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Experiencing research-creation in urban studies. Lessons from an inquiry on the making of public space

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines collaboration between artists and social scientists in urban studies. The author was a participant in experimental research commissioned by a new cultural institution, which examined how this institution might participate in the making of a public space. In this paper she analyses the methodologies of investigation and the discussions about forms and representations, and shows the difficulties and rewards of this type of collaboration. To what extent may research based on art and social sciences, and rooted in references to the methodologies and theories of both, be a relevant and alternative way to explore, investigate and represent an urban issue?

The relationship between artists and urban changes has been studied extensively in terms of symbolic valorisation of space in gentrification and urban regeneration processes, or economic development based on creative industries. Yet artists, through their works, can provide critical insights on the mode of production of contemporary cities, and thus afford a new understanding of spaces for different uses or even for planning purposes (Miles, 2005; Molina, 2016; Till, 2011). Some academics and practitioners have called for an alternative interpretation of the creative city, in which contact with artists might render city makers more creative (Boren & Young, 2013). A recent study investigates several experiments in which artists collaborated with urban planners to explore a particular urban issue faced by these professionals (Arab et al., 2016). The experiments questioned urban planners' methods and practices by using alternative ways of investigating the fieldwork and representing the results. They thus activated professionals' reflexivity. For the professionals who experienced it, this collaboration with artists was an enjoyable digression in everyday professional routine, through the exploration of what Ranciere calls a new distribution of the sensible (Rancière, 2000; see also Tonnelat & Shankland, 2016). This type of collaboration needs agreement on the means and goals. It challenges city makers' thought and artists' practices. By working with and in a world different from one's own, the artist has to reach agreement with the others on the meaning of his or her presence as an artist (Becker, 1982). For instance, Tonnelat relates the case of an artist on a construction site, who twisted and modified codes while complying with conventions on the site (technical rules, legal constraints, modes of financing). All of this contributed to mutual recognition of a professional stance and respect for others (Tonnelat & Shankland, 2016). The making of new conventions allows artists, city planners and other professionals to work together and to create a new "interpretative community" (Arab et al., 2016; Becker, 2009).

In the social sciences as well, some are claiming and even experimenting with new fieldwork methods inspired by art practices. Investigation in cooperation with dancers, musicians, or visual artists can transcend the linguistic barriers or emotional effects of interviews, for instance for researchers working with migrants and/or children (Armagnague et al., 2017; Mekdjian et al., 2014). In urban studies, many researchers experiment with new fieldwork methods to understand subjective and personal feelings in places and spaces (Breux et al., 2014; Grosjean & Thibaud, 2008). Studies on perception of the urban space challenge the validity of objective knowledge to analyse this space, and stress the importance of taking the sensible and affective dimensions into account to understand the psychological, emotional and existential attachments to the urban space. Some refer explicitly to *derives* and psycho-geography (Radovic, 2016), or to Perec's fieldwork writings (Phillips, 2016). In fact most of these researches focused on fieldwork methods. Except for cartography (O'Rourke, 2013), the articulation of the investigation process and the design of the representation is rarely discussed. Yet art works and fictions may offer interesting and relevant means to tell about society and the city. Becker (2009) bids us to enlarge the repertoire of forms or media of representation of knowledge, as long as we are aware and attentive to the constraints and issues (moral, technical, financial) that may affect the making of this new representation. This paper intends to fill the gap

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between analysis of collaborative processes, art-based methods in social science, and the design of new representations of investigation results.

In order to analyse and appreciate more deeply what these collaborations may imply in the production of knowledge and its representation with regard to an urban issue faced by professionals, I, an urban studies researcher, ran an experiment in research collaboration with two artists (Karine Sahler geographer and stage director, and Clément Postec filmmaker) that this paper presents and discusses. My research questions were: to what extent might research based on art and social science, and rooted in references to the methodologies and theories of both, be a relevant and alternative way to explore, investigate and represent an urban issue? What lessons can be learned from it? I analyse here some of the issues we faced, during both the field investigations and the design and implementation of the representation of the results. This experience raised issues around the conceptualisation and implementation of collaborative research in urban studies. Archive analysis, interviews with stakeholders, walking through the city, and professional literature analysis all sound familiar in an academic context. They were articulated to and hybridised with artistic practices, influenced (for instance) by the theory of the emancipated spectator (Rancière, 2008), contextual art (Ardenne, 2002), uncreative writing (Goldsmith, 2011), political art (Leibovici & Pihet, 2011) and documentary practices in art (Baqué, 2004). These authors also inspired the design of the results. For social scientists, the question of the means of representation of data is a limited issue, even if, as Latour and Woolgar (2006) point out, the process of writing knowledge into figures, tables, maps, and texts contributes to the production of knowledge itself that often ends up in 6000-word peer-reviewed articles. Throughout the experiment we discussed the question of the means of representation to be designed. Will it be a text, a sound, a play, a visual piece, a performance, a song? Each part of the paper articulates how we relate to the investigation process and the design of the representation of the results, for working with other media raised implicit questions on the usual research media.

