

[GROUNDINGS]

COMPOSING
THE NEAR
AND THE FAR

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[OCCASIONAL]
[GROUNDWORK]

Written following an invitation to share my work linked to the public(s) of art, this text continues my reflections on the transformation of cultural organisations and curatorial work by principles taken from political ecology. By building on the experience of different projects carried out over the last ten years, and of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on my practice, it explores how the far and the near can be in relation with each other and not in opposition, and lays out this proposition: with artistic means, the composition of publics beyond territorial and disciplinary borders can allow the renewal of political imagination.

I. Two territories

Let's start with the principle that we are situated in a city or a village—it doesn't matter its size or location—where a cultural event has been organised. Under our feet there is a complex fabric made of tarmac, earth, concrete, brick and glass, which serves as a set for the choreography of its collective body. Its limits stop at a simple line defined for reasons sometimes unknown to its inhabitants and which, however, condition its governance. In Paris, the place from where I am speaking, we say for example that the boundary of a *département* was determined by the distance that could be reached on horse in one day from its centre. From the first circle—the city, the village—, a concentric logic gradually leads us from the very near to the very far. These two scales, the local and the global, constitute today two fictions that are so dominant that it becomes difficult to imagine an attachment to a territory beyond their political borders.

Over the fifteen or so years that I have practiced the profession of being a curator, the fiction of a unique “world” of globalised art, the guarantee of the authority of the institutions and individuals who embody it, promised a space to make cultural differences

coexist through the interplay of forces of aesthetic judgement, social engagement, intellectual work, the market and entertainment. Even if, for a time, this precarious balance contributed to the redistribution of influence and to the recognition of a history of art beyond Europe and the United States, it is no longer enough to promise a common world. Because, besides criticisms of elitism, ignorance of the local context, of neocolonialism and of environmental impact, the fiction of a unique world or art as a global and universal phenomenon is embodied today in its contribution to the acceleration of the homogenisation of attention and forms, and by a rejection of radical differences. One of its most caricatural models consists of installing a white cube in a large metropolis, surrounded by an “iconic” architectural work where blockbuster exhibitions will be presented that are mainly aimed at tourists. “A good exhibition gives good photos”: from the 80s pop contradiction where critique and celebration of consumer society were mixed together, this setup has kept the optimisation of time spent in front of each work, the standardisation of possible types of interaction, the assimilation of all work in a modernist aesthetic regime and the instagrammable nature of the exhibition. Faced with this hardly desirable version of globalisation, and the disillusionment caused by ecological and social catastrophes, the logical response of numerous artists, curators, and cultural organisations was to privilege their local context. If many initiatives attempt to nevertheless preserve a place in the international ecosystem, the current trend is orientated towards a more radical location, where community experiences of the 20th century are often cited as models. This is what I understand when, sat next to an artist during the opening of a biennial, they say to me: “Why should I meet with people who I don’t know?”

If the globalised fiction of the art world, as a network that is decontextualised, homogenous, elitist and disconnected from social and environmental problems, is hardly desirable, the local

fiction also poses problems: on the scale of a city, each cultural organisation functions as a micro-society that is compatible with, more or less formally, a certain idea of art and constructs ties with different circles of the public according to objectives that are often linked to democratisation, influence, and sources of funding. These micro-societies are today criticised by progressive voices when they perpetuate patriarchal or elitist forms of governance, and when they contribute to the reproduction of social hierarchies while claiming to represent the universal, or even socially engaged, character of art. They are celebrated when they invent more horizontal forms of governance, more sustainable relations with their environments, and when they tend to represent, as much in their programmes and collections as in their teams and board of directors, the diversity of class, gender, race, physical and neurological conditions, and languages present in the city and in their publics.

The current attention on the local scale has allowed for the emergence of a multitude of initiatives: a reading group of critical theory texts in a village in Albania, a travelling cinema in a van that crosses the European countryside, a self-managed multidisciplinary residency in Picardy, a collective of filmmakers in Rojava, a cultural centre for ecological knowledge in Palestine, a cultural space for asylum seekers in Copenhagen, a network of micro-bookshops in the Philippines ... the examples are endless. They make up one of the bases for the proposition that I am going to outline in this text. But, even if it allows for more situated knowledge and more tangible relations, the local scale can be as undesirable a fiction as the global scale. By concentrating on a territory classed as the political story of a city, region or State, the local fiction doesn't take the full measure of numerous scales of ecological, cultural and social relations that connect the near and the far. Without a renewed approach of relations beyond the local, it is impossible to develop forms of international solidarity

that can constitute a desirable horizon faced with nationalisms, retreats into ideas of identity, and environmental crises.

