

# Bureau des Compétences et Désirs

[www.bureaudescompetences.org](http://www.bureaudescompetences.org)

## **Committing to produce, articulate, inform and... transform**

Living art, contemporary creations are tools. Decorum hasn't seduced our imaginations for a long time: artists now address real problems. Content is richer, they give it shape and the ability to move us, make us think and act. The real function of art is in the use we make of it.

The desire to transform is intrinsic to all of our actions in every aspect of our lives. The Aventure Ici (Adventure Here) project, carried out on location, the Serial Objects and Transformer pour l'Agence (Transforming for the Agency) programs, the Editions Mémoires Urbaines (Urban Memory Editions), the Cahiers de l'Agence (Agency Notebooks) the Prêts-à-poster (Ready-to-post), and finally, La Formation (the Training program) are part of an established project to change our outlook and our capacity to act culturally, based on the concept of putting people in direct contact with artistic acts.

## **A specific social problematic, new ways of interacting and dialoguing**

The town of Peynier, Place des Savonniers. This creation is based on an act of appropriation of a public space, with the intent of participating in the definition of its use and the planning of its development.

A group of people, the townsfolk of a village 40km from Marseille, calls on the Bureau des Compétences et Désirs (Office for Abilities and Desires) to help them start-up and carry-out their project, which involves replacing an old, insalubrious block at the heart of the village, with a public town square.

The townsfolk are clearly determined: they want to be heard by the Municipality and they want to be involved in the design and planning of this urban development project, which is very close to the hearts of the residents in that area. The involvement of an "artist/landscaper/architect" is an indispensable part of their demands.

## ... Committing...

Can a work of art change the lives of one, a few, or many people? Supposing that this is possible, what really changes?

Our main job, as a production and development organisation, is to listen to the people and to understand the projects, to encourage good relationships between the artist and the people and thus to support the carrying out of their wishes.

In this case the work of art is not the cause of change but simply its materialization.

In our interaction with the people we meet, with whom we develop artistic projects we observed that it is not their lives that change, but themselves. Their commitment is preceded by an incredible sense of responsibility, which is often ready to renew itself in the course of the project.

## A social context

Peynier developed as a modern town (a dormitory style village where there is little interaction amongst the inhabitants during the week, good neighbourly relations but also some rivalry among certain people). The townspeople can maintain close relations with the Mayor and his assistants (encounters in town streets, Saturday morning meetings at town hall). This situation, where one can have direct contacts with the Political is very different from big cities where the people with power, who make the decisions, are only rarely visible.

The people's initiative is due to their desire to react and take charge of a situation which has escaped their control and which influences their living conditions directly: the creation of a public square, beneath their very windows in lieu of an insalubrious plot of land. This area is composed of several blocks that are being bought by the Town Council. The townspeople certainly agree with the development of this project, but not at any cost.

A local institution the CAUE (Conseil d'Architecture et d'Urbanisme des Bouches-du-Rhône - The Bouches-du-Rhône Architecture and Town planning Council) was contacted by Town Hall to design an improvement plan for the square. (CAUEs are departmental institutions that work as counsels for small town halls and provide them with a council and an architectural project at low cost).

The CAUE study is published in a small information journal named «Place des Ormeaux» by the Town Hall.

This is the moment in which the townspeople mobilised: not only did they not like the drafts presented, but also, as future users of the square they wanted to participate in the discussions, to be actively involved in the carrying out of this future collective development plan. Briefly describing the drafts, the future square seemed to have a certain no mans land air that did not bode well for interaction. Everything seemed to discourage people from meeting: the benches were back to back, the vegetation was treated in a cursory fashion, it had no character and it took no stand.

The residents of this future square heard of the work carried out by the BCD (Bureau des Compétences et Désirs) in the context of Nouveaux commanditaires de la Fondation

de France after a first project in the area, whose subject was the memories of Peynier's village Elders, which, with the collaboration of an author, resulted in the publishing of the work "C'est la faute au Soleil - récits et recettes de la Sainte-Victoire".

We had, therefore, already a good base on which to work in this village context: a disappearing collective memory and the need expressed of giving it an allure of heritage, and of the evolution of the population in terms of contribution (the village children have moved off to the city, but new ones came soon after, with their own history and needs, especially concerning their way of life. The new arrivals live in the village, but don't work there).

When the group of residents (approximately 20 people) approached us we immediately felt their diversity, the different levels of thought and involvement. However, this group had the advantage of being representative, a sort of sample group, of the village population. Very quickly the group was reduced to four or five people; but the first meetings, with the original group, ensured that their collective mobilization became known to the whole village. Thus, the movement was legitimized and lost whatever aura of danger or conspiracy that it may have had in the eyes of those not directly implicated.

