"60x60": From architectural design to artistic intervention in the context of urban environmental change.

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Abstract :

60x60 is an artistic project in the city of Geneva asking for the participation of the residents of an urban and popular housing complex. From the first initiatives, as photography exhibitions of doormats inside the estate, to the organization of a citizen movement protesting against densification and gentrification, this article shows how artistic intervention and research in the public sphere can make the residents realize that they all share something and that they therefore can take direct action on their environment.

Keywords : architecture, housing, art research, public sphere, participation, citizenship

INTRODUCTION

The 60x60 project began as an artistic and curatorial project, asking for the participation of the residents of an urban housing complex in a popular neighbourhood in the city of Geneva[1]. The initial idea was to use the housing space as a place of artistic intervention, exhibition and debate. Our approach was particularly inspired by the experience of participatory architecture by Giancarlo de Carlo in Italy (de Carlo 1972, 2004), and Colin Ward's research on habitat and built environment in England (Ward 1976 ; Adams and Ward 1982). The guiding idea for this project was also inspired by the art collective Group Material from New York, and in particular their exhibition entitled *People's choice* in the early 1980s, or more recently, the Polish curator Joanna Warsza's project in 2007, *Trips to the Inhabitants of the City of Brok*[2].

We wanted to focus on different features of productions of those living in this urban housing complex, their creations, their means of expression, their interactions, and their ways of developing and investing in the private, semi-private and public space. At the same time, the 60x60 artistic collective wanted to create a research and exchange platform, which would recount the development of this housing complex since its construction in the 1960s, as well as explore what those living in it had done with it. In the spirit of situated artistic practices, we asked ourselves the following question: what effect does the presence of a group of artists in a built environment – in this case, a popular estate – have on the built environment, on the residents of the estate and on the artists themselves?

We were also intrigued by Renée Green's experience in 1993 when invited for an art residency in Firminy, where she inhabited an unoccupied apartment in Le Corbusier's "cité-jardin". Something completely new was going to happen where the "act of a critical artist and the act of life mix and merge". The unconscious act of "residing" becomes a conscious artistic act. So, the knowledge induced by a situated artistic practice would then be inspired by the autobiographical, by anthropological research and by fiction[3].

This is how we first came to be interested in the Honegger brothers' architectural concepts, by revisiting their initial project of modular architecture and integrated habitat, in order to see how it had all evolved. The 60x60 project intended to begin from this notion of "integrated housing", developing from the different connections between the cultural, social, economic, aesthetic and architectural aspects of this housing complex. The project also borrowed a founding idea of the initial architectural concept: to make housing spaces (accommodation), production spaces (workshops), shops, educational and collective spaces (schools, crèches), coexist together in the same space in order to create an environment "conducive to community life", as expressed by the architects themselves (Graf 2010 : 101).

Regarding the project's name "60x60", it refers to an architectural norm, and more specifically a proportion that forms the basis of Honegger's architecture. It is a proportion that served as a construction template or standard *(for each building of the housing*

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[1] The 60x60 project was created in May 2010, by Cyril Bron (film director, social worker), Tilo Steireif (illustrator, photographer and curator), and Sylvain Froidevaux (social anthropologist and curator). In December 2010, the collective became an association conforming to Swiss civil law (civil code, article 60).

[2] Doug Ashford, "Group Material: Abstraction as the Onset of the Real", in EIPCP European Institute for Progressive Policies http://eipcp.net/transversal/0910/ashford/en/ ; Laura Palmer Foundation, Trips to the Inhabitants of the City of Brok / Brok-Open Door Documentary Theater for the Weekend (www.laura-palmer.pl/en/projects/4/trips-to-the-inhabitants-of-the-city-of-brok---brok-open-door).

[3] Klaus Speidel, in ParisArt.com : www.paris-art.com/marche-art/unite-d- habitation/green-renee/5008.html; about Renée Green, see also, Ongoing Becomings, catalogue du Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne, 2009, p.31.

complex, where the proportions were the same for all), and is also a unit of measurement determining the size of the rooms.

