You can always find me in the kitchen at parties
- on hospitality, fermentation, communities of practice and disobedience as keys to re-invent the (Art) institution -

Sally De Kunst

The crucial aspect of my practice as a curator is hospitality: facilitating a meeting. I perceive such hospitality as very explicit. Both at the Belluard Bollwerk International, the arts festival that I was running in Fribourg (CH) (www.belluard.ch- festivals 2008 – 2013), and at Arc, the artist residency in Romainmôtier (CH) that I am directing since September 2014 (www.arc-artistresidency.ch), the kitchen are the heart of the organization. That is because I have two convictions. You can always find me in the kitchen at parties – where the best discussions take place. And strong artistic projects can only take place in a friendly atmosphere - where artists and other stakeholders feel welcome and are encouraged to interact. In this regard, according to different online dictionaries, the English word 'host' refers to 'the master of the house', 'the manager', 'the inn-keeper', 'the mentor' or 'the facilitator'. In recent decades, the role of the curator has expanded also to 'producer', 'agent', 'DJ' and to many other functions. It is a very versatile profession. But for me the curator is in the first place the host, who generates the meeting, between artists and other practioners, stakeholders and the audience.

Arc artist residency (2015) – Images: Sally De Kunst

In that sense I strongly relate to the analysis of Chantal Pontbriand (2013: 190), who refers to the art institution in the 21st century as a 'contemporary agora', and no longer a place for contemplation or aesthetic pleasure. The art world being more and more like the real world, a place for working through issues rather than a world of representation, the Belluard Festival and Arc artist residency function by way of its projects as an interface between art and everyday life, as an 'agora' as such. An interface that is neither a space for naive activism nor for cynical negativity, but for a balance between artistic

autonomy on the one hand, and the link between the artist and the world that surrounds him or her on the other.

This however doesn't mean that we produce social projects or 'community art', which is nowadays often used by neoliberal governments in the UK, Australia, the US or The Netherlands to fill up the holes in their own public and social policies. (Seydel, 2013: 6) With the artistic research that we allow we are rather thriving in what Jacques Rancière (2004) calls the 'zone of indistinction of art and life'. Rancière argues that the aesthetic regime of art, or the system as we have understood it since the Enlightenment, is predicated on a tension and confusion between autonomy – the desire to be removed from means-ends relationships - and heteronomy – the blurring of art and social reality. The third way, the grey zone of indistinction of art and life allows artists to intervene in political questions and cross the borders of their artistic practice (heteronomy), but at the same time this happens through an artistic process or within a frame - the art institution - that is outside of politics (autonomy). I work with artists who investigate this third approach in different performative ways: actions or utterances that through their performance[1] changed the situation or the power relations within the given encounter or context.

Building Therapy for example, an in situ art project produced at the Belluard Festival 2010, for which the German artist Thomas Bratzke treated a building (which was threatened with demolition in order to expand one of the city's many shopping malls) with acupuncture, revealed through its research that Fribourg is the Swiss Mekka of alternative therapy and superstition, with many *faiseurs de Secret* (practioners of the Secret).[2] *Building Therapy* unveiled a lot about the texture of the city of Fribourg; not in a concrete way, but it implicitly uncovered knowledge of unofficial healing practices in a tacit way, and instigated debate about it.

Thomas Bratzke, Building Therapy (2010) - Images: Nicolas Brodard

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[1] Performance in the sense of 'activity': how well a person, machine, etc. does a piece of work or an activity. (http://dictionary.cambridge.org)

[2] Ethnologist Magali Jenny (2009) writes that the Secret, or gift of healing through prayer, is an ancient practice that can be traced right back to Christian antiquity and perhaps even further. Various formulae can be used to cure or ease a wide range of ailments and injuries such as burns, bleedings, ulcers, warts and headaches, as well as certain psychological problems or even the loss of objects. The intervention is special because it does not require any direct physical contact with the patient. You can simply call the practitioner of the Secret by phone. The gift is passed on between individuals, often to the younger generation and in strict confidence, and is primarily an act of charity and devotion that must be performed free of charge. With no governing body and no official organization as such, it is a world of its own, shunning publicity, financial gain and glory.

