BAINS CONNECTIVE

-18/+65
Politics of the An-aged

-18/+65 Politics of the An-aged worked directly in relationship with the local community and focused on hospitality and encounter as producers of meaning.

It merged artistic practice within the community centre Ten Weyngaert in Vorst /Forest and its immediate surroundings in order to unfold the complexity of the relational in this singular context.

Dialogical approaches to institutional, private and social desires were proposed.

Conversations with Marthe Van Dessel, Wendy Van Wynsberghe, Adrian Fisher & Luna Montenegro/mmmmm

Thematics

-18/+65
Politics of the An-aged

Thematics Residency
-18/+65
Politics of the An-aged
Introduction by Lilia Mestre

As the curator of an artistic workspace that offers physical space in which artists can develop their work in a protective, cocooned environment I believe it's relevant to think about how our presence and practice affects the immediate surroundings of BC. How do I as a person, the artists in residence, and the organization as a whole view the relationship with the 'outside', and are we willing to develop more out of it? Should more singular paths be developed? Should they be critical, hopeful, potentializing? What things should we be careful about?

Because BC moved from the swimming pool in Rue Berthelotstraat in Vorst/Forest to a building shared with a community centre in the same municipality, questioning our location and local context became very significant. The urban space and social life surrounding us are in fact very different. Needless to say, this raises a lot of issues to reflect on in terms of institutional identity, since it confronts the people involved in BC with new challenges and possibilities that resolutely ask for all kinds of try-outs and micro-interventions.

The fact that BC is located inside a community centre like the GC Ten Weyngaert, brought to the fore the desire to put the work context into perspective. How are these places organized? What is their function within the social sphere? Who is their public and how do they interact with the community?

As we were studying this topic from the outside, it became apparent that the treatment of two age groups in particular brought into question how the social is structured and how community centres try to organise activities in order to fill free-time. – *18/ + 65 Politics of the An-Aged* attempted to open up a possible collaboration with the centre to bring these questions to the fore, to bring artistic practice into this context and find a critical and poetic approach to a difficult subject.

The collaboration with the community centre was not extensive but rather pragmatic. Not very much emerged from the institutions, which of course have the responsibility of tackling these questions. I have to mention though, the generous participation of Hugo Boutsen, a member of the staff at the centre. At the beginning of the residency he helped us greatly through his knowledge of and interest in the community, and the history of such cultural environments.

In general I am concerned by the participative art practices and community art projects popping up locally and internationally – a lot of them espousing nomadic trajectories, involving a plurality of very local contexts. I like work that goes further than the relational turn that Bourriaud described, that investigates the darker side of participatory interventions critically, in spaces that are not artistic per se.

I was interested in generating a collective of artists to delve further into what participatory and locally rooted art practices mean in a period that is recycling the ideas and attitudes experimented with in the 60s, 70s and later on. Emancipatory attitudes and strategies are now revisited in order to develop experience-based knowledge forms rooted in the hyper-local, or to unleash the potential of creation that a shared moment can offer. I receive a lot of applications that testify to a desire to touch a broader context than art alone. There is a huge necessity right now to go out and take the difficulties into account. Art proposes forms, renders questions visible, but never gives answers.

This Thematics wanted to offer a playground for encounter and shared practices between artists and people willing to get involved, to allow for polyphonic expression on societal, political and aesthetic issues.

Thematics Residency
-18/+65
Politics of the An-aged
Reflections by Coralie Stalberg

The spatial and temporal unity constituted by the two-month residency in the new surroundings of Bains Connective was dedicated to art-based research on the generational zones of the under 18s and over 65s. Formulating a 'Politics of the An-aged' has emerged as a challenging issue for the art field, not only amongst the artists themselves, but also within artistic laboratories and institutions.

In tackling this theme we can observe how change is envisioned in society, acknowledging that since the sixties youngsters have been identified as the major age group bearing the transformative forces capable of realizing collective breakthroughs towards more progressive values. It is interesting to see today if we can identify something like a generational locus endowed with the potential to question and rethink the distribution of forces in society, and in which regard the older generation can propose critical transformative approaches that might be otherwise overlooked. What emerges as a central concern within all this, is how change relates to the issue of transmission, namely what and in which ways do we actually inherit from the generations that precede us. It is therefore of fundamental importance to investigate the emancipatory advances of the past that have been forgotten by the mainstream memory, and that could prove inspiring for our contemporary realities.

The way in which these generations communicate with each other is of central importance. Because of the evident polarities separating the social and affective realities of the under 18s and the over 65s, finding commonalities amongst them related to their exteriority with regard to the productive phase of life, is a great challenge. We believe that the artist could play an important role in creating spaces where youngsters and the elderly might encounter one another and grow towards common concerns and shared dreams. The artist's task becomes the search for ways of building alliances between older and younger generations through very local dynamics, and a scrutiny of how these contexts allow for new political subjectivities to emerge.

Artistic work investigating age groups must take as its starting point a critical reflection on the divergent meanings and contents related to 'generations' in order to explore the different ways in which 'generations' are actually enacted and negotiated in plural and contradictory contexts.

Indeed, promising co-created knowledges and practices can blossom at the interface between art-based research and generational ethnographies, since both practices share a micro-level approach, relying on the participant-observation methodology.

The artist and the ethnographer both commit to fieldwork as a discursive practice that is open to a sensory and textured experience, as they engage in the co-construction of affective zones in the communities they work with. They set up relational dramaturgies for singular collectivities, and experiment with the production of negotiated and co-constructed strategies and practices for knowledge production.

