# BAINS CONNECTIVE

# *Micro Histories*

## approaching art & ethnographic paradigms

*The questions that were raised concerned all the practices. They did not suggest a common answer but instead a constellation of problematics to be dealt with. What are the ways of approaching field research? What is the role of the artist in the making of art that is created in negotiation with 'the other'? What are the ethical paradigms? What is the friction between the objective and the subjective? What kind of knowledge is produced or processed within these practices? What is the political stance of these approaches and their authorship? What is the relationship between micro and macro history? And last but not least, what kind of aesthetics emerge from these practices?*

**Conversations with Anu Pennanen & Stéphane Querrec, Einat Tuchman, Alessandra Coppola, Eleonora Sovrani and Agency**

# Micro Histories

## approaching art & ethnographic paradigms

*Thematics Residency*
# Micro Histories:
Introduction — Lilia Mestre

Thematics Micro Histories was a two-month research residency focusing on artistic practices that deal with art and ethnographic paradigms. Once again Thematics was concerned with artistic approaches directly related to field research and participatory practices, and art that is involved with the study of socio-cultural phenomena and situates it self as a co-actor in their reconstruction.

All the projects used the local community as a work frame and related to different artistic, social and political concerns. The variety of interests was wide-ranging: from the observation of localities such as Saint-Josse-ten-Noode and the European Quarter, to the case of the former workers of the Renault Factory in Vilvoorde, private encounters dealing with intimacy and authenticity, and the re-visitation of intellectual property issues.

During this research period, strategies, methodologies, processes of documentation and presentations of singular micro-histories were investigated and shared. The artists worked in different environments in and around Brussels focusing on singular cases, using different modes of observation and taking positions that were inherent to the way the experiences were translated and took place as art forms.

The questions that were raised concerned all the practices. They did not suggest a common answer but instead a constellation of problematics to be dealt with. What are the ways of approaching field research? What is the role of the artist in the making of art that is created in negotiation with 'the other'? What are the ethical paradigms? What is the friction between the objective and the subjective?

What kind of knowledge is produced or processed within these practices? What is the political stance of these approaches and their authorship? What is the relationship between micro and macro history? And last but not least, what kind of aesthetics emerge from these practices?

Field research and participatory practices open the framework to a complexity of actors inherent to the chosen situation. Allowing these actors to be active participants in the process of art making in terms of their relations, their context, their encounters, their political, economic and social aspects, indicates a desire to consider the art work (and life) as a convergence of factors that exist besides the artist him or herself.

This kind of work involves 'the other', the one that we don't know yet, and will perhaps never know. What forms the work in these approaches is the process of negotiation and the strategies that make the emergence of affective relationships possible. The artist becomes the conductor or mediator, and the artwork a vehicle for the encounter. In these procedures the sense of commitment and responsibility is constructed by all parties and becomes part of the discursive practice.

It seems that there is a strong desire to become part of a larger field of knowledge, to confront and destabilize one's own criteria, and individual views about the existence of 'things' — not to analyze just by dissecting and finding the lowest common denominator, but by bringing together, enlarging and observing the resonance that occurs.

# Anu Pennanen (FI) and Stéphane Querrec (FR)

**Esther Severi: You are working on a particular subject – the closure of the Belgian branch of the Renault factory in Vilvoorde. When and why did you become interested in this topic?**

**Stéphane Querrec:** When Anu and I started working together, we both felt that the idea of human obsolescence today was a very important topic. It has become commonplace inasmuch as people belonging to various classes find themselves treated or considered like rubbish because they have alost their job. So back in 2010 when I was in Belgium for a few weeks for an art project, I went to Limburg and visited the old mines there and I suddenly remembered the factory workers in Vilvoorde. In France, the workers at Renault Vilvoorde made themselves heard when they came to Paris and to the North of France to strike. That's how I found out about it at that time. Finding myself in front of those beautiful decaying factories in Limburg my immediate feeling was that visiting old factories is very romantic. However, the beauty overshadows the past and present working conditions in factories, and it does not reveal in particular the system operating within them and the relations at stake: those binding workers with other workers and their bosses. So I told Anu the story of Renault Vilvoorde and we started to think about what happens to workers who give 20 years or more of their life to their factory. Little by little we got into the subject by visiting

Vilvoorde before the residency at Bains Connective in order to do research and meet the workers. There was a slow process of getting to know them and of gradually building up trust over time. We understood that it would be beneficial to stay in Brussels longer in order to work with them and to be committed to the project.

**Anu Pennanen:** I've worked at specific locations in different cities such as Tallinn, Liverpool and Paris. I don't find working in Belgium particularly exotic. We were both trying to find an interesting site to trigger the work – an architecture or an environment that has a specific meaning now, but which is going to change in the future. Film is the proper means to treat a subject that is about to vanish because there is an aspect of commemoration attached to it as a medium. Stéphane presented the idea of the factory at Vilvoorde. It's a different kind of space because it has nothing of the romantic elements of old factories. In fact there are memories that are nostalgic and romantic, but the work itself and the way a factory functions is not romantic at all. We were also interested in the supposedly flat Belgian environment, which has a peculiar beauty. However, above all we wanted to bring to the fore the people, the end of their manual labour in the factory and the experience of obsolescence. Nowadays we can all relate to these changes in society because everyone is in danger of becoming obsolete at anytime.



Meeting of the hardcore group of strikers from Vilvoorde 1997, taken at the Bains Connective office in 2012. Organized by Anu Pennanen and Stephane Querrec.

From left to right: Jan de Reymacker, Benny Pierard, Stan van Hulle, Albert Vanwinn, André Fontaine, Danny Pierard and Patrick van Aelst

**ES: During your stay at Bains Connective, you worked a lot on the contact with the workers. How did the communication with them take place? Were people willing to tell you about what happened? Were they interested in the fact that this was an artistic project?**

**SQ:** The first ex-workers we met who answered our questions were as usual the people who wanted to talk about their lives, about what the situation was like for them now, about how it ended at the factory and their survival after that. We had to reframe our questions carefully, explaining that we were making a news story for a TV channel, that we were not making a documentary, and that we were not so interested in their personal history but rather in their collective history, as engaged members of a union, and as a group beyond unions.

They explained, for example, that workers can strike for a few weeks, and during these weeks the union pays the workers. The main motivation was to fight against the closure of their factory, but some of the workers, namely the 'hardcore group', decided to go beyond these secured weeks because they wanted to fight for their jobs and keep the factory open.

Among the workers the question at the time of the strike was: should we accept the redundancy payment the bosses are offering us or should we strike and negotiate to keep the factory open? Right here a division was strategically created by the bosses, and yet a few workers decided to unite in solidarity and lose money in order to fight for their rights as a group.

During our meetings with them we tried to create a collective discussion in order to get away from their personal histories. Of course, everyone had their own way of dealing with this situation, and on a personal level there were also tensions and different views back then. It was important to go beyond that, but even so we met the workers individually and heard their stories, views and experiences. Working in a factory gave them a real sense of identity, of belonging – the factory was a family history.

**ES: Did they ask you questions about your project, about the making of the film?**

**SQ:** The purpose of our stay at Bains Connective was to 'discover' our film. We didn't know exactly if we would take a documentary approach or a more fictional course of action based upon facts.

Before you actually come to a place and start working, you have a lot of ideas and projections about what you want to do and what it's going to be about. Being in the field, however, forces you to face the reality of your subject and you have to reposition the project little by little. We kept the ex-workers informed about how the project developed over a period of months. At first they thought they would be 'in' the film. Eventually they understood we needed their cooperation in the sense of giving us their views, their documents, letting us film in their places, and basically opening their doors to us.

**AP:** You can't really know how to make the subject visible until you go to the place itself and talk with people who are connected to it. It was interesting for us to discover how they all dealt with this traumatic situation, how different the reactions to the situation were, and what kind of outcomes they found for themselves. There are people whose involvement clearly goes beyond personal interest and they still have a sort of social or union mission. They are now active in local party politics, or doing things on a more global level, like sending packages to poor children in Africa. Some of them are employed in union organizations while others just found a new job. What is important for them is to keep the idea of solidarity alive.

