

# Contemporary Art Takes Over Leytron – Creative Negotiations

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The present text illustrates the position taken by an artist involved in various aspects of the *¿Creative Villages?* project. It is divided in three parts, each of which is written from a different perspective, in accordance with the various roles I have played.

- › **MAKING CONTACT** – describes my experience as artist-curator. Project manager Benoît Antille suggested I organize some of the events. Here, I explain the motivation behind my choices.
- › **NEGOTIATIONS** – proposes three artistic and curatorial strategies. As project assistant, I participated in most of the events. These strategies were born of my observations.
- › **AS AN ARTIST** – exposes the thoughts that came to me during the project, and that inspire my practice.

## I. MAKING CONTACT

Two events interrogating the way we live together

On several occasions during the course of *¿Creative Villages?*, Benoît Antille offered me the opportunity to act as curator and to organize events. This led me to wonder which forms of art and which subjects could enter into dialogue with the residents of the municipality. From the outset, referential or minimalist artistic approaches seemed harder to justify with the general public. But I wanted to avoid compromising. I wanted to propose contemporary approaches without imposing on the artists a theme that might be more likely to appeal to the general public. So I decided to give the artists *carte blanche* as to the final form and content of their work. One instruction, however, remained: to interact with the residents of the municipality of Leytron in one way or another. I liked the idea of taking space, making contact, disrupting everyday life and intriguing passers-by. It is for their capacity to interact with the public that I chose Katerina Samara

(visual artist) and the *ad hoc* duo Nicole Murmann (performance artist) + Christian Valleise (musician).

Through her artistic practice, Katerina Samara explores issues of family memory and collective memory, using sensations to activate or reactivate a past or present and then share it with others.

Her project on the links between memory and taste, which she began at the Ferme-Asile in 2016, continued in the context of *¿Creative Villages?*. For a week, Katerina Samara took over the kiosk of Fabiana de Barros (artist). Her project, “Periptero du goût,” proposed various activities around the themes of memory, identity and food. Katerina Samara put together a recipe exchange project between the residents of the municipality, along with a workshop with school-children exploring the links between their native nationalities, their current places of residence and food.

Through an approach placing food at the centre, “Periptero du goût” brings forth a convivial aspect which facilitates access to art, as Véronique Mauron (curator at Ferme-Asile) points out: *But they (spectators from the Valais) become open, curious and involved as soon as they are accompanied in their discovery of contemporary art.* Véronique Mauron emphasizes the importance of this notion of “conviviality” in access to culture.<sup>7</sup>

Through her projects, Katerina Samara deals indirectly with questions of migration, probing our relationship to the other at a time when Valais and, more broadly, Switzerland, seem to be closing in on themselves.

Over the course of an entire day, Nicole Murmann and Christian Valleise performed a sound performance on the Leytron-Ovronnaz PostBus line entitled “Duel Moîte”.

The performers were dressed in black and equipped with a mini-loudspeaker. Following the shifting sounds, they too would shift, moving away from one another or coming closer. The soundtrack melded a mix of their voices, recordings and musical compositions.

For “Duel Moîte”, Nicole Murmann and Christian Valleise explored the question of our relationship to the other: at times harmonious, and at others, suspended or tense. Beginning from the principle that each interaction is a form of negotiation, the performance’s concept situated communication between two people in a duel, a choreography of power struggles. As for the adjective “moîte”, or moist,

7. English translation of original French excerpt: *Arts Visuels en Valais: Un état des lieux*, Benoît Antille, Cahiers de l’Observatoire de la culture – Valais 1, Canton du Valais, Service de la culture, 2013.

it refers to the body, to the physiological changes that arise during a stressful situation, but also to those types of duels that are rather more latent and implicit.

The choice of the PostBus – a limited, enclosed space – involved passengers in the performance. This moist duel was therefore played out between the two performers, as well as between the performers and the audience. The reactions were varied: some experienced it as an aggression, others were grateful for the opportunity to assist.

The choice of this atypical site for a performance allowed us to reach a large audience, and as such to put them in close proximity with contemporary art. This performance may even have led them to examine the interactions within their own relationships, be it in a couple, their family or workplace, the street, etc.

The common denominator in the performances of Katerina Samara, Nicole Murmann and Christian Valleise, is a dialogue with spectators. Through their work, they question our memory and our way of living together – how these various spaces, whether they be tangible or intangible, private or collective, are negotiated.

## II. NEGOTIATIONS

How does one go about involving an unsuspecting audience? Here are a few curatorial and artistic strategies that emerged from *¿Creative Villages?* in Leytron.

