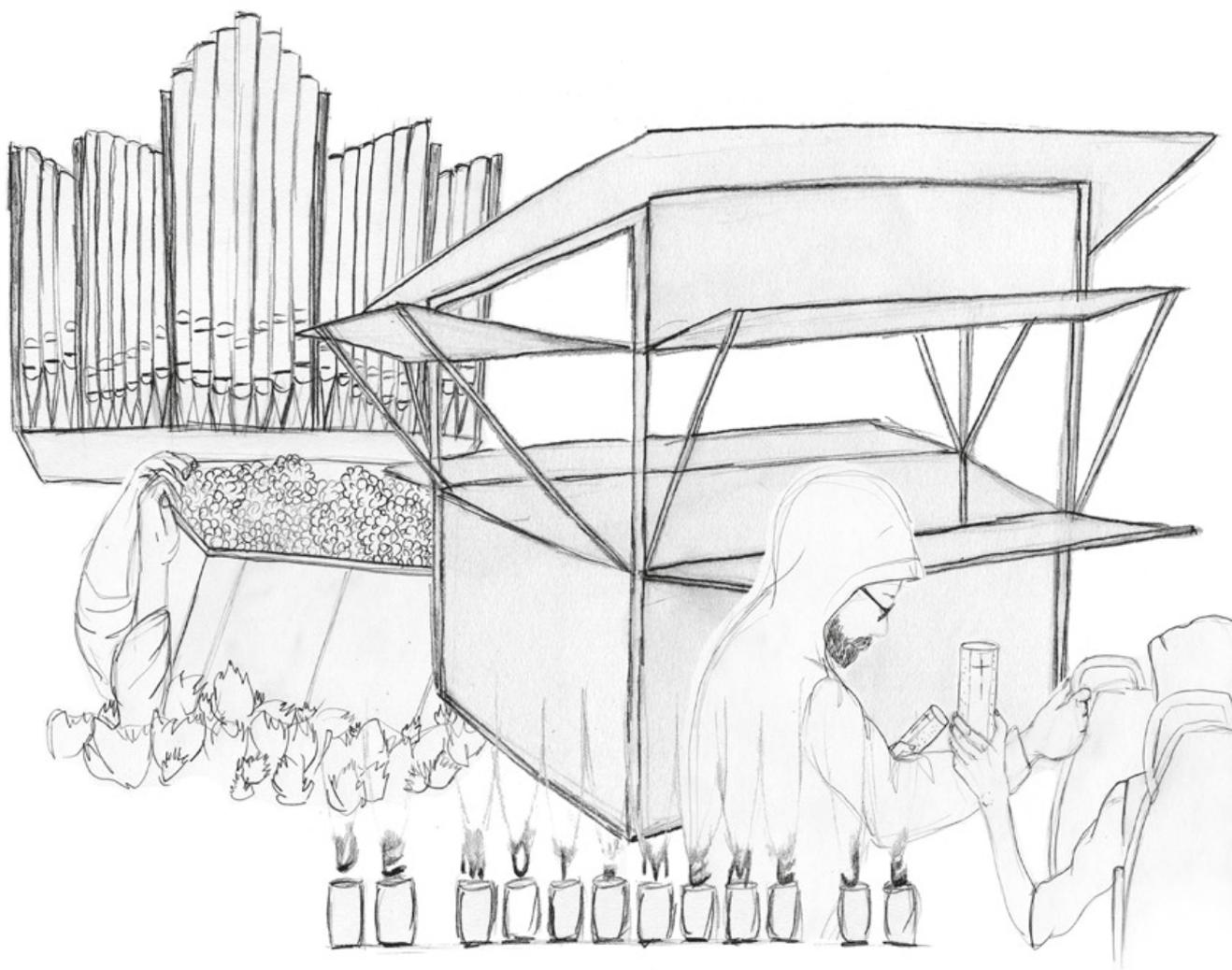


# ¿Creative Villages?



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# ¿Creative Villages?: CONCLUSIONS OF A PILOT CONTEMPORARY ART PROJECT IN A RURAL AREA

## EXCERPTS

BENOÎT ANTILLE

### PROLOGUE

The official ending of the CreativeVillages' pilot phase was scheduled on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> May 2017. Inbetween the presentation of artist Fabiana de Barros' *Kiosque à Culture*, and the speeches that launched Carmen Perrin's exhibition – organised in the former church used as exhibition space – François Dey had invited us to join him in the main church, to see a performance for an organ piece titled *Peu Rose*. The audience slowly walked from one church to the other, and progressively gathered together in the transept. François, the first artist to take part to our residency program, has finally been involved in the entire project. In the introduction to his performance, he highlighted the fact that the composition we were about to listen to had been written by his friend, the Iranian composer Aram Kamali Sarvestani, for the official launch of Creative Villages in March 2016. Thus we had come full circle.

