

Where we will consider also creativity as a tool box, and technique

Where we will consider the tools and the box

Let's begin by what i call here the box as an easy play on words: our place, space of work, and one of the tools: feminism

## 1. The box

(slide V. Woolf)

As Virginia Woolf was writing it in 1929 in *A room of one's own*, the work of fiction, of art is attached like a spider web to concrete conditions of life. To quote her: "What were the conditions in which women lived? I asked myself; for fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible; Shakespeare's plays, for instance, seem to hang there complete by themselves. But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in."

(slide Lucy Lippard)

Later, another quote from Lucy Lippard, a feminist art historian who said, in 'The Pink Glass Swan' in the 70's; "Five years after the birth of my feminist consciousness, I still have to question every assumption, every reaction I have in order to examine them for signs of preconditioning. Some changes came across fast. In the winter of 1970, I went to a great many women's studios and my preconceptions were jolted daily. I thought serious artists had to have big, professional-looking spaces. I found women in corners of men's studios, in bedrooms and children's rooms, even in kitchens, working away. I thought important art was large. I found women working small, both out of inclination and necessity."

For me feminism revealed among other things, the relationships at play between the conditions of work and the conditions of visibility, recognition.

(slide choose your mission)

My work deals with these relationships, these conditions. My personal means of action and creation, my tools are not colours and brushes anymore but meetings, discussions and organising activities. There were no more paintings, videos or objects. At the end there are situations where people meet, talk, walk and work together. My work is not only in the galleries or in the studios anymore, but around coffee tables, in offices and workplaces, during meetings and workshops.

When I entered Constant an art and new media non profit organisation that i will describe later, i brought these questions with me.

(slide dessin)

We asked ourselves how, and where the other artists worked? Where the money came from? How do institutions and galleries work? Who is the audience, who is their public? Who is choosing the work to be viewed, on display, or commented on? How? What for, and, under which conditions? When we have a day job in factories, offices or schools when is there time for our own work? A few years ago we compared these remarks with our own and other social and working conditions, we were producing art work by hand or on computer in the kitchen, or living room, in small formats, in between other tasks and works.

(images des lieux de travail cuisine interne + voix)

These testimonies and drawings are taken from a project called Cuisine Interne Keuken, where we were interviewing our fellow cultural workers about their conditions of life and work.

## **Constant's room**

(slide network constant)

Constant is a non profit organisation, based in Brussels, active since 1997 , dealing with art and new media or better said dealing with art in new media, or better said active in between art and new media, dealing with new media in art, or better said Constant is a non profit organisation dealing with cultural work/ers using among others tools, digital media.

At the beginning Constant was defined as a platform and network of production, exhibition, critics of digital art works such as electronic music, video installations, cd-roms (if you remembered what is was), net art , ...

But following on,

- on the one hand, the evolution of the use and the exhibition of digital media in Belgium.

Meaning that more and more media festivals, exhibitions are organised, focusing more on the spectacle of technology with the show of interactive installations, and electronic music. And that web pages were brought in the collection of museums,

- and on the other hand following our own internal evolution. That is, the members and founders of Constant, from curators, were replaced by people with an artistic practice and who use Constant as a "place" to raise questions, to experiment contexts, to open tools and means of production, to question the tools and means and condition of work.

People didn't come anymore to work "with" Constant to produce a " piece" , but come to work "with/in" Constant to challenge, question conditions of exhibition, distribution, production, to question and challenge the access to this type of work done with digital media.

These questions take form in public, of talks, seminars, workshops, softwares, actions, and sometimes of course of exhibitions, concerts, because we want to meet, learn from others, and share in public this exchange of knowledge, experience, technique, processes.

## **2. Tools and methods**

### **Space**

(slide vj6)

We do not have a room of our own for public events, we have an office, we have servers, we have websites, all shared. When we want to become public, we have to enter other people spaces, could be a museum, a training center, an empty bar or a squat. We often use spaces not to be used that way, with the hope they might stay culturally active or open to technological practices. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't.

We position ourselves and our actions in the interstices

- in between institutions,

- in between institutions and associations having social, cultural , technical or artistic practices

- in between institutions and individuals having academic, scientific, technical, artistic practices, professional, activists, amateurs, fans or actor of the cultural field or everything at the same time

(slide fat)

So we could say that we attached always the web of our action, our narrative, to the material conditions of others. That we have always to enter a dialogue, to share resources, to share interest.

