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RESEARCH REPORT

SPEAP

Valerie Pihet[1]

[1] Independent Researcher, Paris, France

This text is written from my experience of SPEAP – Program of experimentation in arts and politics – as I co-founded it with Bruno Latour in 2010 and as I ran it until 2014.[1] We decided to create this program to face up to the necessity of imagining new articulations between arts, social sciences and politics, while raising the question of what it means to do art, science or politics and what are or should be their respective and collective roles within society.

This necessity was felt vividly by us while we were working on the exhibition *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy,*[2] and were confronted with the difficulty of making artists and researchers collaborate, especially on political issues. In a format of experimentation, the purpose of the exhibition was to share and test the common problem of the crisis of representation through the simultaneous exploration of the political, the scientific, and the artistic based on questions such as 'Are we well-represented?' What difference does it make to think in terms of 'matters of concern' rather than 'matters of fact' for the perspective of what politics is, i.e. to think in terms of what is a good *representative* – of human and non-human issues – rather than in terms of what is *representing* in a classic political way?[3] This concrete experience made us aware of the distance between thought and its realization, but also of the difficulty of addressing the political beyond reactions such as mockery, disenchantment, disappointment, criticism,or activism, which reduce the issue at hand to a simple question of power. Confronted with ongoing multiple crises – political, economical, religious, ecological – there is yet an urgent need to encourage the emergence of new possibilities from the world we are participating in and to learn from a plurality of practices and situations. We can no longer believe in any kind of stabilized knowledge or rely on the presumed clearsightedness of anyone. We have to deal with how to live and act in an uncertain world.

Our fascination for cross-disciplinary issues is directly bound to this urge to re-shuffle the cards. But if the need to rethink associations between arts and sciences is no longer questioned, yet it is still difficult to overcome dualisms such as true/false, objectivity/subjectivity, knowledge/sensible, etc. As a consequence of the division of knowledge, most of the time we still think it is sufficient to 'only' join disciplines together instead of radically rethinking each of them. Even worse, it causes the social sciences and the arts to drift further and further away from society. Over the two last centuries, the skills, methods, and tools developed within artistic or scientific disciplines have become crucial, but they also have contributed to – as an undesirable side effect of the process of autonomy and freedom – enlarging the gap between society and how the arts/sciences understand society as their research target. Let the despair people sense about politics be a token for all disciplines.

However, no matter how disastrous the state of knowledge might be, we should not proceed to provoking a 'tabula rasa.' Instead, we have to accept its inheritance as a problem we can work with. We could start to concentrate on the exploration of the 'enabling effects' of research production – as proposed by Benedikte Zitouni who speaks of the social sciences and extends that vision to the arts, i.e. the effects that research could create in the narrative we need to construct – instead of focusing on pure truth seeking. 'It means crafting present times by mixing those pasts, presents and futures. It means handling times with eyes riveted

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[1] Website: http://blogs.sciences-po.fr/speap/. Download here the Manifesto: http://blogs.sciences-po.fr/speap/presentation/pourquoi-speap/

[2] Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM), Karlsruhe, 2005.

[3] Latour, B. (2005) *From realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or how to make things public*, in Latour, B. and Weibel, P. (eds.), *Making Things Public: atmospheres of democracy*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 4–31.

on present purposes and possibilities. It means letting a plural and potential 'now' take over and substitute itself to the linear and irreversible past-present-future thinking and story-telling we're used to.'[4]

The above introduction demonstrates what SPEAP has taken as its inheritance, on what ground it has been built, and what questions it has attempted to expand on and experiment with. Concretely, SPEAP was thought of as a laboratory for scientific, artistic, political and pedagogical experimentation, initially largely inspired by a pragmatism tradition as exemplified in the United States by the work of John Dewey and others – as well as by their followers today. In other words, we took John Dewey's definition of experimentation as a way to point to the similarity between experience and inquiry considering that the social sciences and the arts might define themselves anew within this space.[5] Each year, we put together a group of no more than twenty young researchers, artists and professionals from a wide variety of backgrounds, and ask them to bring their knowledge and methods to bear on concrete issues raised by society, to put their convictions to the test of reality, to exchange questions and learn to think through the consequences of their interventions. Our program statement was based on a set of pedagogical experiments both inside and outside the class. However, once our ideas and ambitions had been confronted with the real conditions of a tangible co-production of knowledge and its sharing conditions, we found ourselves in quite a messy and confused situation – but still a constructive one.