**Producing**, means working alongside the artists and continuously confronting the great questions of society (religions, death, health, education, living heritage, the environment) with more mundane subjects (urbanisation, communities, cultural transmission, memory, cooking). The emergence of works of art is built on a series of steps, some more demanding than others, whose connection, coherence, and outcome must be promoted.

## **Dynamic relations with and between the partners**

Firstly, we had on the one hand, good relations between the townspeople; those in favour of embarking on the public square project got together, had discussions, exchanged opinions and thus created new neighbourly bonds.

On the other hand, there was one person who was openly against the project, voicing a request for the construction of a parking lot, (in the very heart of the village, right at his front door!); this person isolated himself from the group.

Then, we had the relations that the BCD had to build with the townspeople, who must be listened to, then listened to some more. The people's objective was to develop the project together with the Municipality. In this initial phase we suggested that they define their project in a book of specifications that would enable them to pass the order on to an artist. This phase developed throughout several meetings during which the exchange of ideas, corrections, and clarifications were vital and gave each person the chance to express himself.

The drawing out of the book of specifications is, in fact, the time (now, or never again!) in which the person who commissions the job can verbalise his needs, wishes and ideals. This is the moment in which he gives authority to his project dream. For its part, the BCD listens, analyses, interprets, proposes and adjusts. The BCD's role is to give the book of specifications a «philosophical» dimension and to relentlessly ask the following

question: «Apart from the technical, concrete, aesthetic aspects, what is the deeper meaning of this project?», until the answer emerges.

In this way, in this precise case, along with the residents' demands that their public Square be a convivial meeting area, there arose the underlying question of the public square in its political sense: the public square as symbolic expression of the citizen's word, of participation in the organisation and life of the town.

Any architect, urban planner or engineer is capable of designing and carrying out a public square development project, but it is only through this type of in-depth analysis of the client's innermost wishes that we are able to choose the best person to carry out a project.

As soon as we grasped the true nature of the Peynier residents' desires, all of our research led us to one name: Alexandre Chemetoff. Landscape artist, architect, urban planner, Alexandre Chemetoff was the only person, to our knowledge at that time, to have reflected on and clearly described the architectural and symbolic interplay that arises today in a Public Square development project.

The relationship between the townspeople and the municipality began to take shape: an independent group formed, it appealed to the local power, the Mayor. The group proposed a project and a work method that favoured participation by all parties, through the BCD. The group was certainly convincing and organised a meeting between the BCD and the municipality.

However, it is important to take a step back and look at the events that led to this meeting: following BCD's advice the townspeople called in the municipality only once the book of specifications of the order was completely structured. In fact, we suggested that they put themselves in the situation of being able to defend a well-constructed project (motivations, contents, means of developing the project) and not simply an idea. The Town Council subscribed to their proposal and agreed to take it to the next step: inserting it in the projects to consider in the New Orders process.

It took two years to study the project: for long periods no action was taken, due to important political changes (the Mayor at the time was relieved of his duties after over 30 years and replaced by a young assistant, then the political context changed moving the village from a left-wing to a right-wing orientation).

The townspeople went through a period of great anxiety as they lost their initial, favourable contacts one by one. Twice more they had to convince someone of their project, and with the arrival of the new Mayor they started over again for the third time.

Relations between BCD, the townspeople and the municipality started to take shape once more, based on a partnership: each one had a voice in the matter as an individual and as part of a defined group.

The question of political power and decision-making was at the centre of this partnership: the Mayor could decide whatever he wanted concerning the townspeople's project, he was new and had no previous commitments; but he had also just been elected, had little experience and was faced with a very determined group of people. So determined, in fact, that they had even found support outside of the village; the BCD made them stronger.

The mayor realized that this project was important to reinforce the legitimacy of his office. As the Mayor took office the public square project became part of the priority works for the village. Undoubtedly, he intuitively understood that the townspeople were offering him the opportunity to leave a mark on the public space during his mandate. He seemed open to carrying forth a well-thought out project developed by the population, designed by a known architect; he played their game all the while reminding townspeople of their responsibility towards this project (in consideration of the possible noise in the square, possibly unpleasant encounters, taking care of the rubbish, caring for the plants...)

The relations between townspeople, architect and municipality open up a whole new perspective. The townspeople rejected the CAUE project, so we had to take a dynamic and positive position by proposing alternatives to the original draft. The study phase of the project can be viewed as completely separate from its actual carrying out; for this reason, and particularly because it was essential that we propose new ideas in lieu of the old ones for the future square, we encouraged the townspeople to commission a study to Alexandre Chemetoff.