### 1. Exhibiting elsewhere than in a museum space; in public, atypical, convivial places:

- › allows us to present the general public with contemporary practices by avoiding the symbolic barrier of stepping through the door of a museum;
- › gives visibility to art.

### 2. Involving local people or personalities:

- › gets the project off to a good start;
- › gives legitimacy to the project or event;
- › draws a larger audience;
- › allows us to learn from one another.

### 3. Infiltrating community events:

- › breaks with the elitist image associated with contemporary art and its milieu;
- › starts a dialogue.

### 1. Exhibiting in public, atypical, convivial places:

For the general public, stepping through the door of a museum or art centre can be challenging, as Isabelle Moroni (Professor at the Haute École de Travail

Social in Sierre) and Gaëlle Bianco (Research Assistant, Haute École de Travail Social, Sierre) testify: *People who have not been socialized to interpret legitimate cultural codes may have a harder time stepping through the doors of cultural facilities. Malraux had developed the idea of bringing the non-public to culture by way of an ambitious policy that aimed to decentralize cultural facilities in non-urban areas (through, for example, Maisons de la culture). Although the question of decentralization no longer has the same urgency today, particularly in a federalist system such as ours, practices are emerging everywhere that propose to reach “audiences where audiences are.” Actions undertaken range from new forms of mediation to strictly artistic projects. What all these practices have in common, however, is that they “exit” the walls of cultural institutions to weave artistic and cultural relations with the residents in these regions.*<sup>8</sup>

The exhibits and events presented in the old church generally had a low attendance. Despite the quality and diversity of artistic approaches, in both form and content, they were mostly attended by an audience of cultural actors and art lovers. Several factors explain this finding. The space itself was a subject of controversy: a sense of the church being desacralized was not unanimously appreciated by the villagers, some refusing to enter it for that reason.

However, I would posit that the church is perceived by the community as a kind of museum. Indeed, as per the kinds of activities developed by *¿Creative Villages?*, and in its prioritizing of resolutely contemporary practices, the church came to symbolically represent a cultural institution. This, in turn, would explain the difficulty experienced by certain residents to enter it. Moreover, when cultural events occupy the public space, residents seemed more curious and ready to engage in spontaneous discussion.

In order to circumvent this reluctance to step through the door of the museum, we can imagine cultural events that go beyond institution walls to reach the general public.

Exhibiting in a public, convivial and/or atypical place allows us to enter in greater contact with the public. It also gives more visibility to the artistic projects.

The case of the “Art en Demeure” event, created by Balthazar Lovay (artistic director at Fri Art), Miriam Laura Leonardi (artist) and Ben Rosenthal (artist) for the 2017 Palp Festival, speaks to the draw contemporary art can have outside museum walls: on this occasion, apartments and private gardens in the old town

8. English translation of original French excerpt: *Les espaces de la participation culturelle*, Isabelle Moroni et Gaëlle Bianco, Cahiers de l'Observatoire de la culture - Valais 3, Canton du Valais, Service de la culture, 2016.

of Sion were opened to the public and occupied by artists. The event was a great success and was attended by an audience composed of the general public and connoisseurs alike.

Similarly, *¿Creative Villages?* participated in this trend and made use of various sites and spaces such as: the Café des Mayens in Montagnon, the Ovronnaz Baths, the Leytron-Ovronnaz PostBus line, the Café de la Coop in Leytron, etc.

The “Vignes en Mouvement” conference-vernissage at the Café des Mayens with Jean-Henry Papilloud (historian) and Gilbert Vogt (photographer) was a success, which is partly due to the subject matter itself, although in my opinion it may be due above all to the choice of a convivial venue, the café, where the symbolic barrier was lifted.

The choice of a well-known and respected personality in the region to host the evening probably also had an impact on attendance.

## **2. Involving local people or personalities:**

Within the context of cultural programming for a village, involving a portion of the community could prove to be a strategic decision. Several events demonstrated this, notably the work of François Dey (artist) with young local musicians for the opening concert of *¿Creative Villages?*. The interactions between the artist and the youth provoked discussions in the families and the village. This created a buzz that aroused the community’s curiosity, who showed up in large numbers to the event. As Benoît Antille explains, the social factor brings together a larger, more diverse audience: *The Valais is characterized by strong familial and friendship ties which can help mobilize an audience that might have otherwise shown little to no interest, showing up to support an artist they know.*<sup>9</sup>

However, that factor alone is not always enough. If the goal of an artistic or cultural project is to become sustainable, a more continuous and intense collaboration with the community seems necessary (as is the case with some participatory or relational projects.) That being said, consulting residents and taking them into account from the project’s inception seems crucial to start off on the right foot. I am thinking here, for instance, of the choice of project title, *¿Creative Villages?*. This title, proposed in reference to “creative economies”, was widely approved by the research team. However, the community was greatly displeased with the choice of an English project title. Indeed, residents did not feel compelled by it, expressing that they might have more easily identified or connected with a French title.