After working with them we realized that it wouldn't be particularly interesting for them to be in the film. They don't need this process of looking at themselves. Their wish is that the subject is kept alive and talked about, not only in terms of what happened at Vilvoorde, but a more general or international discussion about work and critical unionism.

Eventually we wrote a scenario, based on everything we talked about with the workers, but it's fiction now. We will film with local amateur actors this autumn, who are aware of the subject because they followed it or worked in a union.

**ES: When does the film take place? Do you go back in time?**

**SQ:** The film takes place today and in the near future. It traces what happens after such a traumatic event and is entitled *Staande!Debout!* The film follows one fictional character called Felix, who is based on a real worker who was part of the hardcore group of strikers. He has been out of work for 15 years, and is a 70-year-old pensioner. The real former-worker who inspired this main character was actually one of the most traumatized people in the group of workers (with the exception of the ones who committed suicide after the closure) because he lost more than a job. In the process of the closure he lost his identity, his social contacts, and also his faith in society. The values of work dramatically changed for him, from one day to the next.

In our film the main character wonders what happened to his friends. He then starts looking for his former colleagues and strikers in order to convince them to gather together again, in memory of those who have died in the meantime. However, these encounters don't go the way he imagined they might. Some people are embarrassed, others have moved on, but all are in pain. They finally choose to meet at the *Raised Fist*, a steel sculpture commissioned by the workers and a union, erected between 1997–1998 and made by local sculptor Rik Poot. The *Raised Fist* is a very powerful symbol of struggle.

In reality the former Renault workers regularly meet there, usually at the time of the anniversary of the closure, the 27th of February.

**AP:** When you make a film, you can easily describe it as fiction or documentary, but I'm reluctant to put things into these categories. As an experimental filmmaker, being faced with the idea of formats or genres is a constant problem. You have to identify your film very clearly within certain kinds of parameters and I find this a little absurd. When the film is good, beautiful or also consciously ugly, it shouldn't be more important whether it follows the rules of a certain genre or not. This is a problem that you face as a filmmaker from the first step. An interesting project might be left aside just because the people who look at it don't manage to put it in one box. Formatting is absurd and dangerous, we are pre-formatting our minds.

**ES: I think of experimental film as a genre in itself, in which you use elements of documentary, fiction, or a mixture of both.**

**AP:** When you say experimental film, people immediately think of super 8 camera techniques — they think about a certain kind of film made in the 1970s when things were tried out technically.

**ES: There seems to be a dissociation of the word experimental with what is new, with exploring, similar to how the word avant-garde is connected to artists at the beginning of the 20th century. The words have become more like a definition of a specific style.**

**AP:** For me the experiment is more present on the level of the narration, but many people see experiment as something technical.

The experimental techniques of the 1970s have now become almost 'classic', and their aesthetics have been borrowed by the fashion industry, for example.

**ES: Is there a reason behind the choice of the main character? Do you sympathize with him, personally or politically?**

**SQ:** Not especially. There are many characters in the film, all with different views. When you work in fiction, you must be fair to all the characters and not express your own views directly through them. You have to be able to express different opinions, including the ones that you don't share yourself. Basically film is a place where you can ask questions, a place of different hypotheses, incarnated by characters.

Of course we were interested in putting the emphasis on the main character as somebody who is traumatized. But somehow everybody in that story was united by the trauma of the factory's closure. I use the word 'trauma' once again because that is exactly what it is in reality — here is someone whose identity was erased when he lost his job. The trauma is so deep, that he is literally 'not the same anymore' and will never be again. An external, unexpected event occurred and the workers often said that they hadn't been prepared for the closure. This event stopped their own feeling of time, right on Thursday the 27th of February 1997.

They still refer to themselves as ex-Renault workers and clearly cannot let go of the past.

Therefore we thought it was important to present that kind of loss, from different perspectives and from people who had made different choices.

Despite the variety of ways in which their lives turned out, and the range of views they have on the situation, in the end everyone gathers together in the memory of colleagues who died. At the same time the gathering commemorates the workers' own history, in which no one else is interested anymore. People are in general more concerned with the problems of today. That's why it's important to put this history into focus, with all the different views on it and to present different hypotheses about how to survive such a trauma after 15 years.

**ES: What is clearly not in the film is the voice of the management, the voice from inside the factory, from the people that make the decisions. Was that a conscious choice? Did you have contact with anyone from the management?**

SQ: We didn't want to go into that aspect of the story. We wanted to concentrate on obsolescence – being an obsolete person because other people decide upon it through their own arrogance and greed. For the management it's just an economic decision, there is no human perspective at all. We wanted to focus on the workers.

Manual workers still exist today but there are fewer and fewer of them. We wanted a proper representation of them by means of fiction, and not by placing different opinions side by side, like a TV documentary would do.

It's important that they are characters in a story, and that it's not about who is right or wrong. The film has become a universal story about a certain loss of identity and the question of solidarity.

**ES: Do you feel that there is a tendency towards voicing your own opinion throughout your research, especially when you talk about the factory management not caring about the human consequences of their decision?**

AP: The situation was and is highly emotive, so it required and requires strong opinions. In the factory there were of course managers, local people who had no choice but to follow the orders of the big boss. Since the late 19th century, in situations like this it has not been possible 'kill' the main boss. The main person in this particular conflict was not publicly lynched. Now he has a very good job and has continued his career.

SQ: Making a film is not like giving a diplomatic discourse. It's about taking a point of view that is decided upon early on in the process. We felt that these workers deserved to be the subject of a story. I think that the people who take decisions at any level already have enough representation in Hollywood. However, we aren't making heroes out of the workers, they are just normal people who suffer, struggle, give up sometimes, hesitate or act quickly.

AP: If you want our point of view, it lies in the uncomfortable thought that accompanies the film. The idea that this kind of obsolescence could happen to everyone.





**ES: In this Thematics residency, the research that participants have conducted is highly anthropological. How do you behave as artists delving into a social subject matter like the one concerning the workers at the Renault factory, going into a social situation, which is not connected at all to your living environment or your life in general? Is the artist as researcher becoming a voyeur?**

AP: People in general are always trying to make new labels for things, such as 'the artist as social worker'. My mother is a social worker and so I know what it's about. It would be impossible for me to do that, I don't have the right skills at all. It's the same with research – I'm not a researcher like an academic researcher. I'm a 'flaneur' and I can do this whenever or wherever I like. It's like stepping out of the chains of production and consumption for a moment.

SQ: We are artists. To me, being an artist means being an author, which involves taking a stand and having a point of view. It is a very humble job.

To make this possible I need to gather people around me, listen to them, hear their points of view and at one point take some distance, which is what the fiction is meant for. The distance is crucial in that regard. The residency at Bains Connective gave us the time and space to observe the situation we were in with those workers, and observe ourselves during that process. We opened up our process to others and started talking about it. I remember a very interesting conversation with Elke Van Campenhout about the ethical problems of identification in films in general and in our project in particular. We had a passionate discussion about how to find disidentificatory practices. The way we have rerouted our film from a take on the real to a fiction has certainly something to do with it.

**ES: Being an artist of course, comes down to practice.**

SQ: 'Research' is too much of a big word. We only do a job, which is both manual and intellectual, we don't research, create discourse and publish something. One has to call a spade a spade. We are always talking about workers, but we are also workers!

# Einat Tuchman (IL/BE)

**Esther Severi: You come from a performative practice – you worked as a dancer and theatre maker, and now you are conducting artistic research as a full-time practice.**

**Einat Tuchman:** The *Micro Histories* residency followed on from my a.pass (Advanced Performance and Scenography studies) year of artistic research. During that time I wanted to observe and examine the performance of the cultural and social world. I was interested in leaving the idea of creating my own artificial space in a very limited frame for a while, and focusing on the performative aspect of the real world: the street, where communication between people happens in the public sphere. This development arose from a feeling of not being able to communicate in the theatre and also within my own life with certain layers of society or certain groups. I wanted to get in touch with this other social 'niche' on a performative level and learn how to influence an action within this sphere – an action that could create a dialogue between an artistic practice and the 'realistic' way we live life.