At this stage, a new question arose: How could this common and impersonal standard, endlessly repeated and multiplied, have an influence on the lives of the inhabitants? As artists, we found in this standardized modular architecture, through the forms and prospects it offered, the possibility for an interesting aesthetic and conceptual game[4]. As researchers, we asked why this architectural concept was or not conducive to community life. So, we needed to begin by taking stock of the situation: consult the archives, collect testimonials, observe, create inventories of objects and events, all the while proposing artistic interventions in the different spaces of the Carl-Vogt housing complex. What we were most interested in, was the subjective point of view of the residents, of their personal history, of their experiences, of their perceptions – be they spatial, sensorial, anthropological, aesthetic – of the environment in which they live in, how they have seen it change, in what ways they have inhabited it, shared it, left it to decay or even abandoned it.

THE HONEGGER BROTHERS AND THE CARL-VOGT HOUSING COMPLEX

Jean-Jacques, Pierre and Robert Honegger, the three brothers of the architectural firm "Honegger Brothers" have been the most productive estate builders in Geneva after the Second World War. More than 9'000 apartments and studios, but also a lot of commercial buildings and factories were built during the last fifty years by "Honegger Brothers" within the town. Nevertheless, their first buildings have been carried out in Casablanca, Morocco, where they invented and tested a system of construction called "système Honegger Afrique" (HA), including the 60x60 standard, also named "norme Maroc" (Graf 2010: 124-125).

Built in the early 1960s, the Carl-Vogt housing complex saw its first inhabitants arrive between 1962 and 1964. At that time, there was little housing in the neighbourhood. Instead, there were numerous art and crafts workshops, allotments, warehouses, factories, as well as being the place where the former slaughterhouses were situated, which closed in the 1950s. The population that settled in the Carl-Vogt housing complex was primarily Swiss. It was mostly young couples and middle or working-class families, with young children. In terms of trade, there were: skilled workers, carpenters, small shop owners, civil servants, and postmen.

The Carl-Vogt housing complex has today 445 apartments spread over five rows of tenements. It also includes workshops, boutiques, garages, and back in the day, a kindergarten and primary school. Even though it is situated in an urban centre, this architectural project was imagined in the same way as that of a suburban housing estate, meaning as something functional and self-sufficient. Taking inspiration from the 1960s, this project was seen as creating cheap, working-class housing that would address Geneva's already growing housing crisis. In the beginning, the Honegger brothers had also envisaged creating a large, wooded park that would lead to the banks of the Arve river. But the construction of two large buildings, which are extensions of Geneva University's Physics Department, put an end to that idea and prevented any future creation of a passageway leading to a green space.

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[4] At the beginning of our project, we met a woman – a painter - who when she came to live in the Cité Carl-Vogt, some years ago, started painting on 60x60 cm canvases. At that time, she was completely unaware that 60x60 was the construction's norm, and the basis of the Honegger Brothers' architecture.

The Carl-Vogt housing complex is situated in a former industrial district of Geneva, called *la Jonction*. The area has considerably changed since the buildings were constructed, particularly since the second half of the twentieth century, with the expansion and the densification of Geneva's city-centre. In recent years, a new phenomenon of "gentrification" has emerged in the area, with former industrial sites being reclassified as trendy cultural places – "The Factory" (L'Usine), Contemporary art Building (BAC), Museum of contemporary Art (Mamco), Museum of Ethnography (MEG) - in addition to the arrival of numerous contemporary art galleries and specialized boutiques, and a younger and wealthier population. In fact, a new contemporary art gallery recently opened in the Carl-Vogt housing complex.

Beyond the economic, cultural and social changes engineering a progressive redefinition of the neighbourhood, the residents of the Carl-Vogt estate remain, for the most part, removed from the contemporary art scene, which they perceive with suspicion and even sometimes with contempt. Indeed, our project made no claim to bringing, explaining or making people like contemporary art, as found in the galleries or art centres, under the pretext that the residents would be deprived of it or would have difficulties accessing it[5]. For us, it was a matter of removing contemporary art from the galleries, museums and art centres, with their elitist and exclusive milieu. But it was also to outflank a mass audience that, often on principle, rejects contemporary art, in order to invite them to partake in productions which we were then going to stamp as 'art' – even if they do not always meet the academic criteria and conventions.

