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Desvoignes/Marianne Guarino-Huet

Challenging questions at the intersections of art, pedagogy, and research

An Interview with microsilions (Marianne Guarino-Huet and Olivier Desvoignes) by Laila Huber and Elke Zobl

The artists Marianne Guarino-Huet and Olivier Desvoignes who together form microsilions, were our guests at the “Artistic Interventions and Collaboration in Anti-Racist and Feminist Artistic-Educational Projects” Symposium at the Program Area Contemporary Arts & Cultural Production in December 2013. In the interview they discuss how they developed their approach of combining arts and pedagogy, working with different audiences and different forms of collaboration, as well as the interventionist aspects of their artistic and research practice and critical art education in Switzerland. *(1)

Our first question is about your artistic practice, which is mainly collaborative, linking research practice with art and critical pedagogies. Can you explain what the artistic part of this is and where the critical pedagogies come in?

Marianne Guarino-Huet: Maybe we can trace back a bit to how we started working together and how we built our theoretical background from the first project we did together when we were still students at the arts school in Geneva. We were both studying at the Critical Curatorial Cybermedia Program at the Geneva University of Art and Design. One of the assignments was to develop a collaborative project. It was a project with two secondary classes from the state school and the aim was to propose a day of symposia presentations for teachers who were attending a lifelong learning program for art teachers.

Olivier Desvoignes: We decided to involve the pupils and the students themselves, which was not necessarily a requirement of the project. We were very interested in the idea of collaboration and trying to form something together with non-artists. At that time we were interested in questions of education, but a bit loosely, and through doing the project and through the exchange with the participants, we realized that it was something that was very exciting to do. We didn't ask ourselves, "Is it education? Is it art?": For us, everything has merged completely right from the start. We both have art training, and neither of us has educational training, but we have practice in education at different levels. For us, it is really not about separating, but finding a way to hybridize, to mix those interests in art and education.

Marianne Guarino-Huet: We are making the road while walking. For each project we develop a specific collaborative structure and a specific content because the context is always different. For the specific groups of people we work with, there is also a need to have specific inputs.

Olivier Desvoignes: We have to point out two things regarding the question of artistic practice: First, for us it is truly the idea of producing something

together and producing something that will be made public. Because we noticed it is a completely different relationship with the participants when we simply say, it is a kind of internal workshop, as opposed to saying, we are doing something that will be exhibited. A lot of questions regarding who you are addressing and the responsibilities of what you say come up this way.

And the second point is that we always try to consider our art practice as not only handcraft production. So very often in our projects the participants are not doing anything with their hands, they are conceptualizing, making models. So in a way this is different from what people we are working with are used to: in the art classes at school they are still doing traditional art practices, such as modeling or painting, which is another type of learning. That's a point where we differ from school.

Marianne Guarino-Huet: We are somehow very close to the idea of learning through art. It is really using art as a sphere where the political, the critical, the social, all kinds of different problem areas can meet. We can reflect on those issues through the collective production of the work.

What different audiences do you work with?

Marianne Guarino-Huet: There are various audiences. For four years we were responsible for art education projects at the Centre d'Art Contemporain Geneve. We wanted to develop art education through projects and we had the opportunity to do so in that institution. We also worked with a lot of schools.

Olivier Desvoignes: Community houses, also with groups that are more mixed. And with future art teachers, students in graphic design, in communication, journalism...

Marianne Guarino-Huet: It is very different from one project to another: when we are working with a group sharing an interest or a practice or a class of pupils. The dynamics and the relationship are completely different.

Olivier Desvoignes: Maybe one comment we can make regarding the audience is that it demands that we work locally. We also deal with projects in different contexts, but for us, when we are invited to do something in a remote context, a big part of the project is always to define our position and really be very extra careful about why we are there, what we can actually do with the group, etc. When we are in Geneva, we know the context, and we know it better project after project. Quite often in collaborative projects there is this idea of working with "the other," and this is sometimes linked to the idea of targeted audiences. There is this kind of otherness that is sought. When we are working with classes in Geneva, we feel closer and for us it is also a more accurate position.

Marianne Guarino-Huet: Perhaps in trying to describe the different types of collaborations and groups we are collaborating with, we can talk about circles, different circles that we can imagine as "exocentric." We have developed a mobile office, the "Bureau Mobile." We did a 24-hour tour in Geneva with it and invited thirty different artists and cultural workers to take part. In that project, each artistic proposal generated another circle of people who were willing to participate in the performance, so this was another way to collaborate, not on the long term like the experience we described before, but with a more interventionist approach. This idea of developing different circles and seeing how you can get them to talk, to mix at some point, is really how

we try to do our artwork.

Can you explain a bit more about the “Bureau Mobile”? Could it be understood as a tool box?