Participatory art practices entail the necessity of genuine commitment both towards and from collectivities that are approached as unique entities. This leads us to an ethical questioning of the aesthetic proposal, critically reflected upon from several perspectives since we envision a dynamic approach to ethics, a co-construction among a plurality of actors with different logics, which are sometimes overlapping, sometimes contradictory. I view the ethics of the artist in the perspective of a poetics of the encounter, rooted in the experience of what Levinas calls the "l'épiphanie du visage". In approaching the other, one should open oneself up to what Levinas understands by "le visage", namely *"La manière dont se présente l'Autre, dépassant l'idée de l'Autre en moi"* (*"The way in which the Other presents himself, goes beyond the idea of the Other in me"*).

This ethical reflection also encompasses a critique of the aesthetic forms that are proposed and developed. Because the layered and textured relationships that are experienced through the collective process will constitute the very material from which an art work will emerge, reflecting on the ethics of the artistic medium one uses, and on the artistic tools and forms that are used to translate a lived experience into an aesthetic one must be an integral part of the artistic process. Essential questions have to be addressed, such as how to represent the Other while leaving his singularity untouched, and how to formulate an artistic interpretation of the real without losing its inherent complexity.

Last but not least I would also like to mention the importance of the ethics of the curators and institutions that offer contexts for this kind of work. This relates to promises of a dramaturgy of the local, investigating the protocols of curatorial logic in the frameworks of an ethics of the encounter with both the artists, and the publics it wishes to get involved with.

The diversity of positions, logics and desires at stake in a collaborative project points towards the need for an 'ethics in becoming', a fluid ethics adapting to ever changing relational contexts, that asks for an engagement in open-ended dialogue and continuous processes of negotiation. It also suggests the necessity of exposing one's fragility and vulnerability through the participatory practice, allowing oneself to be affected by the radical alterity of the Other.

Marthe Van Dessel

Marthe Van Dessel has a pluridisciplinary background in political/social sciences and graphic design. Her artistic practice has developed around the borders of art, design, community and social participation, and explores their intersections. Cyber-feminism and Open Source are philosophies she feels deeply connected to. Marthe is the founder of bolwerK, "a non-exclusive, temporary constellation that initiates, mediates and facilitates projects, abducing thought and reflection on relevant issues". She was invited to join the Thematics research platform – 18 /+ 65 Politics of the An-aged in order to share her critical thoughts, practice and experiences on the creation of social frameworks.

Coralie Stalberg: Since you come from a graphic design and computing background, I was wondering what your view is on networking as a way of generating connective dynamics that could potentially establish collectivities? Does this term describe how you operate within the framework of bolwerK?

Marthe Van Dessel: I know that people sometimes like to say that what I do at bolwerK is constructed around the dynamic of networking. I would like to correct this way of understanding my work: what I do is to search for people that intrigue me, and to engage in subjective alliances with them.

In the eighties and nineties people were highly critical of nepotism in politics, and practices giving family relatives access to employment opportunities. Now the emergence of the network has created a tremendous shift, blurring the very understanding of the notion of 'family'. What the network does is to make links visible and it is in this regard that it interests me.

CS: I find this search for people that intrigue you, and the desire to engage in subjective alliances very interesting. Can you tell me more about it?

MVD: My aim when engaging with the people I want to work with, is to create a social body that constitutes a communality. This is a kind of process that seeks to establish a common ground similar to that of electricity: a connection to the earth, a return path for electrical current.

An excessive individualism created a historical deficit in our knowledge of how to relate to the other(s). For twelve years now at bolwerK, I have been committed to bringing people together, although this has not always been an aim in itself. What I'm searching for is a kind of 'being present for each other', a 'being with' through gathering people together.

In your question on networking you used the term 'collectivity', which is a notion that I find problematic both personally and within my practice. 'Collectivity' is a term I want to distance myself from, in favour of the notion of 'communality'. 'Collectivity' implies a process of consensus, compromise or hierarchy. It is founded on the constitution of a shared vision, identity and strategy. I find the loss of the individual singularity that this stance demands critical.

For me it is about working together around a common question that allows the answer to be personal and articulated as a single voice within a multiplicity.

I am not interested in initiating or activating processes of streamlining. I want to refer to Hannah Arendt, and her critique on the control and regulation that this position produces, and how it disrupts everybody's individual initiative and actions.

When I look back on my residency in Bains Connective, the moment that I moved closest to establishing a temporary communality was during a workshop I organized at le Chien Perdu, an artistic workspace in the neighbourhood of BC. I enrolled myself in a class that was already being offered at that space, namely a course in singing Dutch polyphony for people learning the language. I decided to invite people below 18 or over 65 years old to participate in this workshop for free. Among other things, I posted an advert on "Seniorennet", a website for pensioners. Singing together was a beautiful way to get to know each other. The metaphor of polyphony is a precious one to me, in the way that it embodies what 'being together' is about. Producing polyphony with our singular voices and bodies was a very meaningful and touching way of creating a form of temporary communality. I suggested presenting one of our sessions in public during Plankton Bar #39, and the participants responded with genuine enthusiasm. The issue for me became how I could show this temporarily constituted communality to the outside, how to find a relevant form. I came to the decision to include an interactive moment during the second part of the presentation. The public was invited to participate with their voices and bodies in the performance of a piece of polyphony. In this manner we expanded our communality into a temporarily constituted social body interweaving our singular voices.