Our project very quickly came up against a major problem: the population's indifference to any form of artistic activity, and particularly to artistic activity that is collective or participatory. The testimonials from the first inhabitants, those who were there in the 1960's, described a social life in the housing complex that was once strong and dynamic: "before, everyone knew each other; the children went to each others homes', we would leave our doors open, we felt secure". Today, the functional and impersonal seems to dominate the housing complex: with its disappearing alleys and deserted stairwells, its anonymous entrances, its closed doors, these neglected facades all seem to reflect an unwillingness to reach out to the other. In a way, this urban housing complex appears as a place of depersonalization, of disempowerment where there is little to no self-involvement.

We realized that the 60x60 project needed time to develop, if not to waste time in a sort of expectation, in an attitude of availability, of complicity, of waiting and wandering with no fixed goal. In Petcou and Petrescu's words, we had to experiment a kind of "urban act" ("agir urbain"), an act that has "no goal or fixed time", but that "solely focuses on the possibility that everyone follows their own path, to find the space for what they have to do" (Petrescu 2007). A need to delve into a poetics of space, where the fact of living, of inhabiting a place, suggest first and foremost shared collective experiences, acts of proximity, during which we are confronted with our self and with the other, before committing our self socially, politically, as an artist, as a tenant, as a walker, as a citizen.

One of our first initiatives was to offer an "artistic service" in the estate. There was of course the idea "of being at the service of" something or someone, all the while offering "a service"

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[5] The 60x60 project is not specifically a cultural mediation project, despite receiving a grant in this category, (we received the Prix de la médiation en art contemporain from the Cultural Department of the City of Geneva, 2010-2011). Also, our work does not replicate that of Thomas Hirschhorn and his "Musée précaire Albinet" (2002-2004), in Aubervilliers, France, where he established an exhibition hall in Paris' suburb, to be managed by young people without jobs living in the area. The goal of this small art centre was to "exhibit major art works of the 20th century" (http://archives.leslaboratoires.org).

as it was fictitious, similar to Tatiana Trouvé's *Bureau d'Activités Implicites*[6]: an imaginary and improbable place where ideas, suggestions, information come and go, which can lead, or not, to concrete forms of links, projects or actions. Although it never had a physical existence, this "artistic service" nonetheless allowed concrete actions to emerge and a network to be created with multiple ramifications, both within and outside of the Carl-Vogt estate. This "artistic service" was also the opportunity for us to contact various groups and organizations that we had previously not envisaged collaborating with, such as the City of Geneva's social services whose interests (to occupy the land and create friendly communal spaces through various regular or one-off actions) were partially the same as ours. We also decided to collaborate with neighbourhood associations and already-existing events such as the "Fête des Voisins" (The Neighbours' Day) or "la Ville est à vous" (The City is Yours") – which are events organized and encouraged by the municipal authorities.

"OPERATION DOORMAT"

Our first main intervention was entitled "Operation Doormat". It consisted in listing all the doormats that we could find in the five rows of tenements, to take photos of each doormat, to write down the floor number at which we found them, to make a note of the owners' name, and of any additional comments that the people may have, etc. Through this process, we were able to meet numerous local residents and explain our project to them. On certain occasions, some people asked us to come back another time, while others invited us in for a cup of coffee. When asked why we were doing this, we would reply that we were making contemporary art and that the photos of all the doormats would soon be exhibited in the entrance of each building. In the end, we took more than 400 photographs of doormats. We dispersed the images over fourteen A1 posters, which were then hung at the entrance of each building, next to the door code. In each entrance, we also posted small placards explaining something about our project, about the neighbours, about the doormats, about contemporary art, about architecture, about the 60x60 standard, etc. Thanks to an article in a local newspaper our intervention made us very popular and enabled us to meet lots of people that we probably would have never met otherwise[7].

The "operation doormat" however also led us to have a very unique and increasingly significant other role, within the housing complex. What began as rumours that we heard on people's doorsteps was eventually confirmed as being true, upsetting the residents: in the months to come, the owner of the tenements was projecting a large-scale construction. He was planning to add two storeys to the five rows of buildings that make up the Carl-Vogt housing complex, in order to create a hundred or so new and luxurious apartments. Upon this news, we reoriented the focus of our action. We were no longer mere intervention-artists with installations and exhibitions within the housing complex. Instead, we became the mediators of an emerging resistance movement, where we facilitated a fluid communication and relationship between the various parties involved. The residents felt despoiled, even betrayed by the owner (the State of Geneva), who, up to then, had never explicitly expressed its intentions. Our initial role of cultural mediators between the contemporary art world and the public altered into us becoming "messengers", or information-providers for the residents and the associations that defend the rights of tenants, who have taken on the case after we informed them. So, it really was through our particular position within this housing complex, and our ability to play with the different discourses of action and of artistic intervention, that we were able to have a voice and to establish a protest movement.