The collective work, inside the class, aimed to break away from any form of competition or hierarchy between the participants. What would happen if the arts and the social sciences were considered first and foremost as shared places for the invention of new formats, framing, and techniques?[6] We tested that question through many exercises taking various problems as starting points and seeing how each participant could apply his own set of techniques towards them and how we could focus our attention on the effects possibly produced. It was almost like a kind of gym. Moreover, in order to approach the question of politics from different perspectives, the pedagogical committee and most of the invited speakers accompanied participants in the exploration of concepts such as 'public,' 'problem' and 'inquiry' all borrowed from John Dewey's work.

According to Dewey, the public is not the sovereign people represented by its elected officials and embodied by the State, but a multiple of publics that appear and disappear depending on problems they raise and their state of being solved. We stabilize too quickly the distinction between public and private, between the individual ('narrow-minded interests'), on one side, and the public interest ('broader and more general vision'), on the other. Politics starts with the unintended consequences of our actions, says John Dewey. When we are able to follow and know the ins and outs of a problem, we should be able to solve it, without the need of a public or politics; we are then in the private sector. When the consequences of our actions go beyond us and start to be blurred, the politics comes into play because of the need to explore these uncertainties.[7]

Katrin Solhdju reminds us what Deleuze developed in his *Bergsonism* about the definition of a problem. A problem does not exist outside of its solutions. Problem and solution coexist while one does not absorb the other, nor reduces itself to the other. In other words, a problem existing outside its solution would be a 'false problem' or a problem badly constructed. The task, then, is to focus on elaborating on good problems rather than solving them. Following Solhdju, any difficult or unbearable situation is not yet a problem in itself, nor a question. Problems require careful and creative work giving all actors involved or concerned the capacity to act on it.[8]

In addition to Dewey's idea of continuously evolving human associations, Bruno Latour came up with non-human associations that complicated the problems posed even further. For both Dewey and Latour inquiry is the key as an active process, rather than a simple analysis or study, to find our way through the many controversies we are engaged in. Furthermore, their understanding of inquiry is creation or discovery that transforms the subject studying as well as the object studied in the process. The political event happens

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[4] Intervention of Bénédicte Zitouni and Fabrizio Terranova at SPEAP – November 21, 2013 (Archives Privées de SPEAP); Bénédicte Zitouni, *Shuffling Times*, communication for Parse Biennal Research Conference on 'Time,' University of Gotheborg, 2015, 4–6 November.

[5] Dewey, J. *Le public et ses problèmes* (1927), trad. Joëlle Zask, Paris, 2003, 17.

[6] Leibovici, F. and Pihet, V. (2011), 'Pour une école des arts politiques?', in *Tracés. Revue de Sciences humaines*, (III), #11, 101–122. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4000/traces.5286

[7] Dewey, J. (1927) *Le public et ses problèmes*, trad. Joëlle Zask, Paris, 2003.

[8] Solhdju, K. (2015) *L'épreuve du savoir. Propositions pour une écologie du diagnostic,* Editions Dingdongdong, Paris, 79–87.

there, when a group, inextricably, takes in hand its own affairs, for which it was supposed to defer to the public authorities, and starts to think, but not in the sense of theory.

In parallel with these class sessions, the participants had to work in groups in direct contact with relevant actors on concrete social and political issues. Addressing their work to those specific actors, the participants were encouraged to develop new forms of inquiries – and restitution – in order to lead them to other perspectives of responses than those borrowed until then.

Instead of working with problems suggested by participants, artists and/or researchers, – i.e. for reasons of their own – SPEAP wanted to be an opportunity for the participants to put their skills to the test of problems brought and expressed by others than them. This is a strong constraint, the only one at SPEAP, but an interesting one to explore since we need to bridge the gap we mentioned earlier between arts/sciences and society.

We worked with many individuals or groups of people engaged, professionally or not, in all kinds of structures, institutions, or associations, who wished to share a problem with us in the sense above. The most important thing for me, as the coordinator, was to engage the responsibility of the people – and ours – on their behalf and not on behalf of their organization/institution, while not intending to put this dimension aside. On the contrary, the organizational dimension is part of the problem – versus inquiry – and we had to take care of it with them. However, it was not about developing any institutional partnerships, nor about engaging financial question at first. Some money could be engaged – often for production costs – but only if the people were ready – and could afford – at some point to be engaged that way. A financial contribution meant to deal with their organization, supposing so they were already able to appropriate part of the responsibility of the 'problem.' To me it could not be a prerequisite. We had to build little by little the relation with them, paying attention first to the situation they are engaged in, the ins and outs, and then to assess the level of complexity of the 'problem' they shared with us. We had to be really careful and feel what were the conditions of a precautionary coproduction of knowledge. A co-production of knowledge invites all participants to open up novel potentialities and accept the experimental dimension of the project.