We experience different types of collaboration, settings in our encounters with others:

- Time and place specific action

We actually negotiate from the set of the space, to the schedule, images, vocabulary, economy, technique, etc. Resistance, dialogue, collaboration began when we enter matters of institutional representation: which image on the flyer, which taxonomy in the texts (vocabulary, naming, languages), in which economy, with which technique, which licence on the material produced, etc

-Intern collaboration

It can take the form of advice, conception of the softwares, discussion on archiving principles, on institutional organisation. Maybe it is closed to what can be called social software. Social software that supports group interaction. The important words here are group & interaction, not software.

You cannot specify in advance what the group will do, and so you can't implement in software

everything you expect to happen. You cannot separate technical issues from social issues. Quite basic principle, but always surprising when you touch the softwares and design of the interface of archiving and communication, you enter power structures, hierarchical behaviours, (lack of) communication between sectors of the same institution, openness of the information, taxonomy (categories, classification).

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If feminism can be described as one of our tools of action to open the gaze to questions of access, working conditions definition of artistic practices, as a tool to provoke new imagination, new imaginary. Then, the fact of using the space as reactive, as performative could be another tool of creativity. The in-between, the interstitial space as relational object.

I would like now to approach the body of the organization.

### **Embodied & inhabited practices**

(slide active archive)

The other day I used to speak about Constant the following metaphors: scattered body, fragmented body, constructed body, using Frankenstein and his creature as a metaphor. Because at the same time we act, perform both “sides”: the creator and the creature. But sometimes we would like to be Mary Shelley, writing the narrative, the fiction that makes these bodies working together, coherently.

With the time I realize that the body, and our performing, creating relationships in between people is our main tool, instrument of work. We gesture and talk a lot, we are present, we touch often. I don't know now how to formulate this, but our bodies, gestures, voices, settings, create, propose a space, place, environment to the use of technology, technique, software. Hospitality as another tool of creativity.

### **Extensions & habitats**

#### **Softwares as questions**

I have mentioned settings, relationships, people, and I will try to articulate some statements about gestures and softwares, and go on with embodied and inhabited metaphors.

We have integrated softwares and computers in our everydaylife. When we talk about the disappearing borders between private life, work, art in our own rooms, and in our minds. We can feel the same with our machines. We edit sound, videos, texts, listen to music, listen to the news, send email and make payments on the same workstation, and if possibly on the same flux of time.

In our art practice, like in our daily operations with software, software has become the interface with our environment, our utensil, our tool to sense, touch, define our work. A friend of mine who is an artist and a graphist designer uses the following metaphor ((slide: Femke Snelting, A fish can't judge the water, 2007)“My physiotherapist”, she writes, “used this analogy to explain how humans use tools to negotiate the space around their bodies: “If you prepare a sauce...” she said, “and stir it with a wooden spoon... you will be able to feel at which moment exactly the starch starts to burn to the bottom of the pan”.A wooden spoon might not be the kind of glamour and glitter a post human cyborg is looking for, but I think it is in this unspectacular way our daily operations with software help to make sense of our environment.

She goes on: “Software has become our natural habitat. We practice software until we in-corporate its choreography. We make it disappear in the background. A seamless experience. We become one with our extensions.”

(slide mute 1)

Computers and softwares being our habitat, like any room, are linked to an economy, and like any machine, a dependency on the new version, formats, plug ins arriving on the market and all the technological improvements.

Anne & Marine Rambach in their book “*Les intellos précaires*”, a research they conducted in 2001

on their own environment and friends, a group of intellectuals, artists, living on unstable financial conditions. In their research, they observe, among other things, the paradox between the glamorous life they and their group were living in contrast with their poor conditions of health, housing... Part of the glamour, but also of the total necessity of work, was the computer. If possible the last model, very hype and full options which was, as they wrote, throning in the middle of the one-room kitchen, office, bedroom of most of the precarious intellectuals they were visiting. The computer is their workplace, extension, they depend on the economy and the costs of it, between the dentist, a new pair of glasses and a new computer, the choice was quickly made. Not aware of their social rights, they know perfectly the new softwares and the technological improvements.