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[6] "Bureau of Implicit Activities" (www.commentcestquonment.org/index.php?page=les-polders-de-tatiana-trouve-2).
[7] *Nouvelles de Plainpalais-Jonction* : "Un projet artistique dans la cité Carl-Vogt" n°255, novembre 2010, p 15.

The context surrounding this plan of adding extra storeys to the five tenements that make up the Carl-Vogt housing complex is the following: Geneva, for many years now, has experienced real estate speculations and an ongoing housing crisis. In the last five years, the population of the Canton of Geneva has risen by 19'000 people, while only 7'000 new accommodations were built. Such discrepancy has resulted in there being little to no availability of apartments and a dramatic increase in the price of rent[8]. This phenomenon is the same for the entire Franco-Vaud-Geneva regions (Thomas 2011). The average annual growth in population in this border region is one of the largest in Europe. It is currently projected that for 2030, the population will have increased to approximately 200'000 new residents, while the number of new jobs will increase about 100'000. Geneva's population growth is due to a high migration rate linked to the region's attractive economy (a law on no internal borders within the Schengen Area, appealing tax conditions for foreign companies, etc.) However, finding land to build on is difficult in Switzerland, and housing developments are slow to reach completion. In 2010, only 1'560 new accommodations were built, despite the State of Geneva committing itself to build 2'500 new accommodations per year. A reason for this delay is the change in status of the land from agricultural land into building land, in addition to the issue that residents are continuously opposing the construction of new tenements, next to residential houses and villas. It should also be mentioned that building on the outskirts of the city poses the problems of more transportation for workers, an increase in road traffic and development of public transports. The solution then advocated by the cantonal authorities in the last couple of years, is to increase the density of the city-centre. Following an agreement between the left (political party) and the right, the real estate firms and the associations that defend the rights of tenants, a new law was voted into place in 2009, allowing, under specific conditions, to raise the height of certain categories of buildings in the city centre. However, those in real estate soon breached this law in order to extend the "permission" to raise the height to those buildings where the law was not supposed to be applied in the first place. The Carl-Vogt housing complex is an example of such a breach of the law by the owner of the tenements, as they are already at the limit of the formerly authorized height. Additionally, in the coming years, local Associations of predict that there will be 2'000 new additional residents in a neighbourhood that is already very dense with 16'000 residents/km^2. Strange solutions are then proposed to compensate for the lack of green space, for instance, adding foliage and trees to rooftops that remain inaccessible to residents.

FROM THE POETICS OF SPACE TO ITS REDEVELOPMENT

This particular context regarding urban development spurred us to revise the 60x60 project according to the issue of public space – a notion, in view of our own experience, which proved nonetheless problematic. With the "Operation Doormat", we began exploring this particular and subtle boundary between public sphere and private sphere. In remaining on the doorstep of their apartments, we could interact with the residents; make them join our project, without being intrusive. We occupied a disinvested, if not neglected, space; a space generally conceded to passing visitors and commercial sellers. Yet it is through such space that we gained a foothold in the estate. Besides, we were not far from perceiving the doormat as an allegory of the artist's position of intervening where we least expect it. In highlighting an everyday object, on which we step on without much notice, in then exposing it as a work of art in building entrances, which have, temporarily, become a place of exhibition, we created a debate on the role of art in the estate, but also on the use of public space, of shared space, on the relationship between habitat and aesthetic, between daily life and poetry. During this time, we also began working on Colin Ward's idea of sensory wanderings (Adams and Ward 1982), a sort of poetic and educational promenade

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[8] Ch. Bernet, "Construction de logements: Genève touche le fond." in *Tribune de Genève*, 24 février 2012.

