

MICROSILLONS: THE "FLY IN - FLY OUT" CULTURE WORKSHOP

The collective *microsillons* discussed the model of the "fly-in fly-out" project, drawing on their own experience as a starting point.

We want to initiate a debate on the impact of such a model on the conception of a project. We want to identify changes in the nature of collaboration, conditioned by production. We also want to consider the economics governing a project and possible alternatives.

Since 2005, the artistic/educational collective *microsillons* has developed collaborative projects with different types of participants, either independent or institutional. The working methodology of the collective adapts to meet the needs of each particular situation, bar a few permanent characteristics: a small participating group collaborates for a few months, then publicly presents the results of their collective efforts. The *microsillons* collective has just two members but invites external parties (artists, designers, sociologists, activists, historians, teachers...) to collaborate on almost every project. As familiarity with the local context is key to the development of those projects, time has to be invested in the long-term development of a network of teachers, community centres and associations in order to identify appropriate groups and collaborators for each projects.

In 2009, the *microsillons* collective presented a proposal to the Centre for Contemporary Art in Geneva (an institution for which the collective has developed several art education projects) for an exhibition presenting the work of artists and art educators with similar methodologies to their own, combining artistic and educational tools. The exhibition, titled "Utopia and the Everyday. Between Art and Education", encompassed projects conducted by members of two artistic groups and one art/education collective in collaboration with participating groups in Geneva. A significant part of the budget was devoted to the artists' many visits, allowing them to develop long-term relations with *microsillons*, the local community and, of course, the project's participants. Nevertheless, they all pointed out the difficulty of initiating interesting activities in an unfamiliar context, in a foreign language and within the limited time spent with the groups.

Each of the guests developed a different strategy to deal with the situation:

1. The Austrian art educators' collective *trafo.K* insisted from the outset that they only wanted to work with a German-speaking group. Once such a group was found, they decided to come to Geneva as often as possible in order to develop an authentic relationship with the group.
2. English artist, Nils Norman, was immediately interested in the project but not living in Geneva himself, he invited local artist, Tilo Steireif, to help develop the project and cooperate with its participants. Nils Norman and Tilo Steireif invited a group of teachers to work with them and in turn, each teacher expanded the network of participants through their own pupils.
3. Damon Rich, from the Centre for Urban Pedagogy based in Brooklyn, invited another artist, Oscar Tuazon, to carry out a collaborative project with a local group. However, both had to postpone their trip to Geneva almost until the very end of the project, delegating the collaborating part to a group of curators, who conducted the interviews and sent on the results.

As a result of this exhibition project, the curators and the *microsillons* collective became aware of the difficulty of working on such projects from the point of view of foreign visitors. Paradoxically, thanks to the exhibition's success, *microsillons* began to be invited abroad more and more often to realize projects.

Such invitations are usually accompanied by the question: "have you worked abroad before?", on the basis of the notion that working on projects in other countries denotes an assurance of quality. On the other hand, the question: "is it possible to create high-quality projects abroad?", is seldom raised.

Nils Norman, in his piece “A sketch of London” (2007), looked at the circulation of money in the English art world, and included – in reference to his own experience as an artist – “the remote drop project” and “the fly-in fly-out” project. The idea behind the “fly-in fly-out” project seems to accurately reflect today’s art economy. Art institutions and other kinds of structures are increasingly interested in inviting artists to develop “community-based” projects instead of merely presenting artworks. They are usually ready to cover the artists’ expenses and sometimes to support the work itself, but most of the time they have to limit the number of trips and work sessions to a minimum, in order to keep within their budget limit.

Time is certainly a key factor in collaborative art projects and working abroad further limits the time that can be devoted to a specific collaboration. In 2010, *microsilions* worked on a local project called “En commun”, linked to a public park in Geneva. With two classes from the local state school, the collective produced a newspaper presenting the history, diversity and contemporary uses of the park. Afterwards, the project was critically discussed – in particular, within the context of a PhD research project at the Chelsea College of Art & Design – and it was concluded the collaboration with the pupils could have been more interesting had there been more time to spend on the project. For that project, six two-hour meetings were held with each class. Although there were no travel expenses, it was already quite difficult to finance twelve working sessions, as well as the production of the newspaper. Even without adding the extra hours necessary to make such a project fully satisfactory, developing a project such as this abroad would take even more time and would become almost impossible to finance in most of the cases.

Therefore, in developing a project for an “international” context, the conditions of production may completely change the very nature of the collaboration: instead of planning enough time to make a real dialogue possible – to leave some room for the participants to be involved in the conception of the project – there is a risk that the need for time efficiency leads to a strong vertical structure, where the participants just have to execute what the artists have prepared in advance for them, without knowing much about the local context.

If nomadic structures are, in certain contexts, forms of resistance, temporary autonomous zones that sidestep state or market control, the “community based” artist as a nomadic activist would become a kind of door-to-door salesperson peddling a profitable service in a “time efficient” package.

What structures could be developed that would allow artists to collaborate and exchange with people in different places, whilst avoiding the pitfalls of “the remote drop” or “the fly-in fly-out” project?