Quite often the art projects produced in the public realm of Fribourg in the frame of the Belluard Festival incited discussions. 'Why are you digging a hole in our park?' asked one of the neighbours when artists Kosi Hidama and Gosie Vervloessem started their *Digging Project* (2011) in the Parc St. Thérèse in Fribourg. 'We haven't voted on that.' More questions about Swiss basic democracy, territory, utility, urbanism, etc. would be raised the following days under the burning Fribourg sun. Over a period of eight days Hidama and Vervloessem would be digging a hole, without any obvious purpose, except for the performative act as such - the hopeful gesture of slowly working ourselves collaboratively towards the middle of the earth with some shovels. Many specialists helped to research and produce the project with their knowledge and expertise: the city architect and his team, the city's civil engineer service, the state's archaeology service, the local police, a geo-biologist, the department of geosciences of the University of Fribourg, a medium, etc. And many more people eventually joined in, digging and discussing: festival visitors, neighbours, passers-by, schoolchildren, …

In his book *Conversation Pieces* Grant Kester (2004: 12) argues that consultative and dialogic art necessitates a shift in our understanding of what art is – away from the visual and sensory and towards discursive exchange and negotiation. However, as Claire Bishop (2012: 25) points out, this should not become a consensual dialogue, as this risks becoming a new kind of repressive form – 'one in which artistic strategies of disruption, intervention or over-identification are immediately ruled out as 'unethical' because all forms of authorship are equated with authority and indicted as totalising'. I agree with Bishop (2012: 26) when she claims that participants 'are more than capable of dealing with artists who reject Aristotelian moderation in favour of providing a more complicated access to social truth, however eccentric, extreme or irrational this might be'. The underpinning ethical framework she is referring to is a Lacanian fidelity to the singularity of each project, 'and the ideas and affects it generates for participants and viewers, rather than deferring to the social pressure of a pre-agreed tribunal in which a cautious, self-censoring pragmatism will always hold sway'. (Bishop, 2012: 26)

With the *Digging Project* Hidama and Vervloessem subtly revealed how the public space is not just an urban but also a political and social space, determined by material and immaterial laws, by drastic processes of globalisation and dominant frames of privatization, created by governments, by the free market, architects, city planners, … As with *Building Therapy, The Digging Project* created a space, time and moment in the public realm that allowed for the participants to think and produce themselves. Fundamental political questions as what belongs to who and what belongs to everyone where asked. These projects didn't make concrete scientific, political or social claims; their agency consisted within their presence, in their friction, their disturbance of the order of the everyday. Both projects reached a sort of *modus vivendi* in which it was the participants, neighbours, citizens that really created a public space.

Kosi Hidama & Gosie Vervloessem, The Digging Project (2011) - Images: Charlotte Walker

In a conversation with artist Thomas Hirschorn, about his project *Bijlmer Spinoza Festival*, that took place over a few months in 2009 – 2010 in the multicultural neighbourhood of De Bijlmer in Amsterdam, Jacques Rancière argues that the condition for a public space is the creation of a space that does justice to everyone's ability to see, to produce and to think. (Seydel, 2013: 7) He claims that art receives its political power not so much from teaching, provoking or mobilising, as from its capacity to create public spaces. To achieve that, art should leave the spaces that are traditionally dedicated to it. The forms of our organizations of art and knowledge production haven't been conceived for the time we are now living in. As Pontbriand (2013: 120) mentions: 'Our cultural institutions don't correspond to the need to feel, to disturb the order, to explore the flaws in our ways of doing things (…).'

In the privileged geographies of central, western and northern Europe, and moreover in thighly privileged sectors like the fields of art and knowledge production, we have to involve ourselves in re-inventing the (art) institution. In an essay about 'the (Art) institution of the Commons Gerald Raunig (2014: 76) writes that 'in times of persistent multiple crises, the moves of neoliberal institutional reformism cannot just continue as if it were business as usual'. This does not mean conducting spectacular actions, but rather persistently transforming the institution from within and without. So after the series of short-term artistic interventions in the public realm at the Belluard Festival, Arc, the artist residency that I am running since September 2014, is an attempt to re-think the art institution and its components time, space, economy, geography, participation... over a longer period.

During the thematic residency *Re-invent the residency*, in January 2015 at Arc[3], Gosie Vervloessem, one of the participants - who deals with domestic science experiments in her own artistic practice, introduced fermentation as a metaphor for artistic research. She argues that it is not a matter of secure measuring, weighing and dosage; there is no such thing as a clear recipe. Moreover fermentation depends on locality: the yeast will be contaminated by local culture. Vervloessem challenges us to see artistic research in another daylight, namely as a kind of super organism, a community of thousand of species that are interdependent.

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[3] The first thematic residency *Re-invent the residency* took place from 22 to 29 January 2015. Seven artists from different backgrounds were invited to discuss the future practice of Arc according to the motto of "making is thinking". With: Nicolas Field, Martina Raponi, Patrick Savolainen, Tijana Stevanovic, Nadia Tsulukidze, Gosie Vervloessem and Sara Widmer.

