the frame for this performance. In the process, the students learned to work in a transdisciplinary way for a public project. They worked on the topics of self pu-

¹ See the Festival's website : <http://www.eternaltour.org/>, 23.11.2010.

blicity, narration and oral communication, questions which were indirectly linked to job interview training, an important aspect of their curriculum.

During the first session, we went to the school with actors who performed some improvisations. Once the students laughed and were familiar with this kind of performance, we introduced them to the project. Then, for a few sessions, they worked on writing a travel anecdote and on reading excerpts of that anecdote in front of a camcorder. They also chose a word linked to their anecdotes, words which were printed on cardboard signs in a font and size of their choice. After those first sessions, we returned to class with a theater professor from the University of Geneva. Together we had prepared a crash-course on the history of the theater stage. This is a good example of the way we are implying research in our project: we are doing research about *médiation* methodologies, about new ways to build projects, but also about a lot of project-specific subjects, in collaboration with specialists.

Then, with the students, we designed a stage for the opening. On the day of the exhibition opening, the stage was installed next to the bar, the central gathering point of the event. Four actors were hired. On the stage, they would choose a track on a DVD (each track being one of the students' short anecdotes) and draw lots over signs on which the words chosen by the students were written. Starting from one anecdote and one sign, they would improvise for a few minutes. We ended the project in a double display, one at the library of the school with which we had been working, and one at the Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, where all the components and steps of the project were gathered.

In this type of projects, we define our relationship with the institution as mutualist. Unlike parasites, mutualist species, like clownfish and sea anemones, work in a win-win collaboration. The fish lives close to the anemone. Its special skin protects it from the anemone spikes and it is therefore protected from the other fish by the anemone, as those don't have the same skin and cannot approach. On the other hand, it will fight to defend the anemone against other species and the anemone will profit from the rest of the clownfish's food.

As artist-educators, we offer a service which is not that important in terms of bringing in new visitors to the institution or communicating to the outside as it is in terms of symbolic value.

To work with an innovative art education service is a way to show that an institution is concerned with social questions and involved in a prospective research. Therefore, even projects which are critical towards the art world will always be a symbolic benefit for the institution. We are very much conscious of being used in that way. On the other hand, the institution offers us the physical and financial means to realize our projects, an important visibility and, of course, add

a symbolic surplus-value to our work. In this way, we think we are working in a mutualist manner. We occupy interstices, small spaces inside the institution to set up a win-win situation. At the same time, being hired by the institution, we are not a parasite inside a body, but rather part of that body.

As representatives of an institution – or as Andrea Fraser would say, as the institution ourselves – we carry its voice. But we want to question the way that voice is spoken. Therefore, we are trying to develop a *critical art education*, considering art education not as a way to lead people to love art (the first meaning of the word «*médiation*» – gallery education in french – means to solve a conflict) but to use art as a critical and performative tool. We are not trying to mediate,



A condition: Students preparing their video recordings, 2009



Bureau Mobile: Slideshow about tourism, in the streets of Roma. In the frame of the Eternal Tour Festival, July 2008



Clown fish and sea anemone

to solve the issue of visitors not liking contemporary art, but rather to use the different opinions of the participants to open a debate which goes beyond artistic questions.

Working with small groups on long term projects rather than proposing a single «product» to a «general public» implies a performative approach; each project has to be rethought according to the situation and entails a great deal of unpredictability and adaptation, as the people involved are becoming players rather than consumers, dialogically producing something with us. The process of transforming the «visitor» into an «actor» can open a space to think about new ways for citizens to interact with institutions and society in general. Each participant in the projects, including us, has to find a place in the group, rethinking her or his usual role, as a cultural consumer, as passive pupil,

as authoritarian teacher, as guiding art educator. If we take the example of a class coming for a project, the role that everybody usually endorses is challenged, through the work of a collective project which will be presented publicly.

We believe in art education which doesn't focus on describing or explaining the institutions' exhibitions but which develops its own discourse, a discourse built with the multiple voices of the participating people. We defend the idea of a *médiation* which wouldn't be an after-sales service for a museums' content but a tool to rethink the institution in its relationship to society. Our performative action isn't about trying to transform an outside object called «institution». The work we are doing, within the institution, as the institution, is the work of transformation. As «micro» as this transformation may be.

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