**ES: Do you feel that in theatre the distinction between the performer and the one who watches is clearer than in performance?**

**ET:** The codes of a staged performance are quite clear. There is also a clear construct between you and the people you work with – you all come there for a certain activity. Within cultural and social life, the performance is more hidden.

We all have a certain role-play, we meet and react to one another according to certain rules and certain ways of understanding ourselves in relation to the other or in relation to the situation. We are constantly playing a role within the situation. It is interesting to discover this mechanism, and then to influence or subvert it, creating a gap or a certain hesitation or reflection.

**ES: Do you mean that the different ways in which a human being acts and moves through the world are role-plays?**

**ET:** There are role-plays certainly, but also a search for identity: we try to identify with things we know within a situation, and that makes us change as well.

**ES: Do we try to adjust?**

**ET:** Yes, by putting yourself in a certain situation you can change the way you are acting as yourself. This creates a freedom because you try to be aware of the way you act according to signals that are given to you from the environment. Sometimes you think that this is the 'natural me'. But the 'natural me' is something within a dialogue, and when you start controlling this dialogue or reflecting upon it, you can influence the situation. I believe in the self and the idea that by changing yourself, you can change your surroundings – this is actually my performance.

ES: **The natural self has many characteristics, moods and feelings. It can be confusing if you try to identify that, as you say, as one being, instead of as a being with different faces. The idea of performing in society can also be an interpretation of that. Although with the word 'role-playing', or even with 'performance', there is automatically the idea of something, which is constructed or artificial.**

ET: It's a way of creating a focus point. By staging a characteristic of an identity or a performance of yourself, you can put it before you as something to look at. You expose a certain discourse or protocol of a possible behaviour. Of course we are not restricted, but by restricting yourself temporarily and saying "that's how I am in this situation", you can analyze what happens around it and how the rest of the environment is related to it.

ES: **Being inside a certain community, and 'acting' within this community, seems like a way of finding material. You collect and make an archive, which is already a very personal, interpretative archive. There are many layers of interpretation in this collection already. In order to present the material to an audience or share it, do you think you should return to theatrical modes?**

ET: The Thematics residency was a period for me to get to know Saint-Josse, the community I wanted to work in. I wanted to meet people and understand how I see the place. The result of this period was the formation of my personal point of view of this community after being inside it for two months, meeting people and visiting places. It was a first phase, a first step to discovering how I can create a performance within this community.

Now I have reference points through the people that I met, so I can go on and take it further. It's true that the performative aspect that came out of it went back to the rules of performance — it was more like a theatrical moment, which is also something I like. The elements I used such as video, models and stories that I had written, however, were very new to me.

ES: **In a way you put a frame around the subject, the community, in order to use it as a sort of manual. The community gives you a manual, and you discover how to crack the codes, how to deal with the elements that are there and how to define the character of that space.**

You can see it as a manual, but of course a very subjective one. It's amazing how much you can discover, just by being in a place and meeting people. Now it appears familiar to me, but during these two months I was totally fascinated by all the layers of everyday life I was discovering in this place. Understanding the subjects that people are dealing with constantly, but of which they are not really aware, was a striking element of this discovery. Those subjects influence the trajectories of people's lives in this very small space. This space becomes so evident — it is a community with limits, and at the same time it is so amorphous that it doesn't really exist.

ES: **Do you mean in the end it's like any other community?**

ET: You only have to take one step and you're in Schaerbeek, another step and you end up in another community. There is no identity whatsoever, and that's also a very strange place to be in terms of understanding the community.

ES: **Maybe it's easier to get the impression of an identity of something you don't know very well. While getting to know it, the identity opens up. It's not specific any longer, it has many aspects and characteristics. Identity can be connected to 'first impressions'.**

ET: On the one hand you think it's a multicultural place with many different communities that don't have much contact with each other, but on the other it is very lively and vivid. There are a lot of clichés connected to life in a multicultural city. Still, I think that by focussing on one place you can discover the nuances. You keep on having the same discussions with people and you understand the dynamics better: who is against who, who is trying and who is not trying. It becomes a 'net', and it's hard not to become paranoid! When you move through a community like this you can easily think that people are starting to talk about you because you've become part of this net.

I tried to make contact with different people working at the Saint-Josse local authority. It started well but then they stopped answering my emails and phone calls, and the dialogue came to an end. Then there was an event in the community where I did something, and a politician from the PS (Parti Socialiste) came up to me and said "You are with Ecolo". I had written an article about Saint-Josse that was the result of the Bains Connective final presentation I made in the community centre Ten Noey. This article was translated into Dutch and published in Ten Noey's monthly newsletter. It was about a restaurant that had become the headquarters of Ecolo, about the dirt in the community and the clean park that is situated in the area. It became a text about the environment, which was really not what I meant it to be. I told the politician that I was not political, but she gave me her card anyway and invited me to come and see her. During our meeting she told me that until the elections

I shouldn't expect people to guide me or connect me to their organisations. Everybody is very careful. You actually feel a layer of tension between politicians in the community, a tension that the non-political inhabitants are not even part of. They have to vote, but in the end it's not their war.

ES: **Why did you choose Saint-Josse as the focus of your research?**

ET: There was a space in Saint-Josse that I wanted to use as a general research atelier. This didn't work out, but then I started to look around me in the community and realized that it was the smallest, poorest, densest community in Brussels. It has all the negative attributes that a community can have! It was interesting to discover what's actually there, to enter into an interaction with this poor, dense, multicultural place. It's an area that you normally don't want to look at. I wouldn't usually just stop by and look around me, so I decided to do just that.

ES: **You seem to have a motivation connected to your research that isn't political but is about doing something for the community. You want to create a more thorough image of the community, to add nuance to its current identity, which is mainly based on clichés.**

ET: As I said before, I believe that when you work on yourself, you can change the environment. Being a Jewish person in a place that is mostly Muslim and poor is not easy — it is an environment that I would probably not choose to be part of. Entering it is a way of looking in the mirror. I don't live there but it's a level of society that I am part of and encounter on the metro and in the streets. It's 'the other' that I don't look at, but I want to look at them, at the people I live among. I became attached somehow and started to love the space I was acting in. You cannot avoid loving something you're doing.

**ES:** The idea of using certain places, as space, as opportunity, as image, as a no man's land or as inspiration can be problematic – you can easily become a parasite. What do you think you can bring as an artist to the community in another way, maybe in a more permanent one? What is the function of an artist doing artistic research in a community and how is this different from purely social research? Artistic research is very undefined. Can it transcend a certain self-centred approach to the subject matter?

**ET:** I've been struggling with this from the beginning: the idea of the social worker versus the artist, and the artist occupying the space of others in order to create his own artistic research. I haven't solved this question yet. I'm constantly discovering new things about this place. There is a lack of communication within the multicultural urban sphere and different groups living in close proximity, regard each other with a lot of mutual suspicion. The quality that artistic action can offer to this situation is the ability to speak about these things directly. This kind or research is about creating modes of relationship or communication where you can bring a topic into a kind of imaginative sphere so that it can be played with. You can create a game out of something crucial or something difficult to discuss in order to provoke encounters between people. By creating this fantasy or game you can influence a flow of communication and maybe even unblock a traffic jam. I'm not sure about it but that's a little bit what I'm trying to do, not by looking at things directly but by looking at the similarities or interests between people who come from very different backgrounds, and discovering where they can connect in order to facilitate exchange. I've spoken to a lot of people and noticed that, especially with regards to religion, there is a lot of control but also confusion. There is a small group of people who are imposing religious strictness upon their community.

**ES:** Is it useful for social studies to realize that there is a more interpretative style of doing research, and even to integrate this into its own practice? The idea of 'artistic research' is receiving a lot of attention at the moment. Why do you think this is?

**ET:** We have the growing feeling that we are trapped under a certain invisible net of control. It doesn't matter what you do, you are part of it because it's sneaky and undefined. This control influences your brain and the way you regard the world. Only a long-term engagement with research of a certain kind can somehow make you shift slightly away from this control. It's important to constantly ask questions, to take a reflective point of view, to bring doubt to the surface and not to accept things as they are because they're not always as they seem to be.