CS: Taking into account your desire to create communality with people you don't want to streamline, the task of the Thematics to work with specific generational groups must have been a difficult one for you. I see a strong contradiction between the ethics of your approach and the classification of people according to their age. Can you comment on this?

MVD: I do indeed position myself completely outside any form of categorical thinking. I would first like to address one of the central questions of this residency, namely can we consider that the 'an-aged' are endowed with a power of resistance? I want to express a kind of unease I have towards this kind of postulate. Underlying the idea that there are age groups in which we can identify some practices of opposition or latent forms of resistance, there is the identification of these people as a resource or group. The potential for emancipation is appropriated and capitalized by neoliberal rationale, and the question is how we as engaged artists position ourselves in this regard. For example, in what ways does working within the framework of state-subsidized institutions affect the politics of our participatory projects? What is also problematic, is how we behave when we are looking for age categories, and how this affects our relationship to the people we engage with in the context of our projects, and even on a personal level.

I started to work on the relationship to the 'animal' as a consequence of my decision to firmly position myself beyond categorical devices. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* by post-modern feminist Donna Haraway was a major inspiration. In this intriguing work, Haraway explores the stories of interaction between humans and dogs. According to Haraway, a mode of being together that dissolves and transcends categories unfolds in our historical companionship with the dog.

Haraway deciphers in dog / man inter-action an ontological choreography of partial connections, situations of constant becoming. Her concept of 'differential sensibility' speaks to me a lot since it is about being constantly on the alert for the 'being-different' within the relationship.

I feel very concerned by the ethical challenge posed by the 'significant otherness' in my practice. How can I approach the other in his irreducible singularity?

So instead of questioning the age groups, my research topic became a more singular one: how do you approach somebody in a more instinctive way that disrupts all kinds of preconceived categories? It seemed relevant to explore through an artistic practice what it's like to approach someone else when you are with an animal. What I did in practice was to create a little flyer that I sent out around the neighbourhood, offering to take people's dogs out for a walk. A direct way for me of relating and integrating Haraway's *Manifesto* was to develop a practice that has its starting point in the *Axenroos* devised by the Belgian philosopher and psychologist Ferdinand Cuvelier. The *Axenroos* is a practice-based analytical tool that can be used to observe one's own behaviour critically through identification with animal species, and to evaluate the effect our way of being has on other people. This inspired me to develop *Instinctorium*, a work I presented during Plankton Bar #40. I asked the public to choose one

animal they felt related to, and that they could become using all kinds of props that I left at their disposal. I also helped them choose their animal and we would get into free and spontaneous conversations within a convivial atmosphere. I experienced a sense of beauty when I watched the people becoming the animals of their choice.

CS: In addition to the polyphonic practice in le Chien Perdu, and *Instinctorium*, you explored a lot of other paths during the residency. I would like to know how you experienced the global process of the residency, how you approached the subject, the material and the specific surroundings of Bains Connective.

MVD: I always wonder how one should prepare for a residency in an artistic laboratory. Does one come with a plan, a toolkit or a strategy? A couple of months before the start of the residency I wrote a message to Lilia Mestre with some personal insights. I sketched possible gateways in the Thematics related to the particular localities of Bains Connective in Vorst/Forest and the community centre GC Ten Weyngaert. It seemed to me that time would be a transversal concept and a suitable subject of research — both youngsters and elderly people have time, as do I.

When the residency began and I came to Vorst, I felt like the character Grace from Lars von Trier's *Dogville*. In the movie, a small village experiences how wonderful it is to be hospitable to someone who is but a gift of grace to that community. The artist who engages in social participatory practice embodies this gift, and performs a certain type of generosity in the form of hopes, dreams, change, and in being a voice for the 'others' and the 'self'. The immediate reciprocity is suspended. But what begins in the movie as an idyll of freedom, gift and grace, nonetheless ends catastrophically. Modern community is supposed to be a free society, based upon mutual respect for each other's individual freedom. From the very moment Grace enters and introduces a dynamic of giving without return, she loses her liberty and this

culminates in her becoming the slave of the community. So doesn't the idea of freedom repress a deeper and more problematic level? Isn't it anxiety and violence that take over from the moment we start giving?

In my attempt to find answers, I read Mauss' *Essai sur le don*, and Malinowski's writings on the Kula ring, a ceremonial exchange system he studied in Papua New Guinea. It was interesting to acknowledge what giving could mean in other cultural contexts, and also to contextualize the gift in an economy of giving and its implicit demand of giving back. I went to Derrida, who took the extreme opposite stance, since for him the true gift is the one offered without calculation, without the expectation of a counter-gift. On the other hand we also have Lacan's famous statement "Je te demande de refuser ce que je t'offre".

Immersing myself in theory-based analysis allowed me to gain in criticality. It also led me to constantly re-evaluate how I positioned myself, and this began to trouble my daily practice and experience. I felt like I was somehow being counterproductive.

CS: Indeed, I remember that during our first encounter in BC's workspace, you told me about your feelings of being tied in a knot, but then you described the impressive flow of 'productivity' carried out during this residency! In addition to your philosophical reading, you also delved into the history of participatory art practices to see how a personal position could be realised that was anchored in this tradition. You reflected on the practices of Lygia Clark and Jochen Gertz, but also on movements such as Provo and Mass Moving. You gathered a lot of material about the neighbourhood in Vorst, among other things on Marguerite Bervoets, a member of the resistance executed in 1944 in a Nazi jail. You wondered how you could develop a narrative that would open possible intersections or perhaps confluences between all the paths you took. Finally, the process of making a narrative became an impossibility in itself.