Before the piece started, François also explained that an unexpected and unfortunate event had taken place: Aram Kamali Sarvestani had been held at Brussels due to visa issues. As a result he was forced to play with the organist Corentin D'Andrès from a distance through Skype. Anyway, the project's main character was the organ itself, which had not been used for decades. After some technical checks followed by silence, the first notes finally resonated. Those who had attended the project's launch 14 months earlier were soon able to identify the melody. But in this case, the solemnity of the first version for "chamber orchestra" gave way to a tone of precariousness and urgency created by Internet feedbacks and the up-close vociferations of the old organ.

Since his arrival, Dey continued to question himself on the best place to take in such a context, between the reality of the village on the one hand, and Creative Villages' expectations on the other. Torn between his willingness to perform works that were both relevant for himself and accessible to the local audience, he paid a lot of attention to the issue of *language* and looked for common grounds between his artistic research and this audience. This led him to focus on music, as it is an important aspect of village culture (with its choirs, brass bands, festivals...) as well as his own work. After having spent enough time to get used to the place, he decided to develop a project with the church

organ, which he wanted to bring back to life with the help of some volunteers. Besides this instrument is interesting, as it also symbolises a community being progressively dissolved due to the suburbanisation happening in the village, and of collective memory doomed to disappear with time. From this perspective the artist's attempt can be perceived as an act of resistance... before becoming to my mind, to be a metaphor for the whole project.

On Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> May, the small community gathered together along with a few aficionados from the village, some participants in the project, artists, curators, and friends. The incident with the Iranian composer being held in Brussels, and forced to accompany the organist through Skype, added a touch of the contemporary lifestyle to the confined and ancestral context of the church of Leytron, "globalised," "connected" and "nomadic" whilst at the same time making reference to political realities deeply antagonistic to the New Age-like hedonism of Easyjet public relations. This performance operated on the notion of distance, which was highlighted in many ways: Distance in time (through bringing lost sounds back to life), distance in space (between Leytron and Brussels, and Europe and Iran) and in "habitus" or cultures (between the art world and a so-called rural community, between an urban culture and a so-called rural lifestyle).

A rare experience occurred in the fragile gaps in the musical dialog: The feeling of an act of communication aware of itself, which audibly and visibly embodied all the difficulties, misunderstandings and discontentment that can also be part of it. This assessment was true for Dey's performance, but it also applies to Creative Villages very well.

### POSITIONING

Since the 1980s, the artistic field has been undergoing mutations that are significantly redefining the role of art and artists in society, as much as the various forms art can take. These mutations relate to correlated aspects:

1. As underlined by scholars such as Anne Gombault (who has been invited to Leytron), art commissioning is again becoming predominant in terms of art production;



2. this phenomenon can be partly explained by the development of post-Fordism and its various forms (such as creative and knowledge economies), which all progressively lead to a fusion of the artistic field with other sectors of the economy (such as entertainment, territorial development, sciences, social, etc.) within what could be described as inter-sectorial governance;

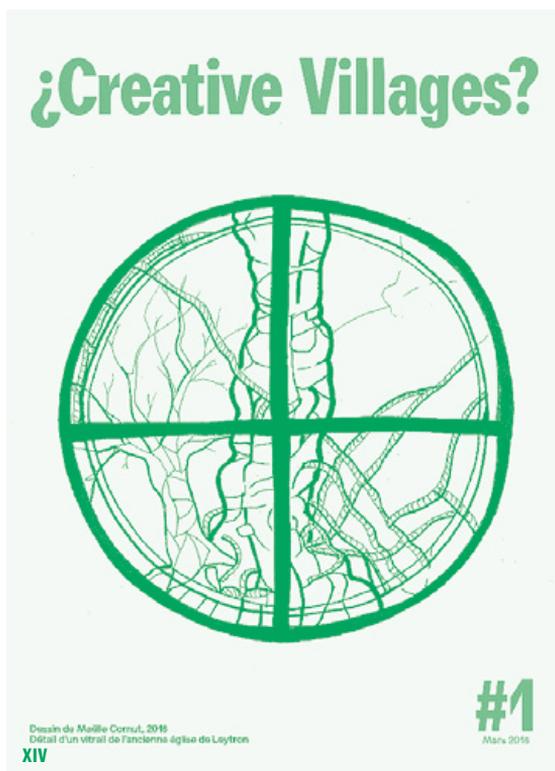
3. as well as the other sectors, the *project* has become one of the most efficient modes of action for the art world, allowing it to best respond to the various expectations projected in this field:

4. In these conditions, the artistic project is no longer solely a matter that includes specialists; artists and curators must now collaborate and co-create with actors from other fields and horizons.