Olivier Desvoignes: It is definitely a tool box. We really meant it as something quite functional and not as an artwork in itself somehow. Even though it was conceived with a designer and it is also a clear reference to that USM Haller system, that very classical Swiss office design. We used the USM as a kind of joke because it was completely distorted. But the idea is that it can be functional. The idea began from our experience of working with different institutions and never having a place to work, always having to work in the corridors or on the floor.

Marianne Guarino-Huet: We were always carrying all our materials with us and we wanted to make sure that if we needed to print something, for example, everything was working. We applied for a grant for art educators from the city of Geneva, with the concept of this mobile office. If it is a tool box, it is also a way to address the production conditions of cultural work. How can you imagine working without a space?

Olivier Desvoignes: It was also a strategy for financing our activities rather than just for a project. Austria was a very important place for independent art education— with practices a few years ago such as “StörDienst” or “trafo.K.” In Switzerland, this independent art education is an emerging field. So for us it was also a kind of strategic move to say; what we need is material, it is time to think about the specificities of our practice. It worked out and we were able to build that office. We can go with it to an institution or we can develop things completely outside of the institution. The idea of autonomy was very important: we are energy-autonomous for a few hours. We did exhibitions, screenings, parties, etc., in the streets.

Would you say it is an intervention, in the sense of intervening into the museum context?

Marianne Guarino-Huet: With this project, at least, we can definitely say that it is really a way to intervene and also to interrupt the “usual.”

Olivier Desvoignes: Not only in the museum context: when we used it for two projects in Rome and in Geneva, in the streets, it was definitely an interventionist practice.

In both cases we didn't ask for any authorization, so both actions were pirate events in the street and because the structure was so light, we could move quickly and we never had any trouble. In Rome we found a closed travel agency and we decided, just passing by, that we would do an exhibition on the window, so we just stopped in front of it and for a few hours we designed the exhibition and put everything on the store-front. So it definitely has the potential to be an interventionist toolbox.

Marianne Guarino-Huet: After each experiment we did with the mobile office, in public space, we printed a poster, which is also a way to keep track of those interventions. The posters are just printed on demand, but we produce the pdf and it can be reprinted. It is also a nice way for us to talk about the idea of mobility because it is genuinely a reproducible object that can be displayed in different places.

And is there only one mobile office? Or are there several versions meant to be used

by different people?

Olivier Desvoignes: There are two modules that can connect because we can carry one each, but in fact, the idea is the opposite: in the project concept, in the beginning it was meant to diminish. The idea is that each time we use it, we lose some parts. The idea is that it does not become a model, but instead, an experiment that will eventually disappear.

Marianne Guarino-Huet: It was very important for us to also have that financial support, to be able to buy a computer, for example. But it is not meant as a kit that we could develop.

Since our topic here is artistic interventions, could you explain what artistic intervention means to you? Do you see your work or perhaps specific projects as artistic interventions?

Marianne Guarino-Huet: The question is about defining art. We were both trained as artists and we consider our practice an artistic practice, which does not mean that we can't say it is art education, but for us the umbrella "art" is really useful because it allows a lot of freedom. Art education and a critical art education as it was developed in Vienna in the 1990s are not present in French speaking Switzerland. The "Institute for Art Education" is really an island in Zurich and it is really nice when you are on that island and when you talk with the people there. But when you go out in Geneva, the art education programs of the institutions are classical. So, for us, the idea of a different art education is very important also in that context.

Olivier Desvoignes: But regarding the term "intervention," certainly some other of our projects could enter this definition, "Notes of possible future uses of the Gdansk shipyard," for example, is a project where we worked on the production of posters as a counter proposal to the plan of the promoter for a new city in the former shipyard of Gdansk. It was a work of inquiry with different people and the production of a counter proposal, via a poster that was distributed in the city. We also worked around the practice of craftivism, which definitely lays in the tradition of interventionist art. There is always a bit of an idea of "Störung [disturbance]" when we are working with institutions. There is very often a critical dimension, but maybe not always in an interventionist sense. When we are hired by an institution, it is difficult to call our projects interventions, when in truth, is they are planned well in advance and supported by the institution.

Marianne Guarino-Huet: The core is how to articulate these artistic practices and educational practices together to develop projects; then, sometimes it takes a more interventionist approach, sometimes it doesn't. And about the art in it, well, for us it is more about the context. It is also about the role that you are adopting with a group: when we collaborate independently we present ourselves as artists and when we are invited by institutions, it might be as artists or as critical gallery educators.

Olivier Desvoignes: But we are not always attempting to integrate artworks, for example, with "Groupe l'Aventin" (<http://iae-journal.zhdk.ch/no-8/texte/>): The theater play was "Antigone," so we could easily find a lot of representations of "Antigone" and, starting from there, reflect on the visual part of the play. But we wanted to go further and the results with the two groups—a series of objects inspired by craftivism and a video, had little to do with that initial input of the Antigone representations. We do not force the production of an artwork that will be perceived as such. It is not important for

us.