MVD: As a matter of fact, my participation in the Thematics became complicated. As you said, I was overloaded by the experiences and strategies that I was trying to somehow structure. It was almost impossible to find a focus.

Something that externalized my state of confusion was the fact that we decided to have three moments of public presentation during two months of residency. Of course it is valuable to disclose and share our practices immediately but maybe I wasn't ready for it. In a public showing you have to articulate and become more responsible for what you transmit. You produce but sometimes also overproduce your narrative. If you create a public moment while you are still processing, it seems your questions are answered immediately. One of the few moments I didn't feel this pressure was while I was being interviewed — it created a space where the questions became a conversation.

I have to confess that I tend to be oversensitive about this issue because this is something I've been confronted with over the last 12 years, accumulating short-term intervention projects at the end of which an outcome is expected. This generates a lot of inherent tensions, frustrations and contradictions.

What's more, the relationship I was establishing with Bains Connective and GC Ten Weyngaert could only be a transient one given the short duration of the residency. In this regard the writing of Claire Doherty enlightened me a lot. In her critical approach to public art forms, she reflects on factual and short-term interventions in public spaces, and advocates the necessity of working with a durational approach. She encourages artistic and curatorial practices to be committed to long-term and cumulative engagements.

Indeed, short-term interventions can activate things. But in the absence of a long-term perspective, your position become a very conflictual one, and I might ask myself to what extent I am exploiting both the people I work with and myself.

During the residency I decided to talk to my neighbour Lut, a 62-year-old lady, in order to share our views on what a 'locality' is and how both of us related to our neighbourhood. This was a very simple and human conversation and in the end it became the key to all the problems I was struggling with.

My experience at BC motivated me to set up a project with the Cultural Centre of Berchem, where I live. After having acted in what was for me an artificial context in Vorst, I needed to generate a process in my own locality. The practice was about exchanging recipes and food with people living in the surroundings. I couldn't have done anything as legitimate as this in BC: in this case it was my own initiative and not an artificially created one. I was not so critical and distant any more and the project had durability. I am still in contact with my neighbour Lut but not with the people I talked to in Brussels, which is something I really feel uncomfortable about. I am someone who wants to consolidate relationships but unfortunately this leads to unrealistic expectations in the people I'm working with and the simple truth is that I cannot respond to these expectations. Being clear from the very beginning is not a great enough precaution against this risk.

CS: Another difficult point you highlight is that of the inherent tensions brought about by participatory art forms within institutional contexts. Can you tell me more about this?

MVD: Of course there is always an ambiguity concerning participatory practice within an institutional framework, in this case an artistic one situated in the same building as a community centre. Speaking about generations and community art forms in these specific contexts, leads us to address how these themes are part of an instrumentalized discourse produced by cultural institutions, and how these narratives in their turn relate to the rhetoric of policy making and budget approval. The Thematics made these issues discussable and created an open space of reflection.

Speaking about the confrontation between participatory forms of art and political agendas, the case of the Mass Moving movement is a telling example. This Belgian/Dutch collective, active between 1969 and 1976, wanted to take art outside the institutions. By proposing temporary actions and projects 'on the street', they criticized the bourgeois order and raised ecological consciousness. Inviting the public to participate in a playful mode was central to their practices. In spite of the subversiveness of the actions proposed by the collective, Belgian Minister Devillez became interested in their playful proposals to move the 'masses', so he subsidized the movement for a while, but withdrew later on, speaking about a 'misunderstanding'. Seemingly, the model of cultural participation proposed by Mass Moving to the Wallonian Maisons de la Culture didn't fit the political agenda very well. I think it is interesting to look back at such cases in art history, to critically assess the difficulties and possibilities of participatory art projects in state-subsidized institutional contexts. Of course from the moment the free market takes over state intervention policies, marginalized minorities will not be on the neoliberal political agenda anymore.

Wendy Van Wynsberghe

Wendy Van Wynsberghe is a core member of Constant vzw - a non-profit organisation for art and new media, which is highly active in the fields of open source, feminism and alternatives for copyright. In her artistic research and as an activator of participatory projects, Wendy works with electronics, textiles, sound and open hardware, only using free software and working under a free art license.

Coralie Stalberg: Your work explores zones at the crossroads of disciplines such as software design, electronics, textiles and sound art. I am curious about your background, and how your very specific practice grew out of it.

Wendy Van Wynsberghe: My studies in Germanic Languages at the end of the nineties were a real immersion into a language-obsessed environment. I really enjoyed being surrounded by people talking about language all the time, analyzing how people speak, scrutinizing accents and unravelling the use of particular words. I developed a passion for conversational analysis, an example of which is the study of telephone conversations, which are very formatted because of the absence of visual input. Sociolinguistics has also been a major influence on me. I had the opportunity to develop the tools to understand how language functions in a society when I had just moved to Brussels. I took a course that was called "Sociolinguistic Brussels" where I could deepen my understanding of the issues related to the multilingual context of the city. It was very rich and rewarding because it was directly related to what I was experiencing in my daily life. I was also fond of psycholinguistics. This discipline asks essential questions about how language functions in the human brain.
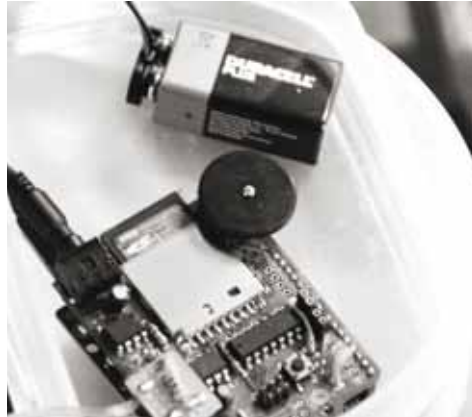
The way in which thinking can only be enacted through language, and how the grid of language in its turn determines a subject's view on the world is fascinating.