II. The near and the far

By taking the metro, we can observe that the thin layer of ground located immediately under our feet covers a second, thicker layer, where mixed in the different geological layers is a jumble of cables, pipes, roots, mycelium, as well as concentrations of water, petrol and other elements that make up what is commonly called the earth's crust. For this second layer of ground, the importance of political borders is more relative. Internet cables bring a large Californian company closer to the door of a house and make the abyss of the ocean easier to cross than a side street. Viruses and environmental crises cross the border of a country without a passport, while people, whose language, laws, economy and culture have been colonised by this same country, die trying to reach it.

Whether it be a pandemic, an environmental or migration crisis, or to do with the economy or war, the political, economic and social consequences linked to the codependence of the near and the far are today the main subject that is dealt with daily in the press. However, what our leaders propose seems to continue to reflect an opposition, rather than a relation, between the local and the global: this would mean choosing between the pursuit of a globalised capitalism whose rhythm is given by digital companies implying ever-more alienating labour conditions, and a retreat into nationalism where our customs would be regulated according to a supposed national identity that is confused with a "natural order". Therefore, I often use the term "fiction" in this text to insist on the fact that the imaginary associated with the opposition between the near and the far is first and foremost a *construction* where interpretations of different orders – scientific, spiritual, ideological, cultural, etc. – are mixed together.

The repeated responses to social and environmental developments by political leaders of all persuasions, their validation by elections and their success on social media only confirm the necessity to take the contribution of fiction in the emergence of collective imaginaries seriously. Here, it seems necessary to remind ourselves that the development of publics is not simply linked to what is at stake in the number of visitors and access to cultural offerings but also in the political imagination. It is through cultural practices – whether it be seeing an exhibition, reading a book, speaking together on social media, cultivating a garden together, watching a video on a digital platform, or sharing a dish – that singular relations and forms of representation are realised and sometimes invented. Even if I am conscious of the little influence that cultural projects have, I nevertheless believe that it is through their multitude that an alternative to our disillusioned political horizons can be imagined through the composition of the near and the far.

III. Along the way

The microsocieties that are cultural organisations make up a multitude of separated worlds that art as unified fiction cannot encompass. It can happen that some of these worlds establish relations, that they fuse or divide, but these phenomena cannot be assimilated into a global fiction. When they feel that they belong to a common world, the members of these worlds are in fact united by their *concerns* (I will return to this term later) that fall under, for example, the market, diplomacy, tourism, militancy, education, as well as, it goes without saying, art and culture. I am therefore surprised when at a dinner in a large museum surrounded by masterpieces of Modern Art, one table is mainly made up of bankers, while at the table of an art centre located a few steps away I find the people with whom I protested against police violence several days earlier. This description is clearly a slight caricature, but it is the type

of crossing between worlds that has happened to me, sometimes in the same evening.

Along the way, we cross numerous worlds: an association for refugee aid, an intersectional discussion group on Clubhouse, a local food distribution company, a university laboratory on the representation of legal evidence, an art therapy workshop in a psychiatric hospital, a Zone to Defend, a collective of witches, an artisan who is reviving sustainable traditional techniques, an indigenous community trying to preserve its rituals. We observe here imagination in action, an active transformation of our living conditions and representation, and we find difficulties in distinguishing these worlds from what we have learned to recognise as the world of art. Few readers will recognise themselves in this crossing between worlds, because it is indeed very personal. I use however the pronoun “we” because I am convinced that everyone, in their own way, can replace the list of these worlds with another one that is just as contrasted. In spite of our sometimes radical differences, what we have in common is that we have formed attachments with each other in these heterogenous worlds, in such a way that we feel more inspired by the approach of various anthropologists, gardeners or hackers than that of various artists, who are nonetheless celebrated by museums and the market. Some are located in the street below our flats, others are thousands of kilometres away, and yet it is through this circulation of forms and ideas in this trans-local and transdisciplinary ecosystem that our taste and expectations for art are built. Faced with this situation, the question is to know if we are brave enough to imagine what these relations allow for, or if we prefer to once again draw the boundary between disciplines while maintaining that “this is not art”.

