

Iterations #5: talks and performance

Rotunda Bertouille, Bozar, Brussels, 07-11-2019

Intro by Donatella Portoghese and Peter Westenberg, Constant, Association for Art and Media

[image: homepage of Constant website]

Donatella Portoghese:

Goodafternoon everybody. Thank you for being here. My name is Donatella, I'm coordinator of Constant and I would start with a little presentation of our organisation. **Constant** is a non-profit organisation based in Brussels since 1997 and active in the fields of art, media and technology. **Constant** develops, investigates and experiments collective artistic practices, through a feminist and intersectional perspective. **Constant** support and promote Free/Libre + Open Source Software. **Constant** applies the philosophy of Free Software Culture to artistic practices believing in sharing, reproducing, dissecting and reworking knowledge's and know-how.

Constant organises and mediates working moments called 'worksessions' in which not only artists, but also researchers, activists, programmers, graphic designers and other creative and investigating minds come together to develop and discuss ideas about a specific topic which we believe is relevant for the digital artistic field. **Constant** tries to put into practice a critical and not passive approach to new technologies and to analyse their effects and influence not only on the cultural fields, but also on our society, and this, through a series of research oriented projects which results are shown often in exhibitions and/or publications. **Iterations** is one of these projects.

Within Constant, Peter and me are the persons responsible for the coordination of the project. We follow the programme and work together with our partners to implement the activities. In this introduction, we would like to share with you some observations and experiences that we have collected so far, and to underline some of the recurring aspects that this project and its protagonists have brought to the surface and to our attention.

[image: homepage of Iterations website]

Peter Westenberg:

Iterations is a collaborative European project that was started by **Dyne.org** (NL), **esc medien kunst labor** (AT), **Hangar** (ES) and **Constant** (BE).

Iterations is committed to the future of artistic collaboration in digitally networked contexts. Multidisciplinary artists and practitioners are brought together to create works that feed the imagination of possible modes of artistic collaboration. Between 2017 and 2019 a series of artistic group residencies and presentations of collaborative work in different formats took place in Giampilieri (IT), Barcelona (ES) and Graz (AT).

Iterations consists mainly of a series of relayed residencies in which different artists are invited to work together on a collective work. Each group considers the work that was done by the previous group. The material is handed over during so called 'handover meetings' that are organised in between the residencies. These are moments to meet, exchange and discuss the work, materials and sources that are handed over.

Iterations is a hands-on trajectory to research and exercise with artistic practices of sharing. Each partner organised a residency and presentation according to their own internal logic.

The work that is done in the context of Iterations is considered to be material to be re-used and is produced and distributed under open content licenses. Not only do the works travel between artists and groups who participate in the project, third parties are welcome to re-use the work as well. Therefore links to documentation and resources are made available through the website of the project, <https://iterations.space> and through a publication that will be launched in May 2020.

The exhibition "**Operating / Exploitation**" which opens today here in Bozar Lab, shows the results of the most recent residency in Iterations, which is also the final one on the project programme. This residency took place here in Bozar Lab in two parts: the first one happened in June this year and the second one started two weeks ago and finalises with this exhibition.

Let's give you a quick overview of the main activities in the project.

Donatella Portoghese:

[image: Iterations 1: seminar in Hangar - 1]

The first Iterations was a seminar that took place in Hangar, Barcelona. It was a sort of kick-off meeting that was meant to establish a shared way of working between the partners.

[image: Iterations 1: seminar in Hangar - 2]

Discussing key notions of commons, economy and governance was an important first step. We were not alone but we invited some guests such as: **Andrea Olredo and Fran Quiroga (Peman)** (mediation), **Julien Deswaef** (artists who took care of the 'handover' from previous Iterations), **Kate Rich** (artist presentation), **Mafe Moscoso** (keynoter).

[image: Iterations 2: artists residency Trasformatório - poster]

The second Iterations was also the first artists residency that took place in May 2018 in Giampilieri, a small town in Sicily (Italy), which had been severely damaged during a flood in the 1990s. It was organised by Dyne.org under the name 'Trasformatório'. They invited 40 artists to work in situ on their own projects, but in close collaboration and dialogue with the inhabitants. Regularly, proceedings were shared and discussed. The residencies ended with an evening of presentations and performances developed as a parcours through the village.