It was already clear for me during my studies that I wanted to engage in an artistic practice, but I couldn't connect to a particular discipline. Coming from a non-artistic milieu, I was not aware at that time of the range of existing possibilities.

During an Erasmus program in Liverpool, I enrolled in a radio production course whose target audience was unemployed British people, not Belgian students. This happened because of an initial misunderstanding, but when I received the enrolment form, I decided to fill it in and just go for it! Doing the course had a lot of pleasant consequences, because I learnt a number of skills that allowed me to take a more 'creative' direction. I was always obsessed by music, but I could not play an instrument. Learning about microphones, sequencers, digital audio and computers opened up a lot of doors. From then on I started to make radio creations, composed music as well as working as a DJ.

My decision to come to live in Brussels has also been a determining factor in how my fields of interest evolved. I started to work for Brussels 2000, an initiative that united a lot of cultural events around the theme of the city.

Then Pierre De Jaegher invited me to take part in the cyber-feminist working days at the arts lab Constant. Entering the universe of Constant was a pivotal moment for me and it took me some time before I became aware of everything that was happening there, because it was such a large amount of new information. Now I am part of the organisation, working specifically on projects involving art, media and free licenses. Another initiative I am involved in is Open Hardware, which is about opening up machines and devices that are generally not meant to be opened. Luckily there are people and projects that choose to make the layout and how the machine is made public, thereby opening up a world of possibilities of what can be done with this hardware.

Regarding my personal artistic practice, I started off by making sound installations and composing music, but gradually moved towards incorporating physical computing and objects into this practice. More recently I have also included textile creations and wearables in my work. The intention is to connect physical reality with digital data, and the subjects I choose to unravel are related to social conventions. My research on socially codified interactions started when I set up projects in the context of "Brussel Behoort Ons Toe" (Brussels belongs to us), an organization working with the auditory memories of Brussels.

The two years I spent at BNA/BBOT were very fruitful, since we were accumulated an impressive amount of social data about the inhabitants of Brussels. BNA/BBOT has a very strong participatory element, as it is very effective in bringing people in contact with each other. The organization also stimulates the appropriation of audio recording practices and interview methodology by the heterogeneous publics they are involved with. I am a big fan of 'voice textures' — there is something very physical about them and although

only sound is recorded, a listener can still form an image of what the people who are speaking might be like, by virtue of their intonation, the colours of their voices, and their strengths or fragilities. The imagination of the listener is deeply involved in the process, and this is something very precious to me.

CS: How would you relate your work to the Thematics proposal to reflect critically on participatory art practices devoted to youngsters and/or pensioners?

WVW: I have to confess that the link was more evident to me before the residency than after it. I have always worked a lot with youngsters and technology, and design exercises for children to raise their consciousness about the fact that producing an image is already proposing an interpretation of reality. During my workshops I've come across a lot of youngsters with low self-esteem, who don't believe in themselves or in education. Meeting youngsters who can't even imagine that nice things will ever happen to them is quite alarming. How young people function in the city is also one of my concerns. I am very aware of how I react to them and how they influence the way I function in the city.

Regarding the over 65s, I am seriously worried about the general lack of interest that exists in our society toward this generation, and the lack of consciousness there is about how this age group is going to develop in the near future. Everything revolves around youngsters and being young. If we don't find new ways of relating to this generation, we won't be able to handle this society in the long term. When I was part of "Brussel Behoort Ons Toe", I tried to organize several projects with the older generation. I experienced how difficult it was to gain access to these organizations. Indeed there are a number of platforms for senior citizens and we tried hard to connect to them.

Another thing I tried was proposing a project at an old people's home in the Béguinage called the Pacheco Home, but I had to end it because it was so heavy. The pensioners are sometimes so far away and disconnected to modern life. On the other hand 'active' pensioners are not easy to approach either — because they are active, they are not interested in being perceived as 'elderly'.

CS: Can you tell me more about your research process during your residency?

WVW: The idea of the project I developed was to talk with youngsters and the elderly about how they greet each other, within their own generation and inter-generationally. How do young people say hello to each other, and how do they make this connection when an old person comes into the room?

However, it soon became apparent that speaking on a meta-level about the greeting was much more complicated. It is something so natural and automatic that people are taken by surprise when you try to question them about it. It is so fleeting and transitory that you only have so many things to say. People said things like, "Why are you asking me this question?"

I think such a project is possible, but you would need 6 months to really begin establishing relationships. I was only able to work on a superficial level. Unfortunately GC Ten Weyngaert was closed during the Easter Holidays, so there were no people I could work with during this timeframe.

During the 'Speelweek' (play-week), I had the opportunity to interact with children and youngsters. Some of them said very cute things such as one child who said he greeted his grandmother by giving her thousands and thousands of kisses!!

I also had contact with an old people's home, but it was almost impossible to research my topic there. A lot of the people were quite unwell and had a strong desire to retell certain stories about the past and it was difficult to bring them into the here and now. In the film by mmmmm, the nostalgia of the past was also very apparent, and being interviewed was used as a tool by the elderly to maintain the presence of their past.