9. *Arts Visuels en Valais: Un état des lieux*, Benoît Antille, Cahiers de l’Observatoire de la culture – Valais 1, Canton du Valais, Service de la culture, 2013.

It would therefore be beneficial to consult residents in the selection of the title, eventually creating an event precisely for this occasion, involving them in a vote for their favourite title at the end of the day.

### **3. Infiltrating community events**

In the context of a village, to break with the elitist image that is often projected on contemporary art and its actors seems not only necessary, but pressing. Infiltrating grassroots and community events allows us to enter into dialogue, as I witnessed during our participation in the rally organized by the Université Populaire in Leytron. The *‘Creative Villages?’* stand was located in the old church and involved a glimpse into the current exhibit, followed by a quiz. Thanks to the exhibition’s mediation work and the conviviality of this community event, as well as the artistic pieces showcasing the landscape of the municipality, participants generally appreciated the exhibition and a bridge was thus created, initial communication established.

## **III. AS AN ARTIST...**

Food for Thought

### **Creating For Oneself vs Creating For Others**

As a cultural actor, I believe we must be aware of the primary impulse that drives us. Whatever reasons we may invoke, we carry out artistic projects primarily for ourselves, be it because we feel like it, we need to, or we believe it may bring about a contribution, a new perspective, new questions; on a place, a process, a system or a political, sociological or social issue... Some might even say that it is economic instability, in part, and the quest for funding, that drives us to create.

### **Creating For Others - Giving Back to the Community**

When a cultural project takes root in a new region, reactions from the community can be varied: from the fear of invasion to anger, indifference or enthusiasm. But what is certain is that all cultural projects are inspired, one way or another, by the place where they are developed – and that all rely, sporadically or consistently, on the help of local residents. Although goods and services are often exchanged (orders made from local suppliers, etc.) we often forget to give back to the community that welcomes us; forgetting also to consult the people there in order to know what the community truly needs or wishes to receive.

### **Audience Matters**

As artists, depending on how we work, we are often led to interact closely with the exhibition space and its context. Research on the place’s history can be carried out. Observations on architecture and/or environment can lead us to create

forms for and with a place. These artistic works then probe an aspect of the exhibition space; be it its nature (a white cube, an old industrial site, a mansion, a public building, nature); the broader context within which it exists – previous use of the space (former factories, for example); and/or the geo-socio-political context of the city or village where the institution is located: the place.

At times, however, even though so much attention is paid to these aspects, the idea of the audience is paradoxically neglected. If it is true that institutions themselves have their own audience, and that as such this issue is easily remedied (we are interacting either with an informed public, or a public who can benefit from mediation), as soon as we set foot outside of an institution or museum, it seems necessary that we remind ourselves: the audience matters. Who, after all, are we speaking to?

### **Regarding Function**

Outside of museums and cultural institutions, is it truly reasonable to neglect the question of the purpose of a project (or of art in general)? Indeed, without the communication and mediation tools made available by certain structures, how do we enter into dialogue with an audience? How do we legitimize our practices and arouse interest in an uninitiated audience?

Cultural actors and producers, along with art lovers, are generally reluctant or unwilling to discuss the question of art's usefulness.

However, in my opinion, “art for art's sake” only makes sense in the context of an institution or museum. As soon as we leave those spaces and enter into contact with the general public, people repeatedly ask us why we do what we do, and to what end. Generally, artists respond by explaining why the question of art's function is not relevant when conceiving a work of art!

But it is my belief that, in the context of a village, we simply cannot allow ourselves to sidestep the issue. The particular concerns of this other audience require answers; the public needs to understand.

The topic of art's purpose can be interpreted in a very broad sense. I tend to explain that my goal is to carry out projects that speak to the issues of our contemporary society. Interrogating aspects tied to gender, race, class, economy or ecology can be a way to ground our practice in the need for art to have a purpose. Indeed, as we keep these societal questions in mind, we build bridges between the world and our practice. On my most optimistic days, I would even go so far as to say that some artistic projects have the power to articulate questions and develop the critical thinking that can help us reimagine what *living together* means.