[image: Iterations 2: artists residency Trasformatório - presentation evening]

The work that was chosen to be handed over from the residents in Sicily to the second group of artists in residency was an Italian folk-song, sung in a Sicilian dialect which was part of a performance that happened that evening. Which put many questions on the table: authorship rights, transfer-ability, voice as an archive, not understanding or misunderstanding as meaning.

Peter Westenberg:

[Image: Iterations 3: artists residency at Hangar - Iterations Bingo]

The third Iterations took place in November 2018 in Hangar in Barcelona and consisted of a group of eight artists in residency: **Antonia Manhartsberger,**

Connie Mendoza, Giulia Deval, Azahara Ubera, Iris Torruella, Julia Gorostidi, Rosa Llop, Mafe Moscoso. They used their residency to work intensively on creating collective convivial conditions between them.

They handed over their work to the following group of artists in Vienna in January 2019. The chosen format to present their work was a festive multi-media bingo that featured key notions of their common work such as response-ability, *trust, porosity, transformation.*

At the climax of the bingo event, miraculously all bingo cards were exhausted at the same time resulting in a collective Bingo outburst with all people involved in the game.

[Image: Iterations 4: artists residency at esc medien kunst labor - facade]

The fourth Iterations took place between April and May 2019 in esc medien kunst labor in Graz. The artists who participated to the collective residency were: **Naya Castillo, Antonia Manhartsberger, Norbert Math, Mia Melvær, Constanza Mendoza, Ulla Rauter** and **Martin Rumori.** The residency resulted in the exhibition **Collaboration Contamination** in the gallery of esc. The group had elaborated the idea that collaboration comes with change, with a mutual influencing. The installation which consisted of a heap of soil, symbolised a common ground, a place that composts, ferments, rots, stains and stinks, but all that in the understanding that common ground is a fertile place from which new life grows and develops.

[image: Iterations 5: artists residency + exhibition - flyer of Operating /Exploitation]

This idea of the cross pollination and contamination was taken to Brussels and discussed as an input during the residency in Bozar Lab in June 2019. The work in the group was not without tension and it was through this that the group decided to put conflict in the middle of the work around collaboration. During the second residency which ends today with the opening of the exhibition, the metaphor of an operating system was followed to address conditions of work and operations.

The exhibition presents contributions by: **Mia Melvaer, Maxime Stifinner, Zoumana Meïté, Norbert Math, Iris Torruella, Yoan Robin, Rosa Llop, Geraldine Juarez, Martin Rumori, Luis Rodil-Fernández.**

Donatella Portoghese:

There were some more activities on the program:

[image: handover residency in Brussels]

[image: Constant_V: Iterations – translocal presentation and installation]

[image: esc talks about iterations]

[image: handover meeting in Vienna]

[image: Constant_V: Collaboration guidelines - translocal presentation and installation]

At this moment, within the project Iterations, Constant is writing some 'guidelines for collaboration' as a sort of 'work in progress' during a series of activities and in dialogue with different people around us. For example, in the upcoming 'Collective Conditions' worksession that will start tomorrow at Ateliers Mommens, and also with an installation in our office window, as you can see in this image; the current installation in our window lists the short version of our guidelines for collaboration in 3 languages (EN, FR and NL) and invites visitors and passers-by to interact with them, leaving comments, etc...

Some reflections on the project: Technologies of collaboration

Peter Westenberg:

The formula 'The future of artistic collaboration in digital contexts' is a rather broad formulation that over the span of the project has been refined through its activities and participants.

Why is collaboration important?

Art and technology are shared concerns, they have influence on how we read and write the world and they demand collective learning and acting.

Collective imagination is doing, acting out while imagining together. It is through working together and mutually influencing each other that we will imagine and give shape to the world of tomorrow that we will inhabit together. If we write that story together and we want to be part of that, then **togetherness** is the tool that we need to study, improve and distribute. We cannot afford to not find out about its technologies.