I have one regret, the fact that I couldn't carry out my interview at the 'Seniorengym'. I thought that I would have had the chance to meet pensioners there who would be more curious and connected to modern life.

Thanks to Hugo Boutsen who works at GC Ten Weyngaert, I had the opportunity to meet a group of people taking Dutch classes. I hijacked his conversation table for one hour, and it became a very nice exchange. Instead of intergenerational greeting, the focus moved towards intercultural greetings. Nobody was originally from Brussels, so there was a plurality of points of reference that could be compared and put into perspective. For example, somebody from Somalia found it crazy that men and women kiss each other as a greeting. The issue of confusion in the greeting was raised. This became a very nice meta-conversation. I tried as much as possible to have people describe which gesture goes along with which greeting but in the end this remained relatively limited. It was mainly about kissing and shaking hands.

I was also introduced to mothers waiting in the hallway for their children, following a taekwondo course. Most of them were of Moroccan origin.

This also became a five-minute interview wherein different ways of greeting were discussed: the way women greet each other in Arabic culture and regional differences. This led to a very lively debate on 'belgo-belge' and 'belgo-marocain' protocols of greeting.

When you know each other you already have the information about how you are going to carry out the greeting. When you are confronted by a new context, you will either apply a model that you already know, or you will first observe how people greet each other.

CS: In which form did you arrange all the material you gathered during the research in order to share it with the public?

WVW: I presented the results of my research on the occasion of the Plankton Bar #40 that closed the Thematics. I constructed a 'greet-interface': an interactive installation consisting of textile interfaces positioned on the hands of two participants. The touching of the two hands triggered the playback of one the 34 greetings that I had recorded in the neighbourhood.

But I also chose to present part of the piece as a work in progress, using the whole afternoon at the Plankton Bar to continue working on its development. Eventually something finished would grow out of it in the evening, though this was not an obligation in itself. So I proposed a kind of open atelier consisting of two kitchen trolleys: one with textiles and sewing material, the other containing all kinds of electronics. People could wander around freely in this space, testing out the materials.

What we constructed during the afternoon was an interface for kissing. The results were astonishing: one interface looked like a beard with its two censors covering the cheeks, and the other, made out of red spheres on an elastic band, looked more like an S&M Moustache!

At the end of the evening we tested them and it was a bit of an odd experience! People improvised ways of kissing each other through the interfaces, their touching making the hello-sounds audible. It really became a game at a certain point, generating a swarm of people rubbing their cheeks against each other and making other strange gestures.

CS: What do you think about participatory forms of art?

WVW: For me it really depends on the intentions of the artist, the means he uses, and the extent to which he might be exploiting the people he works with. I can be extremely critical towards works in which I can identify forms of exploitation. I am also a bit doubtful when I see artists giving voice to fragile people and creating something out of it — I wonder then to what extent they respect the people they are working with.

On the other hand, when an approach succeeds in making a voice heard, or in bringing some issues to the surface and presenting more nuanced information, then I find it very relevant as a participatory art practice. To give a concrete example, I like the way that Zinneke Parade works creatively in collectivity because it has many voices and layers, and brings people together.

The art-forms that interest me the most are socially involved. Francis Alÿs is an artist that inspires me a lot, also because the urban context is so essential to his practice. For my artistic practice it is important to be very aware of the societal and political context, and the urban ecologies we inhabit. Art can be a way of showing and questioning social issues, and a tool to make them debatable.

mmmmm

mmmmm is an art collective that was formed by Adrian Fisher (UK) and Luna Montenegro (Chile/ UK) in a joint desire to make live and time-based art that puts 'presence' at the forefront of the work. The content of the work maintains a ritualistic form that explores contemporary objects, technology and actions in the context of ancient traditions and indigenous beliefs. Their artistic practice leads from research into making unique live performance actions, exploring ideas of the body, to how these events can then be registered with the 'presence' of the action, in mixed media, objects and film.

Coralie Stalberg: How did your collaboration as the collective mmmmm begin? Can you explain the specificity of your approach?

Luna Montenegro: Adrian and I met in Chile eleven years ago. We were both making performance and intervention works then and started to work collectively. The body and its 'presence' was central to our work together and we shared an interest in anthropology. This interest inspired us to travel to the south of Chile, to look into the history of the indigenous tribes that inhabited the region of Tierra del Fuego. These groups have 'disappeared' in relatively recent times. We were intrigued by their overtly theatrical rituals that didn't seem to make a distinction between art and life. We wanted to collect some 'traces' in order to explore these cultures and developed our artistic processes together out of this experience. We have been working together since then, making performances, videos, sculptures and installations, working in public spaces, galleries, on the radio and the web.

Adrian Fisher: When we reached the South of Chile we read the works of French anthropologist Anne Chapman and the testimonies of various priests and missionaries that had worked there. The studying of 'text' and its relationship to 'absence' was central to our artistic research as very few physical objects had been left by these nomadic cultures. We were investigating the Selk'nam people, victims of a genocide that began in the second half of the nineteenth century and was completed by the late 1960s. Anne Chapman made extensive fieldwork in Tierra del Fuego, during which time she interviewed ninety-year-old Lola Kiepja. She was one of the last surviving Selk'nam people, and a female shaman who had lived in the traditional indigenous way. The ethnographical investigation by Anne Chapman allowed Lola Kiepja to record a testament to the culture of her people.