We used to call these projects 'commissions,' in an attempt to revitalize and redefine this tired word. We were inspired by a protocol invented by a French artist, François Hers, called *The New Patrons*; a protocol claiming the redistribution of the roles and responsibilities between a 'new patron,' a mediator and an artist.[9] This device induces the creation of arrangements depending from case to case. The strength of the protocol is to give shape to situations without reducing their multiplicity to a common standard. Even if the way in which each one plays its role is determined in the process, the non mixed-upness of the roles is an interesting constraint. The artistic part of the project still belongs to the artist but its success won't be only her/his. We are never autonomous alone and the most important thing is to treat well what is building in a relation without thinking we necessary will lose something.[10]

Using the word 'commission' rather than 'project' was a way to create the opportunity for commissions to be expressed through our proposal to answer it and to introduce a difference in our method of elaborating participative research. But unlike the 'New Patrons,' the output was not as clear as an artwork. We could not and did not want to determine in advance what would be the mode of restitution of the inquiry. To say that the output will be an artwork does not say a lot about the artwork in itself, but the act of saying it will be an artwork and has an effect on how we tell the story. The words are active and effective, following Donna Haraway, a philosopher whose work is genuinely attached to the power of words and to the way we tell our stories.[11] I'm still hesitating if this active word of 'commission' was the right one. It produced an interesting problem in our disciplinary habits, but it also produced at the same time considerable chaos. We could use the word 'co-mission' maybe, which induces a more active process.[12] As Haraway, Vinciane Despret and some others contemporary thinkers like writing with 'tropes' or 'metaplasms' because they create a little contrast in the form, but keep the link with both its history or heritage and its vivid or new uses; they transform the meaning force of the word, but without losing the trace of its transformation.[13]

9   www.newpatrons.eu
10 Stengers, I. (2013) 'Parce-que je me sentirais autorié à cela maintenant....', in Hers, F. (ed.), *Faire art comme on fait société. Les Nouveaux Commanditaires*, Presses du Réel, Paris, 37–53.
11 Haraway, D. (2003) *The Companion Species Manifesto. Dogs, people, and significant otherness*, Prickly Paradigm Press.
12 Special thanks to Celine Bodart who suggested the word 'co-mission.'
13 Despret, V. (2012) 'En finir avec l'innocence,' in Dorlis, E. and Rodriguez, E. (eds.), *Penser avec Donna Haraway*, PUF, Paris, 23–45.

Figure 1: Presentation of the commissions – year 2010–2011 – SPEAP. Credit: Emilie Hermant.

I was then, and I am still, convinced that we need to exceed boundaries between arts, sciences and other practices, but at the time I was also convinced we would succeed in providing some answers through SPEAP. For instance, I thought that a necessary step needed to be taken by both the arts and social science in order to be able to meet: for the arts, it might be to focus the attention on imagination (creation embedded in the real world) rather than imaginary (fiction based on fiction); for the social science, it might be to feel that it is very different to do research in taking responsibility we are attached to our 'objects' and to report on that attachment.[14] But I know how complex it is and that I still will hesitate often when confronted with what it means to do art and/or science. For sure, each of these remarks has to be exposed to the test of reality and to their experimentation, again and again, in each necessary different situation. 'The correlation between living a problematic situation, experience the consequences of its own activities, and rebuild the framework of the experience while acting on its conditions, in order to make it able to take again the continuum of experimentations'; this is what Dewey calls an 'inquiry' – or even a 'development of individuality.'[15]

And last but not least, I think SPEAP was and is a place to share discomfort or to learn how to stay with the trouble, in the words of Haraway. Isabelle Stengers comments: 'The worry/concern, always situated, belongs to the art of staying with the trouble, i.e. not to give an answer to the trouble in terms of abstraction, but to give to a situation, an encounter, the power to trouble our thinking habits.' We need to hold conflicting positions and hold them at the same time without exceeding it because they are all true and important. You should always seek new arrangements.[16] In these terms, and according to me, SPEAP is more important in its

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[14]   Thanks to the research seminar organized by Antoine Hennion in Paris – Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation – Ecole des Mines on the question of attachment in social sciences.

[15]   Dewey, J. (1927) *Le public et ses problèmes*, trad. Joëlle Zask, Paris, 2003, 19.

[16]   Stengers, I. (2014) 'Penser à partir du ravage écologique,' in Hache, E. (ed.), *De l'univers clos au monde infini*, Editions Dehors, Paris, 162.

transformation effects on all participants – the new arrangements they are engaged in – than for the communicable or transmissible answers we could give. This program should be constantly reminded of its duty to experiment, of its opposition to what we call 'faire école.'

Competing Interests
The author declares that they have no competing interests.