**ES: When you started the research, what was your goal, or your idea of an outcome? Is the goal something performative that takes place in a theatrical context?**

**ET:** I thought about making a performance using people from the community. This is something, which will still hopefully take place. I would also love to have a position somewhere in Saint-Josse and continue my activity. I would really like to join an organisation as an artist. It's something that I could go on with for a long time: inventing all kinds of practices in order to work with people and constantly create.

There's an advantage in getting to know people more personally, because that's what makes people participate. When they don't know you they are very suspicious. I see it a lot in the activity of cultural centres – when people don't know something they don't participate. I go to people, I dare to do that, to knock on the door and enter. It's scary sometimes, and you get disappointed a lot, but I believe in this personal approach.



**ES: The process of the research is about becoming part of the community. Maybe this is an important thing connected to artistic research, the idea of blending in. There is a personal desire of belonging to the subject.**

**ET:** Absolutely, you have to start loving it. It has to be emotional, for me at least. I really believe that's the only way to make people participate. Maybe that's even a selfish way, a way of getting into my own artistic practice. In an artistic action, when you work with people, for example when you make a choreography with people, there has to be love. You start to create relationships. It is daily and it becomes part of your life. I see my activity in Saint-Josse as something similar to that, I want to create my group there. Of course people can come and go, it will not be fixed. It will function on the personal level, as a kind of message: if you and I work together and you can communicate it to another person… One becomes a sort of an ambassador in the community.

**ES: You make an interesting comparison to the way that you, as a performer in a theatre/dance context, approach a community and search for close relationships. In the theatre, as well as in the community of Saint-Josse, you create relationships in order to achieve something else together, something that transcends the level of simply getting to know each other.**

**ET:** At the moment I'm starting to have a friendship with a woman in the community, who is very different to me on many levels. Although she comes from somewhere else and experiences very different things, we also find that we have things in common. I spend time with her, I'm the one asking the questions, and she is the one telling the stories. I've started to enter into her life – I've met her children, I eat with her and I visit her at work. I only see it happening in this way, at least if you don't want just the obvious to happen. You have to invest time in yourself and in the other.

# Alessandra Coppola (IT/BE)

**Esther Severi: How did you get from dance to video?**

**Alessandra Coppola:** While studying at Bologna University, one of my professors, who was writing a book about contemporary dance in Belgium, sent me to Belgium to work on a thesis about Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. The actual research for the thesis was quite disappointing. The dance company Rosas was not very open and I didn't know how to relate to them. I was also dancing at the time and I found Brussels to be a very interesting environment, the dance and art world is dense and interconnected, favorable to experiment. Opportunities, people and sources of inspiration are within your reach, whereas in Italy, the cultural world is fragmented and rather limited.

When I finished my thesis back in Italy, I had to choose between an academic career, and a more artistic one as a dancer. I decided to dance and left Italy, working as a professional dancer between 2002 and 2009. I often found the editing of filmed performances rather poor and so having already started to make my own videos, I learned how to edit videos and even ended up working as an editor. When I broke my knee, the surgery kept me away from dancing for months, and my video activity became much more intense. It was a critical moment in my life. Before this I had been working as an interpreter for choreographers, but the last projects that I did were not very satisfying.

I needed more food for my brain. I do believe that this is possible within the dance field, but the projects that I worked on were not challenging enough. I felt that people underestimated my abilities: I could do more but I was not given the opportunity to do so. I realised that I had to do my own work. At the same time, working as a choreographer was not my thing. The idea of conceiving a dance piece was not attractive to me. All the ideas and plans that I had were more concerned with performance than choreography.

**ES: You make a distinct difference between choreography and performance. Don't you think that there is also an element of choreography present in performance?**

**AC:** I see them separately in terms of where they come from. The need from which a performance comes into being, the context in which it takes place, the impact it has and the relationship with the audience, are all very different. I agree with you that you can choreograph in a performance, and that there are aspects of performance in choreography, but just the way I think about performance makes me feel freer. Performance does not take place on stage in front of the audience as in a classical theatrical situation. It is something that intervenes in reality, in order to shift it. Going to the theatre and seeing a show might alter your thinking to some extent, but it is not the same thing.

**ES: Is there not the idea of staging in video work, maybe more so than in performance? A video gives a definite frame to the viewer.**

**AC:** The process of framing in a video work is very different from using an existing frame such as a theatre stage. The framing in video can be mobile and scaled; it doesn't have to be pre-established. The relationship between maker and frame in video is, in my view, more open than the one with the stage. Framing is central to my work, it sets me free from the constraints of the stage. A performance can also be seen as a way of framing reality. When I first started, my works with performance and video were separate, but they finally came together in a project called *IEEI* – a piece in which the live action could only be heard by the audience. My partner's body would repeatedly hit my own body, which would then ram into a wall until we eventually broke through it. Our action was filmed, framing just the torso of both bodies. Immediately after we broke through the wall, the audience were invited to enter the space and see a projection of the action in slow motion. What the audience could first hear and what they then saw had a completely different meaning. This was possible because of the specificity of the action chosen. The point was how to use performance and video to say something that couldn't be conveyed by either medium on its own. This was a turning point for me, a way of combining both media. In a lot of theatre shows or dance performances the video on stage is just a kind of scenery, and I'm not interested in that.



**ES: Do you mean that the video is restricted to being part of the scenography, and in that way more of a decorative element?**

**AC:** Yes, I'm looking for ways of combining them so that they are complementary to what I want to convey. That's also present in the project I worked on during the residency at Bains Connective. The work came out of the desire to make a film, but the performative aspect was also essential to it. Then something happened: I took the project to a production house for documentary film. They were surprised that I had proposed it to them because they didn't consider it to be a documentary. I also went to a production house for theatre and performance who also rejected it because for them it didn't fit the criteria for performance art. I came to the realization that categories are much stricter than I had imagined, and that you have to fit in. You are allowed to experiment but within certain limits and this seems to be a contradiction in terms!

It became increasingly obvious to me that my work is an experimental process. For this project, the final form is a consequence of the materials themselves (the short films made by the participants) and I don't want to decide on the form before working on the material.

**ES: Is it your intention that the work will be shown in a performative context and that you will direct the way the audience sees it?**

**AC:** I think it will end up in the format of a film, something to be projected onto a two-dimensional screen and watched like a regular movie. I wouldn't exclude a performative context, but I do not intend to construct an installation around it.

**ES: A documentary still plays with the idea of being objective. The way you handle it is maybe more clearly subjective, more like an interpretation of a situation.**

**AC:** I don't know how to relate to the word 'objective', I consider everything to be an interpretation of some sort. What I find interesting in documentary is the idea of portraying the other from your personal perspective. I don't believe in objectivity, there is always a subject behind the camera and I'm interested in this subject as much as in what he or she portrays. Ten years ago, I thought of documentary as something quite boring, as a medium showing the 'exotic other'. I still wonder what attracts people to make documentaries in this way. One very often falls into the trap of banalities and with the idea of the exotic, it's very difficult to really go into the subject deeply. You will always be a stranger in an African tribe, a Vietnamese village or an Amazonian reserve and I think it's very hard to find an approach to those realities that is not superficial, patronizing or naïve. At the same time there are people who have succeeded in not falling into these traps.

For this work I was thinking a lot about the relationship to the other, the 'I versus You' and I wanted to look at the images produced as a result of this relationship. So I imagined that if I took the person closest to me, any strangeness would become even more alienating. What about looking at reality itself as a kind of estrangement?

**ES: Another non-classical documentary aspect of the work may be that you don't exclude yourself from being part of the documentary. In a classic documentary the maker is more invisible.**

**AC:** That's the way I see it. I acknowledge the person behind the camera and I include and even enhance this acknowledgment in the making process. The invisible maker is just one way of approaching these matters, but not an absolute one, in my opinion.