In that sense, Arc artist residency offers artists and other practitioners a space where they can shape a common identity made of multiple voices. From the meetings between individuals working on the edge of their specific disciplines, skills and interests can arise moments of interaction and 'fermentation'. In keeping with its original purpose – a hostel for pilgrims – the house provides artists a shielded space in which they are free to take time to develop fresh and still frail ideas, a space for speculative thinking. Arc welcomes proposals that open questions beyond the art field and that encourage transversal collaboration, at the intersection between the arts and society. The re-invention of Arc - an institution that for the past 20 years was a place dedicated to literature - is not a one-off action, but a slow and continuous process of change, that involves the residents: artists and other practitioners.

In her essay 'Arte Ùtil' ('Useful Art') Tania Bruguera (2014: 299-300) argues that change is not something clearly tangible but rather a subtle, long-term process of growth. Furthermore she suggests that art that works politically is about all the tools that we have in art to challenge things outside of art: it is making art useful for those who are not trained artists, for both informed and uninformed people with the same levels of interest and engagement. Bruguera's definition of useful art is reminiscent of the concept of *communities of practices* of the cognitive anthropologist Etienne Wenger. According Wenger (1998) communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, interest or profession, and learn how to do this better as they regularly interact.[4] The groups can develop naturally through means of sharing and exchanging knowledge. However, they can also be purposely formed in order to gain a particular knowledge or experience. The exchange of knowledge in communities of practice is not necessarily an explicit expertise but can also be seen as a tacit knowledge: a valuable context based experience that cannot easily be captured, codified or stored - in other words that are often archetypical for contemporary art practice. The characteristics of communities of practice – autonomy, practitioner-orientation, informality, crossing boundaries – are also the characteristics of artistic projects. A lot of artists develop their projects on the periphery of communities of practice: situated at the limit where a community is in contact with the world around it and with other communities of practice.[5]

In April and May 2015 the artist Filip Berte worked in Arc for several weeks on his new project *Un-Home (CH)*. With this project he aims at questioning and visualizing the mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, particularly regarding asylum seekers in Switzerland. To process this topic, Berte did on site photographic interventions outside of the registration and procedure centre for asylum seekers in Vallorbe. With experimental use of the archaic camera obscura technique he tried to bring to life Plato's allegory of the cave exactly where people are forcibly living 'in limbo'; a representation

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[4] In his writings Wenger mainly deals with business, government, education, development projects, knowledge management and civic life. Not with art.

[5] The idea of communities of practice is reminiscent of Rancière's 'communities of intelligence', as described in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*: the role of a teacher is only to 'oblige' the student to realize his or her capacity with a mutual acceptance of the equality of intelligence of all humans. (Rancière, 1991: 35) In that sense learning is about emancipation, about 'each man becoming conscious of his nature as an intellectual subject'. (Rancière, 1991: 58) This is, according to Rancière (1991: 36), a question of observing, comparing, and combining, of making and noticing how one has done it.

of the liminal state between in- and outsiders, or between 'home' and 'un-home'. Berte involved several experts from different fields in his research, and as such created a community of practice around *Un-Home (CH)*. He worked, amongst others, with Jean-Noel Gex, ex-the technical director of the former Ilford factory in Marly (CH), to develop a specific camera obscura technique for his three-dimensional installation. He consulted Anne Kristol, PhD researcher at the Laboratory of Transnational Studies and Social Processes (MAPS), University of Neuchâtel (CH) and Raphael Rey, who is completing a PhD about asylum seekers in Switzerland at the Department of Ethnology of the University of Neuchâtel (CH). Furthermore Filip Berte met Yvette Bourgeois, director at director at ARAVOH, Vallorbe (Association of volunteers that help asylum seekers in Vallorbe), Marie-Helène Russi, director at CARAR (Association of volunteers that help asylum seekers in Rochats), documentary film maker Fernand Melgar (who made *The Fortress* about the asylum centre in Vallorbe), etc. And he worked together with several asylum seekers on establishing the camera obscura and its images. As such his learning did not take place in a traditional, hierarchical way, but rather peer-to-peer, which led him in unexpected directions, and which is typical for communities of practice.