permitting a fresh perspective on the built environment that surrounds us. Colin Ward's approach is a continuation of social and ecological-orientated town planning, advocating the idea that the aesthetic gaze is accessible to all, and not exclusive to the elite. Therefore, in the seventies, Colin Ward and Eileen Adams suggested a method founded on sensory experiences designed to raise awareness on the components of space, i.e., perspectives, passageways, junctions, impressions left by colors, by visual barriers or by creepage. Following this idea, we edited a small brochure inspired by Adams and Ward's work (Adams & Ward 1982); a sort of guide where we asked a series of questions related to the views of the estates like: - *What is the dominant visual impact in the observed environment? - For you, what words best evoke the inner courtyard of the building?*

In the brochure, we also asked the observer to note the physical, visual, and psychological "barriers" that they could encounter during their wanderings; places where they wanted to stop or, on the contrary, rush through. We attempted to test this method with different types of people, such as social work or art students, but also neighboring residents or people that were visiting the "Operation Doormat" exhibition. As one needed to roam in the estate's fourteen building entrances in order to view the exhibition, it seemed a good opportunity to offer, at the same time, an experiential promenade in the corridors, passageways and stairwells. For the 60x60 project, it was also an opportunity to continue occupying the site. However, we soon realized that Adams and Ward's method was hardly applicable to our context. Indeed, the residents did not see the purpose of using a guide to stroll, even in an experiential way, in such a familiar environment. The poetic vision here clashed head-on with the visual conditioning resulting from the repeated experience of everyday life. And with respect to the art students, they preferred keeping the brochure for their personal collection, and we received very little feedback on their actual impressions.

At the same time, during the course of 2011, we began interacting with the *Service des écoles de la Ville de Genève*[9]. The latter was interested in our project of working so closely with the residents of the estate, in which a children's playground, placed under the Service's responsibility, was to be restored. The *Service des écoles* is, in fact, the institution of reference regarding all children's parks, school yards and playgrounds situated within the municipality of Geneva[10].

The interest of the *Service des écoles* in our project stems from that fact that the games and infrastructures present within the children's playground are relatively old, and no longer meet the current safety requirements. The municipal authorities have planned, in the short run, to replace these. However, because of the above explained sensitive nature of everything relevant to the development of Geneva's public space the *Service des écoles* preferred, in this case, to opt for a more concrete and concerted approach. Because of this preference, we wanted the 60x60 project being used for steering an experimental project that would merge art, observation, education and communication. According to a report we submitted to the municipal authorities, we proposed that they "create a laboratory of observation, inventions and creative interventions, through the means of art and education". We then suggested to progressively invest, during at least one year, in the *Baleine park,* a square inside the Carl-Vogt complex, in order to transform it into "a site of learning, of games and encounters" for changing it into a multipurpose public space, where intergenerational and intercultural aspects are taken into consideration as much as the safety and educational objectives of children's games and playgrounds.

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[9] Service des écoles et institutions pour l'enfance de la Ville de Genève (Service for schools and childcare institutions of the City of Geneva).

[10] This space was inaugurated in 1999 as the city of Geneva's 100th playground. Originally, it was the schoolyard of the now disappeared primary school of the Cité Carl-Vogt. The inhabitants called it "Parc de la Baleine" (Whale's square), because a sculpture of a whale stood in the yard, also acting as a labyrinth very much appreciated by the children.

Without waiting for the official green light from the municipal authorities, but with the tacit approval from the *Service des écoles*, we then created, at the end of 2011, a working group with artists, parents and neighbouring residents, of which some were architects in a private capacity interested in these questions of developing and refurbishing the public space. This group was responsible for launching, as of March 2012, an operation to restore and renovate the playground. The aim of these activities, which include creating a community garden, was first and foremost designed to raise the park-users awareness of the possibility of reappropriating the public space as was implied by the future transformations, as well as highlighting the issues relevant to these transformations, among which, of course, were the safety standards of the installations, but also the importance of the space being managed by the residents themselves. One of the first suggestions we made to the *Services des écoles* was, ironically, to preserve the old installations wherever possible, and to see what we could do to make them conform to the current norms. Wherever it was not possible to keep them, we hoped to buy ourselves some time and learn what the children and parents wanted, before the installations were replaced. Inspired by the works of French architect Patrick Bouchain, one of our strategies was to suggest an easily identifiable place, from where our interventions could be launched (Bouchain 2010).