**ES: The maker is looking for a truth outside himself. But as a viewer of the documentary you are always looking through the eyes of the maker.**

AC: You've reminded me of a documentary realized by Trinh T. Minh-ha in Africa. The camera has a so-called objective point of view, operating within the classical parameters of documentary. At the same time, however, using a voice-over, she questions the position of the maker and the pretension of being objective in relationship to the subject and the possibility of finding truth. As a viewer it's very interesting because you follow the images, but at the same time you are also connected to the voice-over that is questioning what the director is seeing and how she is looking at it.



**ES: Have you now finished the work that you started during the residency at Bains Connective?**

**AC:** Not yet, I'm probably in the last phase of the work. First I gave the camera and only one cassette to each participating couple for about a week. The idea was to use those tools to make a portrait of each other. They gave me the material and I started editing. When you get a tape with images, you can do whatever you want with it.

Depending on how you edit it, you can completely make up any story you like. I didn't want to do that, so I decided to edit the material with the following question in mind: what is the role that each person gave to the camera in this 'ménage à trois'?

When I was ready I invited all the couples to my place for dinner, and we watched the four short movies I'd made with their footage. Afterwards we talked about it and I asked them what they'd expected and what they thought. A few of them were quite close to anger. One woman barely spoke at all and her boyfriend only talked about what he didn't like. Another woman said she was disappointed that I'd used all her images except the one where she'd filmed her boyfriend with their child. I didn't include this sequence because it seemed too much like 'holiday pictures' and I couldn't see a clear eye behind the camera. She was offended by this and said that by not including the sequence, I hadn't conveyed her feeling of love towards her boyfriend. Here we came to an important point because that was not the purpose of the project. I was not making a documentary about love in a couple's life. I explained that the project dealt with the gaze of the other: hers on her boyfriend, his on her, but also the way that I regarded their images and not them as people, couples or lovers.

**ES: Were the couples informed about this intention beforehand?**

**AC:** Yes, I explained the project very clearly, but in spite of this, I think all of us remained attached to our own expectations and desires, which is normal. In a way that was what I wanted to question: are we aware, and up to which point, of what we do when we produce an image that will be seen? This project is concerned to a great extent with the easy access that we have to technology. We've arrived at a place where we use technology and are excited about having the tools, but at the same time I have the feeling that we haven't developed an awareness of the implications connected to the use of these tools. Once I saw my neighbour singing in her room, recording herself on video, and then putting the video on youtube. The means to mediatize our person are available to everybody, but when we use them we throw ourselves out there and we don't realize what we've produced until the images come back to us like a boomerang.

**ES: When the couples give you the material and they watch it afterwards in a different context, beside the material of other people in the format of a movie, it might be shocking for them. Maybe the awareness that was lacking was the awareness of their material entering a bigger frame?**

**AC:** Of course. One participant said that he didn't film what he didn't want to be viewed, and I could see in the material that he'd considered the format in which the images would be shown and the gaze of an audience from the moment he took the camera in his hands. On the other hand, I could see the lack of this awareness in the material of other participants. Even I chose to film according to my desire at a particular moment, and tried to avoid thinking about the outcome. It's confrontational to look at yourself on a screen with other people next to you. That's why I participated with my boyfriend, in order to accept the same uncomfortable position that I was proposing to the other participants. The first time I showed my own material to someone else – it was Lilia Mestre from Bains Connective – I also felt a little uncomfortable. The process was not supposed to be pleasant.

**ES: People want to see the image of their relationship that they have in their mind.**

**AC:** This is probably what we consciously or unconsciously want, but maybe what we have in mind doesn't correspond to reality, or in this case, to what we filmed. The experiment consists of testing the problematic situation of having easy access to technology and the desire to use it. My boyfriend said that he didn't like the images that I chose of him. He didn't like himself in the images, he didn't like his face, but he also said that he found surprising questions arose from this uncomfortable feeling.

**ES: Your own ego and what you project on the other can be easily misunderstood by a third person outside the relationship**

**AC:** Sure, that's why I was never interested in trying to understand the couples. I told the couples to keep a notebook during the filming, so that if there were 'mistakes' I could look at the notebook and know what to use and what not to use. One couple did not do it, which was their choice. On their tape, there was a sequence of a fixed frame of a bottle of milk and a wall. You only hear their voices in the background: normal family talk, daily life. When I saw this I thought it was great! It was also beautifully framed. However, they had a problem with the fact that I used this sequence since they had simply forgotten to switch off the camera.

**ES: Did they realize it was still on the tape when they gave you the material?**

**AC:** Yes, but even so they got very emotional about it. I told them that they were probably upset about it because they saw something in it that other people didn't see at all. You can't control what other people see. They took it very personally. Perhaps they were having a bad moment when this was filmed, but as a viewer you don't really pick up on it because you can't even understand what they are saying. I never really understood why they were unhappy about it, and I didn't want to push it.

One of the women participating is a cinema critic and I had the feeling she had her own ideas about documentary. She thought that I would discuss the editing with them a little more. I think she'd entered the process thinking it would be a documentary about their relationship, and that I had to get to know them. I didn't want that at all.

**ES: So the participants really put themselves in the focus. From their point of view, the project is about them.**

**AC:** For some of them I guess so. For me it is about the production of images as a relationship between the person behind the camera and the person being filmed, and about the relationship of those two things with the image itself. The way each person filmed the other was very different, although there were similarities within the couples. One couple seemed to stage each other. Another couple used the camera very much like a brush, as if they were painting what they filmed: she filmed the objects in the house that belonged to him from a very close distance, while he filmed her in the house from afar. It's interesting that both had the same approach, while the images ended up being very different.

**ES: Do you give the differences in the material a central position? The material consists of structures that are blueprints for the way people in a relationship think about each other. They structure the gaze that they have on each other.**

**AC:** I would say that the relationships created in making the images/sequences and also the relationship that the makers have with what they have produced is central. I'm supposed to be intimate with my partner, but when I try to film this intimacy it becomes alienating. How do we relate to this feeling? Does the camera let a truth emerge in this sense? Does it betray our desires or reality?

# Eleonora Sovrani (IT/BE)

**Esther Severi: What was your experience of the *Micro Histories* residency at Bains Connective and had you been on such residencies before?**

**Eleonora Sovrani:** I have more experience with workshops than with residencies. I've worked in a team on collective projects and as an artistic assistant, where it was possible to integrate my own practice into the collaboration. While working with Wolfgang Scheppe at the Architecture Biennale in Venice, I really enjoyed the exchange of experiences with fellow artists.

At Bains Connective though, we each really worked on our own project. We discussed the work in group sessions and shared opinions with each other, but most of the time we were on our own, mainly because we needed to spend a lot of time on our research. If you live and work in the same place, then the possibility that the exchange will be more concrete is higher. Personally speaking, the sharing of information and ideas about our projects, especially with people who have been working as artists for longer than myself, was an extremely positive aspect of this residency.

**ES: What did you study?**

**Eleonora:** I studied Art and Visual Communication in Venice. During my degree I moved to Berlin for a while, where I had a very different experience at the Universität der Kunste on a more practice-based visual communications course. There I encountered real exchange with the other students, exactly because of the practical nature of the work. Afterwards I worked for a while as an editor and assistant for *KurzSchluss*, a Franco-German TV program made by ARTE, eventually returning to Venice to focus more on visual communication and the politics of representation. In 2010 I worked at the Biennale in Venice on an art project concerned with the sociological aspect of the city's gothic architecture. In Venice one has a different relationship with time and space in comparison to other cities. It's the only town where you have to walk from one place to another, instead of taking public transport or riding a bike. The relationship with your day changes completely because you have to deal with the randomness of things. Moreover, the contact you have with the people around you is constant and almost physical or palpable in nature. Your neighbours, for instance, on the opposite side of the street are just one metre away.

**ES: What made you come to Belgium and how did you arrive at the subject of your research?**

**Eleonora:** I came to Belgium by chance and I must say that Brussels has been a surprising and positive discovery. In general I really like the moment that you arrive in a new city and you have the purest and freshest vision on it. The first thing to do in a new city or country is to get lost.