The internet is the main infrastructure of our time. The contexts it creates are multiple: technical, societal, political, and all of these are connected. As Reni Hofmüller from esc mentioned during one of our partners meeting: **the internet is too big to make sense of alone, we need each other to learn and exchange.** We can see the internet as a metaphor for the whole world, or, as the exhibition Operating / Exploitation puts it: see a computer system as a metaphor for collaboration.

Iterations is a story in development. It started with a concept, but iterated its own pasts, presents and futures.

One interesting process that we have seen is that we seem to have shifted from in the beginning of the project, working collaboratively with technologies, towards trying to stay with **the technologies of collaboration.** To be able to concentrate on what happens between the humans that are involved in the collaboration, in many instances this has deliberately happened with our laptops closed.

The group of artists coming together in Hangar during the second residency have extensively worked on the creation of **collectivity.** Creating the proper conditions to be together is the work itself. They continued to work as a group after the residency and are currently creating a common persona with the name Rica Rickson, that carries forward the wish of being perceived as a collective. Rica Rickson, inhabited by multiple persons, will join us also for the Iterations worksession Collecting Conditions.

[image: Iterations 4: exhibition Contamination Collaboration]

One reflection I overheard during the residency was: why do we bother with the notion of work, the 'labor' that is integral part of 'to collaborate'. Is 'being together' collectively not preferable?

Iterations tries to set up situations around the work of play, experiment, the work of trying and failing, the work of investigating, finding out together. Rather than a being a prescribed repetitive activity that produces surplus value, a labor job with which one earns one living, this notion of work has more affinity with what Spider Alex and Sophie Toupin call **Speculative Doing:** doing as an attempt to unravel materialies, histories and fictions related to technology, to inspect, disrupt in order to make space for new stories and imaginations.

[image: Doing speculatively, Ada Journal #13]

[image: Constant_V: Collaboration guidelines]

We have to accept that friction and potential conflict is at the core of any collaboration. Finding points of non-commonalities, disagreements and areas of dissent might open up routinuous ways of working together, and inspire doing togetherness differently. This might inspire inventing **new forms of co-operation**, or it might point to a **necessity for shared protocols** or common understanding of each others needs and expectations. Of course an overabundance of unreasolvable points of difference can also indicate that working together is not or no longer possible.

Some reflections on the project: The empathy of care

Donatella:

[image: residency mindmap, Estampa fair, Barcelona, 2017]

Wen we first applied to the subsidy programme of the European Union, **Creative Europe**, we chose, as the main priority of the project, 'transnational mobility of artists and professionals'. Soon enough we realised that '**mobility**' extends to a bigger range of elements, not only artists, but staff members of the organising institutions, sources and resources, ideas, challenges, social and economical conditions and emotions. Which is not without **complexity**. To organise and host residencies means to bring together people from different backgrounds, who speaks different languages, who have different needs or expectations; people that applies or are invited to a residency don't come alone but with a set of conditions, desires, doubts even; sometimes with family members or young children. As my colleague Peter was mentioning above, these observations brought both artists and organisers to put in question the very concept of '**collaboration**'. What does collaborating actually means? Which parameters are essential or indispensable to ensure a good collaboration? And who decides about these conditions: the artists, the organisers or both?

During a particular intense conversation I shared with our colleagues in Hangar, we were looking at this mind-map. It was produced during a meeting of Spanish organisations that are involved with artistic residencies at the Estampa fair in Madrid in September 2017.

The term '**reciprocity**' appeared to be as important and essential to that of '**hospitality**', to support a sense of solidarity, empathy, exchange of knowledge and mutual learning between institutions and artists involved in the

process. Inspired by these and other conversations Sergi Botella from Hangar wrote a small article which will appear in the next publication of Hangar.