IV. What brings us together

Rather than the label “art”, and the way in which it becomes

established, what pushes us to gather together, to be interested in or even attached to certain worlds rather than others are different *concerns* (J. Dewey). The concerns that I speak of here are singular in nature, because they touch us deeply enough to begin to dedicate our time to it, to travel, to change our ways of thinking and doing, to make more or less rational choices that we sometimes commit to for the rest of our lives. It is from these concerns that we can renew our way of understanding the composition of the public. Following our concerns and their consequences allows us to orient ourselves in the jumble of territories on which the city depends, beyond its political boundaries. If we describe the network of people, objects, non-humans and organisations that affect or are affected by the same concern, we reach the representation of a very singular territory, that combines both local and global scales – even if my words are not faithful to their theoretical use, the metaphors of the *archipelago* (E. Glissant) and the *rhizome* (G. Deleuze, F. Guattari) are still useful to represent the territory that I am speaking about. In return, through the understanding of what is at stake in this territory and its trans-local network of relevant agents, a more precise understanding of this concern is constructed.

It was starting from this hypothesis, inspired among other things by Bruno Latour's *Compositionist Manifesto*, that I founded the curatorial organisation 'Council' in 2013 with Sandra Terdjman. Made up of an office in Paris and an international team, Council works with organisations who try to have an active role in the transformation of society. We realise exhibitions, publications, events, or any necessary format, but these formats are never the primary motivation of a project. Developed over around 5 to 10 years, each project starts by investigating a concern, for example: laws that condemn sexual acts said to be "against nature" (*The Against Nature Journal*, 2014), the recognition of different perceptions of sound across the auditory spectrum (*Infinite Ear*, 2013), support

infrastructures for socially engaged artistic practices (AFIELD, 2014), the attempts to represent environmental crises (*On Becoming Earthlings*, 2015), or forms of symbiotic organisation (*Collective Agenda*, 2018).

Often the investigations begin on a local scale within the framework of an exchange with a cultural organisation – given the time that each project implies, shared affinities play a central role in the choice of organisation with which we work. We start by asking ourselves what the controversies linked to the concern that we are investigating are, what the agents concerned by these controversies are (whether they be human or non-human), and if the concern needs to be reformulated in order to allow different relations between them. Indeed, according to the description of a concern, the attachment and the relations to powers and legitimacy are not the same. We look for a description of the concern that does not place us in a position of exteriority, that of an expert, extractor or saviour, and instead allows for a composition of knowledges of different natures, despite the fact that they are built and shared in circles that do not necessarily allow themselves legitimacy. Our work includes a non-negligible part of mediation, translation, and diplomacy, as well as a necessary transformation of our positions. After some time, through following and reformulating the concern which we are investigating, and meeting relevant agents, a territory and a corpus of knowledges and practices linked to the concern start to take shape. To put it simply, by this process, each artwork is supported by an artworld.

For example, for the project T.A.N.J. (The Against Nature Journal), the public is first of all made up of law professionals, activists and researchers who take action in the numerous countries where laws against nature are applied and in the countries – sadly very numerous today – where these laws inspire reactionary movements for the “restoration of the natural order”. And as the concern

broached by this project touches on language and advocacy, the public also includes lovers of literature and visual art who are interested in these questions. The existing territory and networks are notably formed by the ambivalent history of relations between international and local NGOs that defend human rights, and of links that numerous intellectuals and professionals of rights and gender studies have maintained with the country where they grew up after establishing themselves in universities of so-called “rich” countries, for reasons sometimes linked with their sexual orientation. The form and content of the journal were defined in consultation with different activists and members of legal NGOs by imagining what the best way to raise this public’s interest would be. We debated for example the place of texts and images of a sexual nature, the advantages of paper in passing on information by hand, in the polyphony necessary in each issue regarding where the authors live and the type of texts. T.A.N.J. is today a paper journal distributed to 2000 people in close to 40 countries, with only 500 copies circulated in artistic bookshops.

For the Infinite Ear project, the public was in the first place made up of people who are located in different parts of the auditory spectrum. Often reduced to the terms “deaf” and “hard of hearing”, in fact a wide variety of cochlear, tactile and visual perceptions of sound, and of “deaf gain”, exist. Even if sign languages have a shared foundation with Deaf Culture, there is a large diversity of deaf communities across the world, with relations of inclusion just as much as of exclusion with hearers, and there are numerous individuals who don’t wish to be assimilated to the term “community”. To this first public another public habitually considered experts on questions of sound was added, such as for example musicians and academics in Sound Studies, who were involved here to give their position on the centrality of the cochlear as the hearing organ. For this project, the territory links together

different organisations particularly advanced in their defence of deaf culture, such as Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., where all the architecture is adapted to sign language and where sign language is used by all, even off campus. Translators are one of the important figures between these territories because they offer both a connection between different Deaf and Hard of Hearing worlds, but also with Hearing worlds. Infinite Ear was first and foremost a series of workshops of sound practices organised notably in Sharjah and the United States. When the group of people with whom we were working was sufficiently broad, the project became an exhibition (presented in Bergen Assembly in 2016, Garage Centre for Contemporary Arts in 2018, and CentroCentro in 2019). Its format, which included many sensory practices and sound practice workshops, was the fruit of the dialogue with this group.