Today the only traces of the Selk'nam people are in these writings and some photographs documenting their material and symbolic culture. They enacted many characters and allowed themselves to be visited by different spirits through Shamanic callings. The photographs show a visual, physical and symbolic way of performing rituals, some of which could last up to nine months. Individual scenes in the ritual could take hours, days or weeks. We reflected a lot on this use of time within ritual and its relationship to contemporary performance.

Our intention was to reconfigure social sciences such as anthropology through live-art, and to examine the concepts of the Selk'nam culture in a contemporary context through re-enactments. The bodily memory of a cultural genocide is evoked in a present that is physical and immediate. There is a strong political dimension to this work, a response to an ethical imperative against the oblivion of people and culture.

LM: Bear in mind that Chile is still a young democracy and it has only been three decades since the last dictatorship of 1973 to 1990. During this time, the existence of indigenous people wasn't even acknowledged. To commit to researching and gathering information about these vanished cultures is already a political act in itself. It is about fighting for their 'presence', about triggering processes to provoke what has been rendered absent or erased.

We are interested in how art and ritual overlap, how they question ways of living and the types of reconfigurations of the subject they propose.

At the same time, the Selk'nam ritual practices also raise questions of how we can create life and presence from objects, for example, in their use of masks. It brings up an issue that is important for performance art and theatre: how do we begin an action or create a moment?

I really like moments, in their diversity and in their potential to take on physical dimensions.

Transformation and cycles are integral to our process. We document our live actions by transforming them into digital images, film and photography. The presence of the performing body is challenged through the mediation of these different disciplines, their respective rituals and specific relationships to each other and to the spectacle.
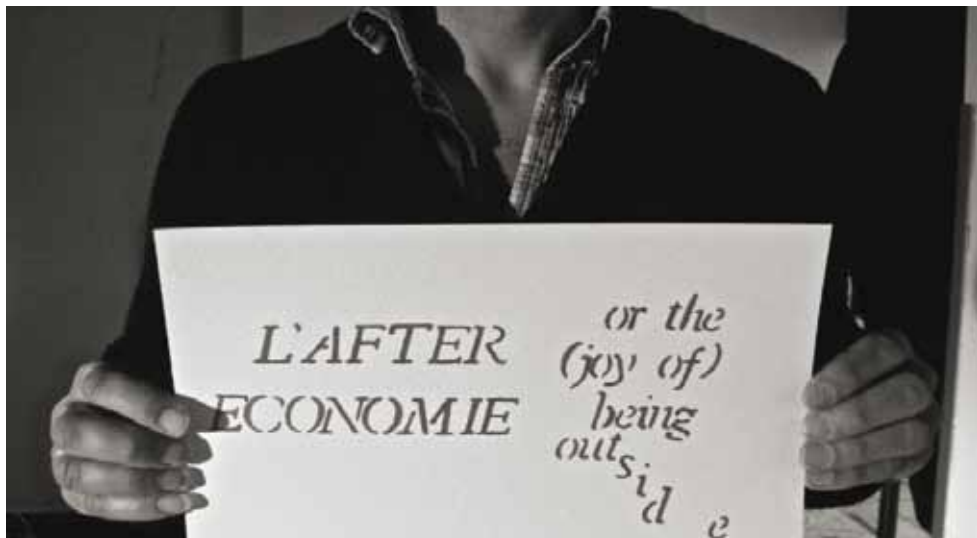
Initially we worked with mass produced objects related to consumption. We would use items like chewing gum, cigarette papers, plastic gloves, and look for a process of transformation, an action or ritual that could make them unique or even sacred in some way. Our investigation into transformation was very much based on physical objects. Over time our practice changed and we moved towards a type of practice that is more participatory in form.

The relationship to the 'body' and in particular the 'collective body' has grown from our practice. In *Il peso delle cose* (HD video 29 mins) we gathered forms of collectivity through an exploration of local people in the cities of Anzio and Nettuno. We took moulds from the fingers of the inhabitants that referred to a full body sculpture of the Emperor Nero that had recently been erected in the town of Anzio, Nero's birthplace. The sculpture had a finger pointing out to the sea and the finger moulds were variations on a fragment of this sculpture. We placed the resulting finger casts in specific locations to disseminate the historical memory of the inhabitants throughout the urban landscape and to question the relevance of the statue of Nero to the contemporary context. By working on the level of collective memory and identity, a social body arose.

This work was in our minds when we began this Thematics residency because we were approaching a new city. While investigating this new urban context, we became intrigued by a seniors club that acted as a collective, social body.

CS: The seniors club became the focal point of your research during the Thematics. What was your experience there, and what was the practice you developed in this context?

LM: Our experience of the seniors club was like meeting a group of friends. We would hang out at the club listening to the conversations and laughter, occasionally trying to speak some French or Flemish. We learnt about how they had all met, which was often because of the death of their partner or because they were looking for other friends in the local community. We listened to stories about their war experiences, and even some of their sexual experiences. We were party to some of the knowledge that arises from eighty or ninety years spent living in the local environment amongst enormous contextual changes.

At the seniors club we took photographs, wrote and made a documentary film. In the evenings we would review the material we were collecting and put it into the context of the studio installation work we were making. We were thinking about comparative temporality, of the seniors club and with regards to our own social relations, since we were living in Brussels for two months in a different locality.

CS: From this stemmed a sound piece you realized with the people of the neighbourhood on the subjective perception of time. Can you tell me more about how you developed this notion of time, also in your main work at the old people's home?