Filip Berte, Un-Home (CH) (2015) – Images: Filip Berte

Although Berte's research was not easy - he was for example not allowed access to any of the asylum centres - the productive friction of his project, and of the other above-mentioned projects, allowed social linkage. As Pontbriand (2013: 103) argues, this is an increasing global concern: 'The question of commonality, relationality, how to connect with the Other is crucial in the current context.' The subject of community touches all aspects of artistic practice. According to Pontbriand (2013: 22) it manifests itself in various forms:

> *At the heart of the most influential practices are the ideas of community, self, and the world in which we live. This development is brought about by a number of changes in the values and lifestyles in our time, which are influenced by globalization, the resulting increase in cultural cross-fertilizations, and technological evolution.*

In an essay about the public space, art and the common, Jorinde Seydel (2013: 4) refers to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's book *Commonwealth*, when she points out that the common is in our age becoming more and more immaterial and affective (knowledge, information, communication, images, codes), and that it's exactly that what is expropriated and privatized by the neoliberal market.

Artists Christoph Wachter & Mathias Jud, who will be in residency at Arc in June 2015, interrogate this situation in their projects and propose new forms of interconnection that bridge the gaps of language, politics and socio-cultural divides, giving voice to marginalised communities. Under the title *TOOLS FOR THE NEXT REVOLUTION* they created different projects, like *Picidae* (since 2007), *New Nations* (since 2009) and *qaul.net* (since 2012) that make both Internet censorship visible and provide the tools ready to bypass it and create completely independent communications networks. Central to their work is the issue of free access and the use of cheap and accessible materials.

During the Belluard Festival 2013 Wachter & Jud gave a lecture-performance about their *TOOLS FOR THE NEXT REVOLUTION* and about their project *Hotel Gelem* according to the principles of *qaul.net*, a redundant, open communication principle, in which wireless-enabled computers and mobile devices can directly form a spontaneous network. The term 'qaul' (pronounced like the English word 'call') is Arabic and means 'opinion', 'say', 'talk' or 'word'. Chat, twitter functions and movie streaming is possible thanks to qaul.net, independent of the Internet and cellular networks. The network can spread like a virus: the users gain access via a Wi-Fi devise. Those who access qaul.net, directly receive the installable software through the link, and can then immediately use qaul.net and simultaneously pass along access to others. An Open Source Community can modify it freely. qaul.net has been used amongst others in China, Syria, by Roma communities in Paris and Bucharest, and recently, in March 2014, in Turkey. (qaul.net, 2014)

In a second event at the Belluard Festival 2013, Wachter & Jud explored the possibilities and limits of our communication devices in a hands-on workshop, in which the participants tailored antennas for qaul.net out of tin cans. The artists had used this procedure before in the project *# GLM [Grassroot Local Meshnet]*, an extension of *Hotel Gelem*, in the Roma community in Montreuil, in the suburbs of Paris. In June 2015 Wachter & Jud will be in residency at Arc to work further on this project, in collaboration with asylum seekers, stationed at centres in the region of Romainmôtier.

The projects of Wachter & Jud have a strong political impact, in the 'dissensus'[6] they create, in the way they deal with the tension between the physical and virtual public space, and in their sustainability and usefulness. (Rancière, 1991: 5) Seydel (2013: 5) refers to Rancière when she states that the political conflict is that – rare – event when those who are not perceived, break the sanctioned principles that guarantee participation in society, and as such undermine the consensus about perception. With *# GLM [Grassroot Local Meshnet]* Wachter & Jud allowed the Roma community in Montreuil, with who they have been working since 2011 and who they claim to be 'excluded from public perception and self-justification by social exclusion and structural power', to have access to the Internet, and enabled them to engage online in 'politically explosive discussions regarding exclusion'. Furthermore the effect of the interaction between the physical and digital space is important in Wachter & Jud's projects. In the virtual era we live in, space is not merely three-dimensional and time linear, but is the time-space a flow with several levels, writes Seydel (2013: 5), in reference to media theoretician Joss Hands. Wachter & Jud's projects are products of our decentralized network-era, and as such deal with sustainability and inclusion.

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[6] Rancière emphasises our differences as the basis of our humanity rather that our commonalities and this leads to a politics of 'dissensus' rather than 'consensus'.

Christoph Wachter & Mathias Jud, Tools for the next revolution (2013) Images: Charlotte Walker

The collaborative strategies that Wachter & Jud, but also Filip Berte, Thomas Bratzke and Kosi Hidama & Gosie Vervloessem use in their projects are each adapted to a situation that is the starting point for small subversive gestures and direct actions that have a real impact. These strategies for disobedience are not merely critical, but useful and propose democratic alternatives in a constructive way. Their projects are not final products, but rather steps in a subtle, long-term process, that allows discursive exchange and negotiation through its disruptions.

Which makes me end with Rancière (1991: 33): 'Whoever looks finds. He doesn't necessarily find what he was looking for, and even less what he was supposed to find. But he finds something new to relate to the thing he already knows.'

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Sally De Kunst

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