Software does help you make things, but at the same time defines the space within which that making can take place. In proprietary software, those forms of use are prevented by extremely restrictive licenses. How could we even understand what software does to design aesthetics and working patterns without being able to step away from them to try out different ways of making things? Adobe software has become like the weather: you might complain about it now and then, but it is useless to think you could actually change it. What if we would want to adjust, reinvent, change, alter our tools? As we all know, software is never politically neutral, nor are its aesthetics without colour: each product prescribes use, and results in specific forms, sounds and shapes. Free software<sup>1</sup> allow us to open our tools to study them and transform them as much as they transform our gestures and aesthetics

(slide mute 2)

Our decision to use and produce Open Source tools is therefore as much political, as it is in line with the nature of our artistic and intellectual interests. Of course we get frustrated sometimes using Open Source software; one does not always have the time and energy to not know what to expect. But it is a luxury to find other experiences than those we were used to; it offers an opportunity to rethink “user-friendly-ness” to start with. It offers an opportunity to create out of the missing links, out of the hiccups and misunderstandings. Free softwares allow us to see the guts of our tools, get rid of the corset, feel the weight, the limits of our technological extensions.

(slide osp)

To be concerned about freesoftware is also to try to reduce our economical dependency towards big companies, their rhythm of marketing, and their definitions of needs and aesthetics. Free softwares allow us to choose our bindings, to choose the community we are dependent of, linked to; (like the spider web dear to V. Woolf), the community we are working with. To use free software is not easy for graphic design. The development is slower, because the number of developers interested in graphic creation is much smaller than the number of developers interested in server applications, i.e. Key applications for the designer (as Scribus desktop publishing) progress slowly. But development is also hectic, because most of this type of free software is developed on free time and free will. If free software provides you with a certain autonomy in terms of economy, it gives you also the opportunity or the obligation (depending the way you see it) to be in interaction with a group, a code, an economy developed on the margins.

I would like to give here 2 examples of the work we do on in the inhabitat, and the extensions in free softwares

(give the example of open publishing and samedi)

slide osp (Note: There is nothing wrong with a poster, website or piece of typography which uses the specific characteristics of the software it was made with, but it is questionable when the choice of tool is never in your own hands. It would be exciting to think out loud about what other tools are possible and what is possible with other tools; a bit less exciting but much needed is that designers file bugs and report back on pleasant and less pleasant experiences. For this we will need to find a common language with those people who developed Gimp, Scribus or Sodipodi etc.)

slide samedi (note: La série d'ateliers "femmes et logiciels libres" continue de rassembler un groupe diversifié de femmes qui veulent apprendre à construire, gérer ou tout simplement comprendre un

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1 Free software is a matter of the users' freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software.

serveur. Organisés dans le cadre d'Ada (réseau femmes et technologies) en collaboration avec Scumgrlrs, Domaine Public, Constant et des participantes enthousiastes, ces ateliers s'efforcent de développer de manière collaborative des savoirs sur les systèmes, les services, les servers dans un contexte prenant en compte les questions sociales et politiques entourant l'usage des technologies.)

### **What art has to do with that.**

(slide Hugo Ball)

*«We can say that for us, Art is not a purpose in itself - - but we see there the occasion to formulate critics towards our time and to develop a real sensitivity for this era (...) Our debates are an ardent search, and from day to day a more alarming one, to discover the specific rhythm and the hidden face of this time; its foundations and its essence; its emotional possibilities and their awakening. For that purpose, Art provides us only an occasion, a method.» Hugo Ball, Flight from time*

Art is considered here as a mean to construct spaces and relationships to reconfigure concretely and symbolically a common territory, a mean to occupy a place where relationships between bodies, images, spaces and times are redistributed. (Jacques Rancière)

We could connect ourselves here to the history of feminist art, or to any engaged art with its society as I quoted here above Hugo Ball. A history of practices of working on relational objects or spaces with the function to recover a voice, a visibility, a position as subject.

I would like to give you, very shortly, as examples Lygia Clark (Estructuras vivas 1969) or Mierle Laderman Ukeles (Hartford Wash 1970) In her relational objects, Lygia Clark's wish was to connect body to body, to form collective creations. She repeatedly makes art using a conversational model materialized in web of connecting lines and relational objects. Art and subjectivity promoted as in dialogue with the other, the environment, in a large portion of feminist practices of 70's insisting on the idea of "living organisms in regards to art. To mention also Mierle Laderman Ukeles, cleaning the museum, making visible the working female body in the art institutions and in the household. Or if we take Martha Rosler (Semiotics of the kitchen 1975), where Rosler "demonstrating women's instrumentalized position, withing the logic of her alphabetical order, finally turns into a tool herself".