LM: We were looking for possibilities to establish connections with the local communities around Bains Connective and the community centre where the residency was based. We approached people in and around the area and asked them "Qu'est-ce que le temps?" We recorded their replies and edited them together with Congolese words for time, numbers and days of the week. We had been struck by the monuments to Leopold II in Brussels and wanted to explore the time of native people's exploitation through the 'Free State' in relationship to a contemporary local time in the community — moving from the international to the neighbourhood. The Congolese words act as a rhythm for different people's ideas of time around the community centre spoken in Flemish, French, Spanish and English.

We filmed the interactions and body language of the seniors club members.

We wanted to try to capture the spontaneous outbursts of laughter and to think about what laughter meant in relationship to time. Time seemed to stop with laughter. The shared moment of time is felt through physical responses such as smiling. We also tried to capture some of the activities of the members, such as making wooden cut-outs of cartoon characters, and how these activities shaped their environment. We filmed in the backyard of the club and also inside it. We wanted to give a feeling through the video of different time spaces, where time was unimportant, the release from time or the partial attachment to it.

In one intervention we asked each member of the club to write down a wish on a card and place it between their teeth for a portrait photograph. We became equally aware of the fragility of time, one 90-year-old club member wrote: "I wish I was twenty again". It seemed that in the act of 'writing' about time, the club members realised 'their time' but in conversation it could appear as if there was no time.

AF: To come back to notions of time, we're interested in approaching the concept from a Deleuzian perspective, pointing towards a layered past that occasionally converges and incarnates itself in peaks of the present. Past and present interweave through the club members' narratives and these two layers of time often coexisted through laughter. There is a strong sense of anarchy in the laughter that worked on a vocal as well as a physical level. The laughter didn't always tie in with humour, but it could connect to many different situations, rooted in an expanding present.

CS: How do you feel about approaching the under 18s and over 65s as 'unproductive' age categories?

AF: We found the approach an interesting and provocative framework. It seemed too scientific to approach people on the basis of their productive potential and age.

The methodology struggles against economic definitions of humanity from the beginning. The approach seemed judgmental from its inception.

To separate ideas of age and production seemed problematic. All age groups consume and are in some way productive. Associating age with production depends on definitions of economy, production, time and currency. It has been interesting to try thinking within that framework in order to tackle some of the underlying questions.

LM: The issue of categorizing individuals according to their age becomes problematic when you start to approach people in order to collaborate with them. Elderly people may not want to be thought of as elderly! It was a framework, something that was relevant as a departure point. It allowed the work to define a singular approach that avoided broad categories.

When I observed the members of the seniors club, I perceived a wish to be free and outside production. You meet people there who have had really hard lives and do not wish to be young again. They live the present moment in a liberated manner, they're happy to be beyond the productive age categories. We also witnessed a very strong economy of friendship at the club.

They do consume, but on a low level. Most of them go to the club every day and have a meal there. They don't eat much else. At the weekend, when there is no club, most of them stay at home.

AF: There is also an economy of storytelling within the club. There is, for example, a woman who doesn't really speak much, but can spark a lot of discussion with just a few words. The dynamics of the situations are very strong, but again this happens because they are close friends. I wouldn't relate it to the fact that they're aged or an-aged or productive or non-productive.

CS: How do you position yourself with regards to participatory art forms, and in particular the work you produced in the context of Bains Connective?

AF: The work became a document of participation in different time spaces. Participation is inside the art form process. We collected elements of the participation in a time-based medium, video, and attempted to change the feeling of time through editing and also in the final installation piece. We mixed analogue time in the form of plaster casts with audio recordings in the soundtrack of the video installation from a group of under 18s improvising their time through voice and microphone. We used symbols of participation, objects charged with a particular age group, such as a skateboard, and layered the plaster casts made at the seniors club over it. We projected the final video *L'after economie* (HD 16 mins) compiling all the different age/time elements we had collected and edited and projected it on the back of a glass-fronted display cabinet containing the skateboard and plaster cast mouths.

We see participatory practice as inclusive, combining diverse groups in order to make a work that reflects and bounces off the different ideas and themes that emerge during the time of the participation.

LM: We like to create environments in which people can participate by reacting or playing in an open and natural way.

I'm interested in the work of the Brazilian artist Lygia Pape. I like her idea of objects that only work when people use them in order to enact the artwork. In her work *Divisor* (1968) she created a kind of mask made out of a very large piece of fabric with a lot of holes in it. People could put their heads through the holes and react to the object. This proposal to the public still implies a controlled position.

In my view, participatory practices aim to realise the idea of empowerment, of sharing and creating meaning together. It is always necessary to question how a participatory practice can succeed.

AF: When we joined the club and became friends with the people there, we didn't want to interfere with the dynamics of the club members experience because it seemed very precious, unique, and beautiful. We just wanted to film and record it. The question became how to relate the experience to the installation and film we were making in the studio.

The artistic outcome was a video installation sculpture, registering discussions and laughter in a documentary style. This was edited in relation to the recording of a ritualistic action performed by us in the studio, establishing different fictional spaces. We are interested in the zones where fiction and documentary meet or cross over. Our performances to camera in the studio or in the apartment form other dimensions of realism. The experience that seemed so real at the old people's home, becomes fictional in juxtaposition with other economic time spaces.

Questioning the translation of life experience into art forms and fictional landscapes, also leads us to reflect on our being here and our being for the other through different art practices. It demands that we ethically question what forms of 'being together' or 'collectivities' we want to investigate or instigate through our artistic work.

*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.*

www.bains.be

printed on 100%
recycled paper