When I first arrived in the Brussels, I decided to walk around randomly. When I reached Arts-Loi it seemed remarkable that the streets there had not been designed for pedestrians at all. I then went to Schuman and looked at the Berlaymont building, not knowing where to walk or where to cross the street. It occurred to me that it was a place that had to be seen from a point of view other than that of a pedestrian. The idea that the best perspective on a building is that from above, or as seen by search engines such as Google maps, is an increasingly common characteristic of architecture. The forms of important buildings, such as the European Commission building, become a sort of symbolic image, strategically shaped to look recognizable from this point of view, which in turn creates a new aesthetic. The fact that nowadays we have the opportunity to find 'live' broadcast images on the internet of almost any city on earth (I'm thinking for example of earthTV.com, with its eloquent subtitle "explore the world!"), surely influences our way of looking at and perceiving the city in reality.

But whereas on one hand you can watch these images from this 'safe' and wide perspective simply by staying at home, on the other you are always potentially being surveilled by cameras when you walk around the city. Taking the example of Bentham's Panopticon structure – in the first case it is a bit like standing at the central, hidden position of the guard, where you can see everything from your high viewpoint, while in the second case you are in the exposed position of the prisoner, where you can always be watched. The difference in our case here is that everybody is accustomed to moving from one position to another. The first time I walked around in this neighbourhood was on a Sunday.

Everything was closed and almost deserted, and I could only just imagine the presence of humans because the lights were on in some offices. The surveillance cameras, the reflective glass windows and the wire fences along the pavements (they often circumscribe the European Summit area) reminded me of a military base. My interest in this area sprang up around that time, but I really started my research when I moved here. I started to look into the history of the area, met some of the inhabitants and took part in some commune meetings, trying to define a narrative identity derived from the interaction between the relationships of people and the place.

The focus of my concern developed very much in relation to my life here. In general when you undertake research about one place, your everyday life has a large effect on the research itself. You begin to notice how your practice changes according to your movements, and how the impressions of the place alter in relation to the people you know and to the information you gather. In relational art you are in direct contact with the people you are talking about. If your research subject is strictly connected to your daily life, as in my case, it becomes even more important to think about the necessary distance between yourself and 'the other'. To be able to do this, you have to define an authorial position, a formal and conceptual construction that allows you to build the narrative projection of yourself upon the other. It doesn't mean that this position is of a static nature (on the contrary it continuously moves into the space and the experience), but it involves a necessary awareness of your own position.

**ES: The project that you worked on during the residency at Bains Connective is not just about the present state of the European District, but also about the past. How did you make a connection to the past and what was your motivation in going back to it?**

**Eleonora:** The historical research was the starting point in defining the identity of the place. At the beginning I had the feeling that most of the people living in the European District were people from all over the world, working for the European institutions, living here just for short periods of time and not really caring about the liveability of this temporary living solution. Perhaps this is true to some extent, but I also met a lot of people who have been living here a long time, people who are really involved with district life. They meet and keep themselves up to date about buildings that are going to be sold or that are going to disappear. They organise protests when necessary and actually try to live with the presence of this 'European monster' that has changed everything. The most interesting thing to do was to talk with people that had lived there for a long time. Thanks to them I found out, for example, that a lot of artists used to live here before the European buildings were constructed, but were forced to leave their studios because their space was needed. I was getting involved in the meetings of the community as an artist, but also as an inhabitant, and I started to reflect on how my position was changing according to these different identities. At one point I felt the need to take a certain distance and redefine a formal structure in my research.

**ES: How did you communicate with the people you met and how did you explain the project to them?**

**Eleonora:** It was a hard job. When you ring someone's bell you don't have the opportunity to use positive body language. You have only a short space of time in which to convince people to let you into their home, their private, intimate space (the only space that you can't see on Google Maps!), so you have to be prepared with the right things to say. This was an interesting part of the practice, this limit makes me think a lot about my own role in the research in terms of language and so the first step of this process was a lot about myself and the way I project myself to others. After my first 'encounters' I quickly understood the importance of approaching people in their native language in order to communicate with them more easily. In the relatively small range of people I met by knocking on their doors, I discovered a large variety of cultures, most of which were from outside Belgium. I often switched from French to English, but I also used Italian and German. I introduced myself as an artist and immediately talked about the local interest of my subject, introducing myself as a neighbour as well. I asked them for the permission to film my balcony from their window, and to do the same themselves with their own cameras and send the video to me. This formal request was a way of meeting them and having a testimony of it. There was a specific reason for approaching people and getting them actively involved. Involving them in the specific act of filming was also a way of making them look at their neighbourhood in a different manner, and a way of creating a new interest and a new community identity.

This involvement with people obviously burdens you with some responsibilities. As a sort of cultural mediator, I was obliged to live up to their expectations. I find this open way of proceeding very interesting and fruitful, it is a sort of horizontal exchange. It forced me to be perceptive, and continuously re-adapt my position in relation to people's reactions. Entering homes and meeting people was fascinating — all the stories I had created in my mind were completely distorted. In general I found that almost everybody was enthusiastic about participating in the project.

**ES: Did the process of researching help you formulate a plan during the residency, or did you have a plan of the formal structure of the project beforehand?**

**Eleonora:** The residency motivated me to find a formal structure, to allow myself to present my work to others and to push myself to experiment with various methods of documentation. I created a frame of space using my daily observation point. A lot of windows from neighbouring buildings face the upstairs balcony of my house in the European district. Since the day that I moved there, I've looked at the windows of these buildings, sitting on the balcony, inventing stories and imagining who lives there. I wanted to overturn my preconceptions and meet the people whose windows I used to watch. First of all I singled out windows that for a particular reason caught my eye. Then I tried to find out the corresponding addresses by ascertaining the position of the houses on the street, connecting them to the back windows. I used Google maps, started to make sketches and maps, and take photos.

This made me think again about the spatiality of the area that I already knew quite well, and in this way I changed the dynamics of my daily routine. Focusing on this area, I noticed that in contrast to the surrounding impersonal European buildings, the houses were quite varied in their appearance and revealed information about the people living inside. For example, while I was walking around in the neighbourhood, one particular thing caught my attention: the windows on the ground floor of the houses are often decorated, almost like shop windows, with plants, little messages and all sorts of other things. It's a language in its own right, a way of communicating or expressing oneself.

**ES: How did you present your research at the end of the residency?**

**Eleonora:** I showed an audio-visual installation at Bains Connectives during the final presentation. I projected the videos of the different views of my balcony (taken from the neighbours' houses that I had visited) on different screens and used the space of the theatre backstage to recreate the spatiality of my neighbourhood, preserving the same spatial relationship between the windows and my balcony in order to arrange the screens with the corresponding viewpoint. Each screen had a different voice – after every meeting I wrote down a descriptive text, noting some particular sentences that I found revealing and which I wanted to reproduce through different voices. I found it interesting to use the small, dark space of the theatre to recreate a sort of intimate, cosy place. Entering the space and being surrounded by various bizarre objects belonging to the theatre and to unknown people, gave me the feeling that I was in the position of a voyeur, similar to the one that I felt observing people at their windows.

I decided to leave all those objects in the space as they were and made them part of the installation. In the meantime, I presented the texts describing the encounters, and the collection of sketches that I produced to map the area surrounding my balcony and showing the location of the neighbouring houses.

**ES: How do you relate your presentation at Bains Connective to what you want to do with the project in the future? How do you want to continue from here?**

**Eleonora:** The installation I showed was an elaborated documentation of the actual state of my project, which is still a work in progress. At that moment it was important for me to talk about my research and to have the reaction of an audience. In general, however, I think that the intrinsic particularity and interest of the project lies in the interaction between other people and myself. The project is therefore constantly in progress and can be translated into many different sets of 'artistic results' during this open process. For example, I'm now organising a music event on the balcony, where people in the neighbourhood will be invited to participate as audience, simply by opening their own windows. I will ask them to document the event by filming it and sending me the video afterwards. This is a way of creating unusual situations and new interactions between people in the neighbourhood, while at the same time promoting the musicians who will perform. I see this project as a continuous development of models of possible universes. I want to search for ways and suggestions for living in the world with more awareness and creativity.

# Agency (BE)

Agency is the name of a Brussels-based initiative that was founded in 1992 by Kobe Matthys.