One last example: in response to the present debate within different public and private institutions around the “social impact” of culture, the public of AFIELD is made up of cultural and artistic initiatives which have taken a “sidestep” out of the field of art to develop a socially-minded organisation. The network was built up progressively by naming new members every year according to collectively discussed criteria. The new members sometimes receive financial support and above all take part in the network’s activities through monthly meetings and seminars. The network is organised according to the principles of the “commons”: the resources, whether they be financial, conceptual, or technical, are of mutual benefit in order to allow each initiative to continue to develop and to generate relations of different natures between members. Through this process, the network offers a complex and non-quantitative approach to the possible societal transformations that a cultural project can allow, beyond one symbolic regime. The network is today made up of 41 members, and welcomes 3 new members each year.

V. Composing

Through these projects, and the others supported by Council, I was able to observe how to put into action a set of values drawn from political ecology, such as sustainability, cooperation, sharing and diversity. I was able to observe that the composition of practices belonging to these heterogeneous worlds can effect a better understanding of the problem that concerns them, aesthetic experiences which could not have existed otherwise, and the constitution of a public that sees a shared foundation – even if sometimes tinged with agonism – despite the radical differences of those who compose it and the territories they inhabit.

The proposition that I am sketching in this text is a *composition*: it takes and favours the most helpful dimensions of practices developed on a global and local scale in order to enrich existing organisations and, if the conditions are met, to allow the emergence of hybrids attached to territories beyond political borders. On the global scale, it takes on the capacity to build networks and to allow the meeting between radical differences. On the local scale, it takes on the attachment to the land (rather than to the territory) and to those who inhabit it, whether they be human or non-human. It seeks to take full measure of its living conditions and consequences of its activity on the environment. De-centred, it puts all its attention on initiatives that exist already, whether they be near or far, small or big, unstable or rich, and if they speak fluently one of these strange languages that circulate among art professionals.

Even if the composition doesn't deny the determining position of curators, it doesn't rely on their authority alone but on infrastructures built collectively between initiatives in order to allow them to endure and have mutual relations. Here, the technologies of display (publications, exhibitions, events, digital or older) are some

of the modalities for organisation and reinvention. They are the very material of these trans-local and trans-disciplinary infrastructures, and it is through them that they establish a public between the near and the far.

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The projects introduced in this text are archived at www.council.art

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Grégory Castéra is a curator, educator, and editor working in the field of contemporary art. His work reflects on the transformation of art practices and organisations through political ecology. In 2020-2022, he inquires about the application of symbiosis to cultural organisations, and commutes between Paris and Stockholm. Castéra is the co-founder and director of Council; guest professor of collective practices at The Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm (2020—); co-editor of *T.A.N.J. (The Against Nature Journal)* (along with Aimar Arriola and Giulia Tognon, 2020—); and infrastructure and project advisor for the Kerenidis Pepe Collection in Paris and Anafi. Before this, he served as coordinator of Bétonsalon (2007-2009), co-director of Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers (along with Alice Chauchat and Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, 2010-2012), and member of the collective The Encyclopedia of Spoken Words (2007-2014). Recent curatorial projects include the exhibition *Shoreline Movements* (along with Erika Balsom, Taipei Biennial, 2020-2021), the forum *Collectively* (along with Raimundas Malašauskas, Claire Tancons and Kathryn Weir, Iaspis, Stockholm, 2019), the exhibition *Infinite Ear* (Bergen Assembly, 2016, Garage Museum for Contemporary Art, Moscow, 2018, CentroCentro, Madrid, 2019-2020) and the network AFIELD (2014—).

Occasional Groundwork is an alliance of three European biennials EVA (Ireland's Biennial of Contemporary Art), GIBCA (Göteborg International Biennial for Contemporary Art, Sweden), and LIAF (Lofoten International Art Festival, Norway) that are each concerned with re-proposing the model of the international art biennial. Seeking a rooted infrastructure for the production and dissemination of contemporary art, Occasional Groundwork serves as a peer group for thinking-through the existing and speculative frameworks of organisational practice.

Groundings is the first public initiative of Occasional Groundwork – a series of co-commissioned texts by writers, artists, curators, and academics, exploring themes of internationalism, sustainability, audience, and infrastructure within the context of the contemporary art biennial and the shift in conditions imposed by the ongoing pandemic.

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