And what role does research play for you? Or do you understand your work as research?

Marianne Guarino-Huet: There are really two levels of research we can talk about. We have this vast field of artistic collaborative practices and pedagogies in which we are developing continuous research, trying to articulate inputs from critical pedagogies, feminist pedagogies, and post-structuralist thinkers with artistic practices. We are both PhD-researchers at Chelsea College of the Arts at the University of the Arts in London. And then, for each project we do specific research because the context, the groups of collaborators and themes are always different ... We also have some topics that come back in different projects: gentrification gender, commons.

Olivier Desvoignes: Research is one of the keywords for defining our practice. And we are also really interested in the idea of action research or participatory action research. So, even though we are not trying to produce models that could have been proposed by participatory action research and we are not really specialists in that field, we are still very interested in the idea that research is not disconnected from practice, but that both are actually integrated, that research leads to action, and that the collaborators can take part in this research somehow.

Have you ever collaborated with action researchers or social scientists?

Marianne Guarino-Huet: We don't know many people who would strictly define themselves as users of participatory action research, but we are currently doing research around Paulo Freire (<http://another.zhdk.ch/2012/11/10/zurich-working-group/>). It is very interesting because we have also traced back some articles containing the first moments of discussion about participatory action research and building groups, where those questions are discussed. We must say, it is inspiring, but not what we are doing per se, we could not define what we are doing as participatory action research.

We borrow some elements from there, from ideas of transformation, which are really interesting. With the Bologna process there were a lot of debates about what artistic research might be. Without trying to define what artistic research is, we base each of our projects on research that sometimes involves visual questions, political questions, ethical questions, social questions, or cooking questions, for example.

Thank you very much for the interview!

//Zur Person

Laila Huber

geb. 1980, studierte Kulturanthropologie und Kulturmanagement in Graz und Neapel/Italien. Ihre Arbeits- und Forschungsschwerpunkte sind partizipative Kunst- und Kulturarbeit, Selbstorganisation, autonome Räume, Stadtforschung sowie Interkulturalität. Ihre Dissertation „Topografie(n) des Möglichen (in) der Stadt

Salzburg“ wurde im Rahmen des Dokoratskollegs „Kunst und Öffentlichkeit“ (2010-2013), am Schwerpunkt Wissenschaft und Kunst /Universität Salzburg und Mozarteum, ausgearbeitet und 2014 abgeschlossen (Publikation in Vorbereitung im transcript Verlag). Von Jan. 2011-Jan. 2014 war sie ehrenamtlich in der Salzburger Kunstinitiative periscope tätig. Und seit Januar 2012 ist sie Mitglied des Salzburger Landeskulturrats in den Fachbeiräten „Bildende Kunst“ und „Kulturelle Bildung“. Seit Okt. 2013 ist sie wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin am Programmbereich „Zeitgenössische Kunst und Kulturproduktion“ am Kooperationschwerpunkt Wissenschaft und Kunst (der Paris-Lodron-Universität und Mozarteum Salzburg) – u.a. im Sparkling-Science-Projekt „Making Art – Taking Part! Künstlerische und kulturelle Interventionen zur Herstellung partizipativer Öffentlichkeiten von und mit Jugendlichen“ (www.takingpart.at).

//Zur Person

Elke Zobl

Elke Zobl leitet seit 2010 den Programmbereich Zeitgenössische Kunst und Kulturproduktion an der Interuniversitären Einrichtung Wissenschaft und Kunst, sowie verschiedene Drittmittelprojekte in den Bereichen Forschung, Wissenschaftskommunikation und Kultur, aktuell „Räume kultureller Demokratie“. Nach Studien der Kunstpädagogik im Fach Bildhauerei, Germanistik, und der Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften in Salzburg, Wien, und North Carolina, USA), forschte sie an der Universität of California San Diego (USA) zu alternativen, feministischen Medien und transnationalen Netzwerken. Seit 2017 ist sie Associate Professorin am Fachbereich Kommunikationswissenschaft und an der Interuniversitären Einrichtung Wissenschaft und Kunst. Als Kulturvermittlerin führt sie Workshops mit Jugendlichen durch, bietet Weiterbildungsangebote für Multiplikator:innen an und entwickelt laufend künstlerisch-educative Vermittlungsmaterialien.

Mehr Info

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microsilions – Olivier Desvoignes/Marianne Guarino-Huet

The collective microsilions develops collaborative projects and researches the connections between art and critical pedagogy. Its founding members Marianne Guarino-Huet and Olivier Desvoignes were directors of the study program Bilden-Künste-Gesellschaft at the ZHdK between 2009 and 2014. They are currently working in the Master Trans at the Geneva University of Art and Design and are PhD candidates at the Chelsea College of Art & Design. www.microsilions.org

//Fussnoten

*1 *Many thanks for the transcription to Veronika Agra.*