**Esther Severi: What was the reason for Agency joining the *Micro Histories* residency at Bains Connective and how did the idea of participating arise in the first place? How would you place Agency's activity within the context of the final presentation?**

**Agency:** We received an invitation from Lilia Mestre, the artistic co-ordinator of Bains Connective. Agency usually intervenes in a site-specific way, starting from a situation – not so much in the sense of a physical building and its architectural features, but more in terms of environment or milieu. Each artistic organisation has a certain sphere of interest that is connected to specific art practices it nurtures or relates to. Because of the past activities of Bains Connective, Agency chose to work on the question of improvisation. Agency has been doing a lot of research on minority art practices that are not very compatible with the criteria of intellectual property. Improvisation is difficult to combine with copyright's fixation requirements, because of course fixation is not really possible in this context. Although improvisation exists in many different art practices, we chose to work around improvisation in comedy, which is itself a minority practice.

After the meetings I had with Lilia Mestre (who incidentally is a talented clown herself) we decided to do something on improvisations by clowns.

Agency chose to focus on the controversial *Thing 001504 (Magician's Coat Sequence)*. It concerns a conflict between Harold Lloyd and Clyde Bruckman about a slapstick gag in Bruckman's film *So's Your Uncle* called *Magician's Coat Sequence*. Harold Lloyd did a similar gag in the film *Movie Crazy*. During the court case *Harold Lloyd Corporation v. Universal Pictures Corporation* on May 12 1947 at the Circuit Court of Appeals, Judge Stephens had to decide if the *Magician's Coat Sequence* was a mere common slapstick gag, comic accretion, comedy routine and stage business rather than an original dramatic composition of the film entitled to copyright protection as a work of art. Each residency allows Agency to research one or more cases. We decided to create a meeting between this one 'thing' and how it relates to local practitioners. Our meeting with the clown Carina Bonan was particularly important.

**ES: Do you see a difference between carrying out artistic research and being an artist? Of course the two go together in most cases, but is artistic research something that can also be separated from 'making'?**

**Agency:** We consider art as a practice rather than a vocation. There are many different artistic practices, each of which is built on a plurality or combination of other practices, including non-artistic practices.

It is therefore very difficult to outline a particular practice. It is clear that to a greater or lesser extent, research always takes place within artistic practice in many different ways, without reference to scientific practices. Artistic and scientific practices differ very much according to which elements one pays attention to and those that are temporarily put between brackets.

**ES: It's often one of the first questions that the participants of a residency are asked: What is your practice and how do you formulate or talk about what you do? The idea of practice is very much present in contemporary artistic discourse. This is perhaps especially true in places that gather people together in the name of artistic research. In contrast to the idea of research, it is important to go back to the idea of, or even the word literally, practice.**

**Agency:** We don't want to position theory and practice as opposites – the making of theory is also a practice. In philosophy for example, you fabricate concepts and that is also a singular practice. The diversity of practices is important.

**ES: Yes, but formulating a concept is not the same as theoretical research. This kind of research is, I think, still based on 'chasing the truth' and finding ways of formulating it within contemporary reality. Developing a concept is more a way of creatively interpreting the truth. This is also visible in the course of the residency, first there is the collection of material and at the end of the residency the presentation of the material in a very subjective, interpretative frame.**

**Following this idea, how would you describe the practice of Agency?**

**Agency:** The practice of Agency is based on constituting a list of things. The modern concept of intellectual property relies fundamentally upon the assumption of a division between the ontological categories of 'nature' and 'culture'. An artist is supposed to start from nothing 'ex nihilo'. The definition of nature and culture takes place at the same time – when you classify something as culture, the 'rest' becomes nature or the other way around. Nature becomes this nothingness or simply the available material, which is inert and waiting around, until it gets transformed by the 'genius' of the artist into culture. However, for many art practices, such a bifurcation or split is difficult to make. Agency constitutes a growing list of things that resist this splitting. These things are derived from juridical processes, lawsuits, cases, controversies, affairs and so forth connected to the idea of intellectual property and therefore copyright, patents, and trademarks. A 'thing' is a specific word we chose for something that offers resistance in terms of these classifications. Agency calls 'things' forth from its list via varying assemblies inside exhibitions, performances and publications. Every assembly poses a different speculative question. The series of assemblies explores, in a topological way, the operative consequences of the apparatus of intellectual property for an ecology of art practices.

**ES: You select moments that are crucial in the sense that they are the beginning of a conflict and one that perhaps cannot be solved.**

**Agency:** What interests us about jurisprudence is not so much the 'juris' or judgement, but more the 'prudence' or the hesitation. During this moment of hesitation the split between nature and culture has yet to be made.

This is a moment before certain doors get closed. When this moment of hesitation is revisited in a speculative way, one can get a sense of how it could have been different. What if these doors hadn't been closed?

**ES: How are nature and culture placed opposite each other in the case of the Magician's Coat Sequence?**

**Agency:** It's very rare that a judge discusses general concepts of nature and culture in a direct way during an intellectual property court case. For the protection of an artwork, copyright requires that the work is 'original' or originates from an author. Another requirement is that a work has to be created within a 'tangible medium of expression', so for art practices involving improvisation there is a problem with fixation. The division that judges will use is this particular case is that between something that is 'in process' and something that has been fixed. Things that are in process are regarded as belonging to nature and tangible expressions are regarded as belonging to culture. This separation also has consequence for the ecology or art practices. Copyright can't deal with art practices without fixation, such as a jazz improvisation, which is different every time it is played.

**ES: There is of course the idea of style, or collage. Improvisation is, in a way, a montage/collage of your own repertoire. It's a way of dealing with and presenting the things you know, and interpreting what you know and see around you.**

**Agency:** Clowns play with the situation at hand. There are of course gags that are fixed to some extent, or that you can register perfectly, but the improvisational aspects stay under the radar of copyright protection. Often elements such as the timing, the interaction with people that are present, and the response to a situation play an important role for a clown.

**ES: At the same time there is a method behind it that we as audience recognize – we recognize the practice as that of a clown, we recognize the image and the behaviour. Improvisation is in this way a very fragile thing.**

**Agency:** In the *Magician's Coat Sequence* the clown gag is connected to the role of the traditional magician's practice, and how that can go wrong. There is a long history of gags that are based on magic acts going wrong. The interesting thing about this controversy is that it is situated at the beginning of film history. At that time many clowns started to film themselves and this genre of film is called slapstick. In slapstick, clowns improvise around one certain character throughout the film and this all gets fixed on film. Later more and more slapstick films became scripted, and the figure of the clown who is a constant figure throughout the entire film, eventually disappeared. The man who was actually involved in the conflict, Clyde Bruckman, was first a gag director who assisted clowns who were filming themselves. Later Bruckman became unemployed as a gag director as a consequence of the arrival of sound in film. He then started writing gags and routines into scripts for sound films, often redoing scenes from his silent movies. Bruckman rewrote the *Magician's Coat Sequence,* which he had directed before in Harold Lloyd's *Movie Crazy,* for *So's Your Uncle.*

**ES: Is the actual problem in this case that the gag is far too present as a gag, which in turn makes it too recognizable? If the gag had been more integrated into the film it would not have been a question of copyright.**

**Agency:** In this instance of the court case the gag is approached as a film rather than as a recording of a clown act. The judges looked at the images of both films and the way these films were made with regards to factors such as editing and camera angles. Clyde Bruckman in his defence, referred to the clown gag itself and asked how it could be that a gag with a long history before it appeared on film, can be protected within a film, without the history of the gag being taken into account. He looked beyond the film and in this way he addressed the problem of fixation of the clown gag as a performance. Copyright treats one practice like another and as a result this has led to a standardisation of art practices that simply ignores things that do not fulfil certain criteria. The risk is that the intellectual property regime redefines certain art practices through its standardisation.

**ES: In which way is an artist who works with improvisation concerned with questions of copyright?**

**Agency:** That depends on the person and his practice since each practice has its own specific way of 'doing'. As with animals and their habitats, one can talk about the biotope of a practice. If one endangers these ways of doing or destroys its biotope, then this practice will no longer survive. One can try to preserve an animal species or an artistic practice, but without restoring its biotope it will have little chance of survival. Academia has already caused a lot of damage to the diversity of art practices, as has the kind of standardization developed by the intellectual property regime.