As we all know feminist, identity politics artists and theoreticians work endlessly to give a voice, a visibility, an individuation to the people, bodies let in the margins of culture, and society. Feminist "insist on the importance gender as an absolute ordering principle in art, and also on the politics of domination in all social life, whether personal or public". Gender as a code, a classification, can we think of it as free to download, modify, copy, distribute....

So a way to work on the codes and the power technique that distribute our society

### **Subject power as pharmacon (poison & cure)**

I would like here to draw a parallel, a friction, a dialogue, with the use of "subject power" by the industry of immaterial labor. We could first begin to sketch a definition of immaterial labour. To quote Maurizio Lazzarato: "The concept of immaterial labor refers to *two different aspects* of labor. On the one hand, as regards the "informational content" of the commodity, it refers directly to the skills involved in direct labor are increasingly skills involving cybernetics and computer control. On the other hand, as regards the activity that produces the "cultural content" of the commodity, immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as "work"—in other words, the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion.(...)Manual labor is increasingly coming to involve procedures that could be defined as "intellectual," and the new communications technologies increasingly require subjectivities that are rich in knowledge. (...)

Or to take examples from the project by Precarias a la deriva (Precarious women workers adrift) based in Madrid, accompanying, walking literally with precarious female workers, working in the services industries, could be care, sex, cultural, sales work. They collected for example, the

employees in a famous clothes shop, now to sell clothes they expect you to be pretty, to dress well, to have taste and to speak several languages, to implicate yourself in the job of selling with all your creativity, your body and your knowledge, all of this paid quite badly.

To go on with Lazzarato : “The capitalist needs to find an unmediated way of establishing command over subjectivity itself; the prescription and definition of tasks transforms into a prescription of subjectivities. The new slogan of Western societies is that we should all "become subjects." Participative management is a technology of power, a technology for creating and controlling the "subjective processes". (...) Thus the slogan "become subjects," far from eliminating the antagonism between hierarchy and cooperation, between autonomy and command, actually reposes the antagonism at a higher level, because it both mobilizes and clashes with the very personality of the individual worker.”

(slide atelier du web)

When life becomes work and work becomes life, the difference between productive and creative work tends to disappear. Paid work is being defined more and more by the precarious and informal working conditions of creative work. This transformation is characterized by the emergence of an indistinct pool of life and work: the extension of working hours into the home, temporary labour contracts and individualised terms and conditions, the demand for emotional involvement and affective activities. Is there a link between the 'immaterial' and 'invisible' work of all 'home' workers: housewives, opensource programmers, artists, e-workers, etc ? Are there possible models for contracts, social protection, working conditions that would give visibility to the multilayered, flexible and generous workers without commodifying and enclosing them ? Should we define a common policy ? Do we want regulations or increased flexibility? How to reclaim, open, alter this technology use to control subject power? How to empower subjectivity?

(slide petit déjeuner)

We are all aware of the “transformational” power of the technological tools we are using to work, to speak, to relax, to learn, to write, to listen to music, to upload and download, most of time We are aware of their networking power, but also of the individuation of the users, each of us alone on his/her computer, everyone a consumer or everyone a free worker, or this is the image some doomed prophets would like to spread, but it is also true. We all express ourselves freely, distributing our pictures, our knowledge and our friends. We contribute for the beauty of it, for the love of it to free softwares, to on-line contents, to art pieces.

In Belgium, in 2004, a study conducted by NICC, a Flemish artists association, proved that in the group of the artists over 45 year old, the artists were the ones to invest the most in art production, more than all the grants and fundings distributed.

(slide craft and more)

Could we make the connection between this freely participation to craft? Craft labor focuses on labor performed by women involving “caring” - the labor of the head, brain and heart. Women's labor networks people together in social structures by moving beyond labor as commodity to labor as an act of care. Could we think of creative practices the same way? .Art as an act of care? Of course here we are beyond the gender biaise but what i would like to stress here is the notion of “care”, of weaving, knitting, sewing relationships. Also we are beyond what is “naturally” the tasks of women at home, even if we are aware that still the majority of the household is done by women unpaid, badly paid, or well paid. Open source contributors, artists, cultural producers are also here, building a network, a collective intelligence, and caring of the software, the art work, the art space, in a distributed labor function.

(slide witch)

What I am trying to say is we should inject care in the technology, in the subject power, in the creative work hijacked by capitalism technology, technique. Care as a tool of creativity.

God, this is completely falling into angelism where I d like to be more at the side of witches, who situate themselves in the interstices, in-between worlds, and handling unstable mixtures, connections.

Creativity (and care) can be a poison and a cure, like all techniques.