[image: On Reproducing Reciprocity by Sergi Botella]

'Hospitality' and 'reciprocity' are surely two important elements; they are often mentioned, and not without some critical remarks, in curatorial studies. To these two terms, I would like to add a third one which I particularly like; that is the one of '**response-ability**', so dear to Donna Haraway. Haraway's concept of response-ability is not the liberal humanist obligation to be responsible for one's own choices; rather it is about learning to participate in a collective "praxis of care and response". As Martha Kenney in her essay about 'Staying with the trouble' underlines, Haraway has chosen a specific style of storytelling to involve her readers in alternate "economies of attention" and initiate them into unfamiliar "arts of noticing"; finally teaching us how to make openings for different types of listening and responding.

I think that this '**capacity for response**' can apply to the way people relate to each other in artistic collaborative practices and should be developed by all the agents involved (artists, organisers, curators, etc...).

In a lecture by artist Andrea Fraser, titled 'As if we come together to care', reciprocity, openness, interchangeability of roles, capacity of listening and responding are mentioned as important elements that may not solve the sometimes complex and problematic conditions which surround collaborative practices, but can represent a way to deal with these conditions and an input to reformulate ethical principles and guidelines that could lead to healthy, hospitable relations.

Closing remarks

As I was saying, after receiving the grant from the European Union and starting working together, we realised quite quickly that the ingredients of this project such as the official programme of the activities, the agreed budget and the people involved were only the tip of the iceberg, but there were other elements which were more invisible but equally present: correlations, synergies, unexpected conditions, extra volumes and quantities. Some of these invisible aspects, we have tried to evoke in this introduction.

Peter Westenberg:

For small organisations such as us, European funds are a very important financial support. It allows us to work with artists from other European countries, to be able to bring their work to Belgium, and also to be able to offer international contexts for developing and showing work to artists who are based in Belgium.

It allows small size organisations to work side by side with bigger institutions such as Bozar, which represents a totally different challenge and experience. Funding for international collaborations that span a period of several years is not easy to find on local or national levels.

It was a great opportunity for Constant to be able to work so closely with our Iterations partner organisations. A project such as Iterations gives the possibility of getting to know each other and learning from each others practices while implementing the common programme.

Donatella Portoghese:

Maybe some points that we have talked about can be taken into the discussion that we will have later in the afternoon.

And to end our intervention we have to say that next to hard work and serious thinking and re-thinking, we also have experienced many enjoyable and relaxed moments. So here are some pictures from our Iterations family album:

- Marta Gracia from Hangar, Manuela Annibali from Dyne.org and Donatella Portoghese from Constant having breakfast at their lodging at the sisterhood at the Exerzitienhaus der Barmherzigen Schwestern in Graz
- Marta Gracia from Hangar and Peter Westenberg from Constant enjoying non alcoholic cocktails and Iterations bingo during Paratext evening presentation at Hangar
- Rosa Llops kids having fun in Cinema Nova in Brussels during her mum artists residency
- Reni Hofmüller from esc and Donatella Portoghese from Constant doing 'plastic table' administration at the beautiful seaside of Giampilieri Marina
- Organisers renting a big car to travel to Giampilieri in Sicily

- Staring at server hardware with our friend Jogi Hofmüller at Mur.at in Graz.

Thanks

We would like to take this opportunity to thank:

- Bozar for graciously hosting and supporting us during the residency, Christoph De Jaeger and especially Giorgina Becker, all the technicians and the communication team;
- our partners in the project: Lluís Nacenta and Marta Gracia from Hangar, Reni Hofmüller and Nayari Castillo from esc, Federico Bonelli and Manuela Annibali from Dyne.org;
- our financial supporters: Creative Europe culture programme of the EU, Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles Arts Numériques, department Kunsten of the Vlaamse Overheid and Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie;
- the graphic designer Manetta Berends who has worked on the graphic identity of the exhibition, our intern Marjorie Bonnet, our collaborator and volunteers Emma Kraak, Quentin Heroguer, Ruby Water and Axelle Lenaerts for communicating, spreading and documenting the conference, our colleagues at Constant for advise and moral support;
- and last but not least, all the artists who participate in the project and share with us their time, sensitivities, knowledge, intuitions, and without whom this project would not make sense at all.