**ES: But an artist and his biotope are things, which in themselves are always changing and adapting in relationship to society, technology and the economy. Improvisation is very up to date with these changes, and the recognizable aspects of the improvisation are sometimes more defined in terms of style or atmosphere than connected to the specific character of the artist.**

**Agency:** Sure, everything changes all the time, but because it changes it also means that things can go wrong. On the 4th of January 1955, Clyde Bruckman, broke and depressed, borrowed Buster Keaton's gun and shot himself in a Santa Monica restaurant. If copyright applies the requirements of fixation to clown gags, it might destroy this practice at the point where it is applied. Clown improvisations can of course survive in other ways outside the intellectual property regime. That is exactly why it is interesting to look at such practices.

**ES: There is a lot of activity around the fixation of improvisation. Improvisation is often a means of arriving at a structure or material, which is then fixed in a choreography or score. There is also the contrast between something that is fixed and something that is not fixed within one work. I think it is interesting to put both improvisation and the idea of freedom connected to it into perspective.**

**Agency:** Freedom is relative. The role of the clown is so specifically dependant on certain parameters that it can only exist within these parameters. This has to do with the genesis of the clown's practice. We had a lot of conversations about the ecology of the practice of comedy and clowns in a more specific way with an actual clown, Carina Bonan. How does this practice function and what are its fragilities?

The clown originated in the circus, where he acted as the assistant who swept up the shit in between performances with animals. Then this circus assistant started to improvise, tripping over things, and so on, during these intermissions. We learned from Carina Bonan how the idea of the clown is born out of a kind of service activity, and that typical clown jokes are derived from the idea of something possibly going wrong in relation to a job or task the clown is supposed to do. So the clown is free to improvise but at the same time the parameters for his mode of existence are very fragile. There is in that sense an immediate relationship to a certain environment and the clown's practice isn't possible if his environment is not there. Carina Bonan spent a lot of time during her youth on a square in front of Centre Pompidou in Paris with improvising clowns. She told us that she went there every day, studying situations in which she could improvise.

**ES: When Agency presents a 'thing', how do you see your role in it? Is it a performance?**

**Agency:** We call these presentations assemblies. An assembly can be a gathering of humans as well as non-humans. An assembly takes place around a 'thing', in other words around a problem and the public matter that caused the problem. Agency's role during an assembly is to 're-invoke' the thing in question. 'Invocations' depend on the nature of that thing. In that sense Agency's activity is not related to a specific medium. For example when it concerns a film, we try to invoke the film in question, and when it concerns a dance we try to invoke the dance in question. These things bring about hesitations, and by revisiting the moment of hesitation during the case the hesitation is prolonged. The aim of these assemblies is to bring about hesitation and the role Agency plays is more that of the host and organizer of the assembly.

Some call these assemblies as such performances. Of course you can describe them in this way and there might indeed be some performative aspects to these assemblies. In order to revisit the hesitation during a case, we mostly base our research on the reports of the judge. This is a written report of an oral judgement that we reverse again into an oral speculative situation.

However, during an assembly we try not to fall back on pre-established formats such as debates, discussions, talk shows or performances. The closest resemblance to an existing format might be the African palaver, which is a very ritualized gathering. A palaver is called to deal with a problem, and only the people concerned can take part. A palaver also has an aspect of healing or treatment to it. A palaver treats a victim. The court case as we know it in the west, is more about the punishment of a criminal.

**ES: Is a palaver a cross between justice and psychotherapy?**

**Agency:** Yes you could see it like this. In a certain way a palaver might be an ancestor of the court case but it is also like a doctor's visit. It concerns even more ecologies, for example the socio-political one.

**ES: The way the justice system works here is also to produce examples of what you can and can't do as a person in this society.**

**Agency:** During a court case judges refer to the law, and to other cases and how the law was applied on those particular occasions. These are the so-called precedents. During a palaver sages invoke fables and proverbs, which are something quite different.

A certain event that has happened in the past can potentially become fabulated. These fables could be called upon inside a palaver. In comparison to court cases, palavers stay close to experience.

**ES: Are the assemblies always situated in an artistic context?**

**Agency:** The assemblies convened by Agency concern artistic problems. These are problems we stumble upon during the course of our artistic practice. Agency's foundation is based upon the encounter with interference from copyright law while being inside an artistic practice. There has been very little discussion on this interference by intellectual property law within artistic practices. Intellectual property was mostly thought of as a problem external to art. Within the heritage of conceptual art there were and still are many artists experimenting with instructions. The resulting artworks are almost secondary to the experimentation. Agency declares the authorship and intellectual property law to be a kind of set of instructions and an improvisation protocol.

**ES: The idea of the micro-history and the connotation of an anthropological approach connected to it means for Agency going to a certain place and time (as in this example a moment in cinema connected to the issue of copyright). Do you consider it to be something anthropological?**

**Agency:** What interests us is that anthropologists consider everything to be cultural and ethnologists look upon everything as nature. The anthropologist and the ethnologist both look at the environment as a whole without splitting it into two. We try to approach something like the *Magician's Coat Sequence* from both points of views. It might be more like a 'meso' or a point of view from the middle.

**ES: How did the *Magician's Coat Sequence* as a species behave at the moment of the presentation?**

**Agency:** A 'thing' is always singular and so is its invocation inside an assembly. It is interesting to see how every 'thing' resonates when invoked. For various practices this thing will resonate differently within an assembly. We enjoyed the presence of the dramatist, the filmmaker and the clowns very much. In particular, the presence of the clown during the assembly made us think. When we started preparing the assembly we wanted to confront live clowns with the *Magician's Coat Sequence* and we were wondering how to have a clown take part and discuss this film in the context of an assembly. We invited Carina Bonan to be present as a clown but she then explained there were some problems with our invitation. A person inside the role of a clown doesn't really talk and is always supposed to undertake another activity that invariably goes wrong. So you can't invite a clown to just be a clown. In the end, there were two clowns present at the assembly — one clown Alexandre Aflalo, who came in his role as a clown, and another clown, Carina Bonan, who was not inside her role as a clown. She could talk because she was off duty as a clown. The 'on duty' clown pretended to be a member of the audience. He entered late and interrupted the assembly in different ways. The organisation of this assembly forced us to become aware of the ecology of the clown, and what makes his practice possible.

The actual clown gag, which was presented during the assembly, was visible through the showing of the two films. In the first slapstick film there is still a kind of fixation of a clown gag, but in the second film the gag has been woven into the narrative. What happened is that the improvisational aspect of the clown act faded. By confronting the film footage with an actual improvising clown present in the assembly, this became more than obvious. The problem that was being addressed was present within this assembly through the interactions of the clown that took place. The problems that were at play in the case were also at play in the assembly.

**ES: The way the clown was present was certainly much more connected to its origin in the circus. He does not continuously demand attention, which makes the audience look at him in a fragmented way: we turn our heads to him, back to the speaker, back to him and so on. On the other hand, film captures your attention all the time and the clown or the gag is constantly in the picture.**

**Agency:** Carina Bonan told us that a clown who doesn't receive attention dies. We wanted an assembly with a clown present. As a consequence the solution we found was that he would walk in and out from time to time. After his first entrance, we got more used to him and he was gradually acknowledged by the people that were present and given less attention. We never experienced an assembly where there were so many disturbances — it gave it a very different character.

*Bains Connective was founded in 1997 in Vorst/
Forest (Brussels) as an artistic laboratory
that offers residencies in the fields of dance,
performance, music and visual arts.*

*Professional artists can apply for a residency
no matter what their experience, age, discipline
or culture is. BC tries to create an open atmosphere
where dialogue, experiment and exchange
are essential for cross-disciplinary research.*

*Since 2007 BC has been organizing Thematics,
a two-month residency program based around
a given theme that brings together artists, theorists
and organizations in order to share, participate
and create critical responses and alternative
forms to the existing models of art production.*

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