We presented our choice in a public meeting in the presence of both the Town Council and the then Mayor. Our financial independence, thanks to the support of the Fondation de France was a determining factor: the project process could start independently of its actual, physical carrying out. The architect of choice's reputation was another determining factor, it took the project to a level of originality, prestige and demand that nobody, townspeople nor Municipality, expected.

The surprise effect and the presence of a renowned artist, revived interest in a project that was slowly dying because of all the hurdles and complex procedures it had encountered on its path.

Hence, our method was to go on the offensive, perfect for this type of situation, which was a sort of struggle of the democratic way. Talking and listening are the basis for the whole development project; no decision was made by force or against the general opinion.

Later in the project, during the actual carrying out phase, we needed to keep applying these same methods: relenting on some things whilst maintaining the same high standards on others.

Obviously, drawing up a work order plan based on the townspeople's requests gives the project a concrete, technical base that served to reassure them (scheduling and planning out the work phases, defining priorities...). Also, financial transparency was extremely important, as well as trying to keep up with the proposed deadlines.

## **To articulate is to give form to the project**

What is a project? It's an idea, it is the means, imagined and developed, to carry out that idea, the work process that it entails. Our methodology is empirical and constructed, both scientific and intuitive. Through experience we move forward, the ambition is to find connections, to cross knowledge and new information, to make sense where it is not expected and to surprise by taking on a new problem to solve. Then, logic must be found between the pre-existing and the future acts. In this phase, time is a privilege.

## Critical points, solutions and work processes

In the initial phases, scrupulously following the project is critical: what does this mean for the people who are committed to the project? Is the project viewed as a collective goal or as the instrument of personal ambition? Can motivated people become responsible actors? We must evaluate, but also build the conditions of responsibility.

In Peynier, the duration of the project itself, along with the many delays due to political upheaval, greatly tested the wills of the people involved. During this time the solution adopted was to explain everything over again, recreating dialogue with the new political figure, whilst continuing to develop the project draft of the architect's study.

Then, the hardest hurdle to face, the building site, the actual construction of the much-desired public square. Technical meetings, the call for bids to the various companies, the granting of the contract... and the beginning of construction. The construction site, the construction firm, the construction, three words whose meanings are synonymous with continuous negotiation as to the quality that must be maintained in the project. Maintaining this quality brought forth a series of conflicts, which confirm the inevitable difference in the language of the person who lays out the project and the worker who carries out the work.

The idea is to minimize these differences so that the project is developed in a satisfying manner for all involved. So that everyone - artist, artisan, mediator, and the person who commissions the work- recognizes where his responsibility lies.

**To Inform**, is to create a platform for understanding and acceptance throughout a project. Meeting, discussion and transmission time is an integral part of the work-in-progress. Finding a way of sharing these moments is yet another step: conceiving publications adaptable to various project formats, writing texts and getting texts written by all concerned, translating, illustrating and finally, diffusing through publications and internet websites for public access and creating documents and archives for researchers. Giving back to the community all of the various steps of the project through images and content.

In Peynier, as elsewhere and always, it is now time to manage the consequences: the project is finished, it belongs to those who commissioned it, and the mediator must disappear and let the direct relationship with the artist follow its own course. Fixing an inauguration date, writing out invitations, summoning the press, preparing speech protocols, choosing the menu for the celebration... all potentially chaotic, sometimes violent, times for the mediator. This is the time, also, when the biggest power plays for the appropriation of the project are underway. The day of the inauguration is like the reversed image of the previous weeks: a moment of great happiness and mutual recognition.

... **to transform**, how do we define the social spaces in our lives? Emptiness, fullness, encounters, projects being born, creations being carried out, speedy actions, attempts, stilted or continued, utopian projections...

We want to give each person traversing their social space the means for practical and

critical thought, transforming their way of looking at things, raising curiosity, engaging their sense of responsibility: this is our ambition in all of our interventions towards the public (L'Aventure ici, l'Agence, Serial Objects, les Editions).

Through La Formation (The Training Program) we want to give future art professionals the savoir-faire and methodology to work away from the artistic beaten path. We propose a one-year cycle during which time they manage a project hands on from the analysis, thought and imagination phase to the actual carrying out of the project.

At the heart of this training program, the Ecole des commanditaires offers a flexible time module (a day, a week, a month), which is adaptable to all cases (conferences, site visits, project creation, practical and methodological approach). The Ecole des commanditaires addresses its services to local groups who are sensitive to new local and territorial development possibilities. It addresses itself to companies that feel the need to become active in the field of contemporary society alongside the artists and professionals who compose it.

The Bureau des competences et desireres is built on this idea, that the notion of transformation born through the creation of works of art will always be the beginning of a larger and changing project, never its outcome.