First, I present the context of this commissioned research and the question raised: how can the creation of a new cultural institution in a working-class suburb contribute to the making of public space? I then explain three of our main perspectives: to enlarge the audience of the research as a means to make public space; to consider the saturation of knowledge as an important issue to investigate; to consider the subjective experiences of the place of those in charge of its renewal, of those living there, of the place itself. This required that we agree on a common conventional framework connecting our diverse professional backgrounds, which was not the least of the issues we faced. Apart from collaboration with individuals from other professions (artists, social scientists), we also had to learn to negotiate with the commissioner, who would need to be equipped and informed regarding the problem at hand, that is, the construction of a public space. The final part of the paper will explain how the production of various prototypes throughout the experiment acts as a boundary object (Star, 2010) to test our ideas and to agree (or not) on our goals and means.[1] This paper is based on a reflexive analysis of the working process, the methods of investigation, the forms produced, and the relationships with the commissioners. During the whole process I noted my observations, some discussions, email exchanges[2] at the different stages of the investigation, the fieldwork and the design and production of the representation of the results. Due to my position in the experiment, I was aware that there might be some bias, and therefore had this paper read and approved by the two artists I worked with.

1. To investigate the making of a public space

This research was commissioned by a new public cultural institution, Les Ateliers Médicis, established in Clichy-sous-bois and Montfermeil, working-class and stigmatised suburbs of north-eastern Paris. The history of this cultural institution itself deserves attention. After the 2005 Paris riots that started in these two cities, a journalist developed several projects with photographers (Collectif, 2006) and writers (Collectif, 2008). He then proposed to the two mayors the creation of an artist-in-residence programme. His position in the field of journalism enabled him to present this proposal directly to the Minister of Culture who, in 2010, decided to support this project. After the presidential election turn in 2012, the project was shelved for a few years until a new Minister of Culture revived it. In 2016 an administrative frame was created, a director appointed, and a team of professionals employed. The latter were aware that the project concerned many political and ethical issues about the opportunity to create a new public cultural institution to support contemporary art creation in these suburbs, and the meaning thereof.[3] The definition of the project is a work in progress, at the same time as the making of its building. In this unachieved frame, the first initiative of the cultural institution was to commission a group of artists and researchers to explore and investigate how it could contribute to the making of a public space ("*un espace public*").

Here, we face a first issue related to the polysemy of "*espace public*" in French. In urban planning the term was coined in the 1960s by a critic of modern architecture who held that public space should not be considered only as a space of flows, but also as one of social interaction (Toussaint & Zimmermann, 2001). A public space is an arena of social interaction and regulated co-presence that requires one to learn incorporated norms of civil inattention to protect intimacy in public (Terzi & Tonnelat, 2017). The ambiguity comes from the translation of Habermas' notion of public sphere as "*espace public*", which is the democratic space of debate of personal opinions and points of view. In the frame of urban issues, public space can thus be understood as public arena where planning controversies are discussed and exposed, in open-air laboratories (Callon et al., 2001). This follows the pragmatic understanding of the public as "those affected by a problem that this public identifies as such, and with which they are faced and on which they can act" (Dewey, 2010).

In order to consider these various understandings of *espace public* (public space) and to follow Dewey, for whom the experience of the inquiry is a method to create the public and to identify and build a public problem, we investigated the making of public space as at once the public realm, the public sphere, public policies and the audience (i.e. the public) of our own work. This required first that producer and audience share aesthetic and analytic conventions and thus participate in the same interpretative community (Becker, 2009). The question of reception by the public addressed was posed differently, depending on the scientific or artistic world, but was nonetheless posed. It was even a way for the commissioner to stimulate our reflection on form: who were we catering for? What complexity did we wish to make visible, and for whom? Were the means that we implemented relevant? In a pragmatist approach, we considered that the audience did not pre-exist but instead was shaped by the process of the investigation itself. Who was concerned by the public space of the new cultural institution? Who was the audience of our research? This led us to invent a form of presentation of the results that could be reactivated, rewritten and reframed. Like the *Oulipo's* writing constraints (Motte, 1986, see also http://oulipo.net/), we offered data and instructions that the audience could re-investigate, re-write, re-analyse, re-interpret, and re-play, as an unending process.

[1] Likewise, Fourmentraux, analysing the first collaboration between an artist and a computer developer for the creation of a digital work, shows that the technical and artistic dimensions are negotiated through boudary objects that serve as instruments of dialogue to solve the main dilemmas and problems of collaboration (Fourmentraux, 2008).

[2] As we encountered many difficulties organising meetings, discussions were often via email.

[3] The project's name moreover related to Villa Médicis, a public residency for artist fellows in Rome, that is subject to criticism and controversy over the choice of artists and the conditions of their stay (Moreau, 2015).

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