(Photo 4)

Bouchain believes that it is essential, when beginning a new building or renovation site, to have a meeting place, or a place to display or debate; where all the protagonists (builders, architects, future beneficiaries) can meet, talk, receive information or present the developments of the project. It is the site's "home", the place where ideas, suggestions, and renovation works are generated; where we discuss the working methods, the quality of the materials used, where tools are stored, where plans are displayed. In our case, the site could have taken on the appearance of a shelter, of a tent, of a caravan or a garden shed. In the end, it took on the appearance of a small chalet, and so referring to the "Swiss Village" of the Swiss National Exhibition held in Geneva in 1896, and which gave its name to the street that runs across the Carl-Vogt estate, precisely where the playground is situated. With our "Swiss chalet", we were then acknowledging the past, often ignored by the estate's residents, as well as projecting ourselves in the future, developing our project and refurbishing the space with the residents' participation, asking the following question: "*What have we done with it* (the past, the public space)?" The irony of it all was that the small chalet delivered to us by the municipality had already served in another urban site, and arrived utterly covered in graffiti, which immediately provoked a debate on art, aesthetics, respect of traditions etc. In addition, the creation of an urban community garden in the playground generated an interest not only in the children, in inviting them to plant and observe the development of nature, but also in the adults, and in particular elderly people who made themselves useful in providing gardening advice.

(Photo 5)

FROM THE ARTIST AS RESEARCHER TO THE ARTIST AS SOCIAL ACTOR

Now, in fall of 2012, 60x60 project is committed on various fronts[11], with the continuing desire to consolidate artistic intervention, on-site research, social action and citizen engagement, placing us at the intersection of several worlds that often do not meet. However, it also places us at the heart of major issues relating to urban development, the preservation of green spaces, the role of art in the estate, architecture, citizenship, etc. The

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[11] We can say they are currently four fronts in the 60x60 project: 1) situated artistic research and artistic intervention, 2) social and community based action, 3) citizenship and political engagement, 4) environmental action and improve urban development.

future of the 60x60 project lies in its ability to continue acting on these different fronts, modes of intervention and reflection, in order to combine forces and merge areas that are often compartmentalized. Finally, it also depends on our ability as artists and artistic researchers to remain independent from the institutions (of art, of research, of social work, of culture) with which we collaborate.

The 60x60 project demonstrates that in a city, or a housing complex such as *La cité Carl-Vogt*, the purpose of art is not to merely decorate a public space or to make it more trendy. Instead, an artist in the public space can - and should - play a central role in the process of transforming an environment when for example a neighbourhood, or a population, is caught amid multiple, complex and overwhelming issues such as the housing crisis, economic interests, urban development, partisan politics, State power, ecology, etc. The 60x60 project demonstrates the significance of investing a defined space, such as that of a building, a neighbourhood or a city, in order to develop a field of research.

Beyond other categories used in sociology and anthropology, the notion of 'situation' (Goffman 1959, Balandier 1967, Lefebvre 1974,) seems to be the most appropriate for the 60x60 project. By 'situation', we (the artists of the collective) mean the attachment to a place, to its history, the challenges that it faces, and its future, which essentially guides our research. On the one hand, we view ourselves as artists present within a space and a given, built environment. On the other, we view ourselves as acting subjects, living an experience that we have partially created. In that, we draw inspiration from both the phenomenological approach (of the space, the habitat), and a sort of situationist approach (in the idea of constructing situations) (Debord 2000).

The 60x60 project sets off from the place where we live, where urban, social and architectural history merge, and where the individual life of people, their relationship to everyday life and public/private space interacts. Even if the residents think and act in heterogeneous ways, they share the same place and the same problems. It is this abstract entity that art can attempt to recreate in investing the urban space with a lasting presence, in identifying it through its changes and inscribing it in the future. The artist-researcher intervenes in the chinks of the functional habitat, and in the city's abandoned spaces. The artist-researcher creates unexpected acts and leaves traces behind where the functional doesn't intend to leave any. By his/her position of mediator, the artist-researcher can bring together local players and public authorities, can make the residents realize that they all share something, even when they think they are alone and powerless, and that they therefore can take direct action on their environment. Together, artists, local players and residents, eventually create the conditions for an "urban action", providing them with the possibility to intervene in decision-making that affects their lives.

<div align="right">Sylvain Froidevaux/2012</div>

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