The fact is that nowadays, an increasing number of artists and curators are being commissioned to create tailor-made projects, responding to specific expectations that are not just artistic, but that can be political, economical, social, territorial or even communicational. Within such an economy of project work (or project economy), which is parallel to the art market and must be related to the professionalisation of the cultural field and its adoption of a managerial ideology, artists and curators often operate as service providers. In such a context, they work with actors from other fields, who have their own agenda (such as commissioners, visual art officers, politicians, mediators, tourism agents, local communities, etc.). This explains why so many projects are being carried out in rural territory.

Now, if the audience of a rural community, like that of Leytron, is often described as a “non-initiated” one, on the other side, the art world can easily be perceived as self-sufficient and exclusive. From this perspective one should not be surprised to witness *communication barriers*, when a contemporary art project stakes its claim in such a context. To bypass this issue, cultural actors (the artists first, then curators and now commissioners and visual art officers) developed two strategies that perfectly match managerial culture, which ironically stem from the criticality and engagement of the historical avant-garde: To produce a tailor-made offer (site-specific approaches addressing local issues or responding to local expectations) and participation (to transform spectators into actors in order to manufacture an audience in the process of carry out the project).

The coexistence at the heart of a single artistic project of logics, which can potentially be antagonistic, is one of the central issues Creative Villages sought to address. To do so, the team in charge of this project decided to focus on the dynamics of the project economy, through creating a space open to experimentation and speculation consisting of a program of exhibitions, workshops, panels and a journal. In the spirit of Slovak artist and activist Július Koller (1939-2007), who resorted to the question mark as a signature of sort, we chose an interrogative attitude, rather than applying ready-made models, destined to attract more tourists or increase the visibility of the region.



In this regard, the Commune of Leytron gave us a fantastic opportunity: By inviting us to operate from its territory, this community allowed us to ground our polemic discourse in a *public space*, and confront our thoughts and the works of the invited artists to the reality and rules of this context. Creative Villages thus gained a force of affirmation that it would probably not have had in academic or institutional frameworks that are used to this type of positioning and discourse. In Leytron we've had to take responsibility for our positioning right to the end, at the risk of making the encounter with our audience much more difficult or even having to postpone it.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Working in a rural context

The anchorage of a project is a major aspect, especially in a context like Leytron. From this point of view, one can draw a divide between *top-down* approaches (planned from atop, at an institutional or governmental level) and *bottom-up* ones, which stem from local actors, or actors settled in the context. As exemplified by artists such as Curdin Tones (who launched a project in his village, in Tschlin, in the Grisons) or Eric Philippoz (who carried out a project in the Valais in the house inherited from his grandmother) this anchorage not only legitimised them within the community, it also provided them with pre-established links and a deep knowledge of the context. Some mediators could facilitate the work of an artist when they come from outside (as was done for Thomas Hirschorn), but we didn't manage to find this keyfigure in Leytron.

Another issue lies in the temporality of the projects. Typically, top-down projects responding to institutional or governmental agendas have deadlines. If no sustainable solution is found, such projects will most probably end abruptly just as soon as they start to be accepted by the local community. On another level, the time spent on-site is important as well. When managed from outside, by actors (artists, curators or organisers) who only attend their events, there are few occasions to build trust with the local population. From this point of view, artists-in-residency programs are seen as a good means to create the conditions of immersion needed in such a context.

As evoked many times in this report, the matter of «language» is a fundamental one, in a context like Leytron. Interviewed on his curatorial standpoint based on years of experience in rural areas, Adam Sutherland explained: “The huge difference for us [Grizedale Arts] was when we stopped trying to bring art, call it art, and think of it as art,” which led him to develop a *community-based* approach relying on the idea that art must be useful, inspired by John Ruskin and the Art & Crafts movement. The only project of this kind organised in Leytron has been Francisco Camacho’s “The Art of Sharing.”

Several projects and events organised in Leytron sought to create bridges with the local community by looking for a common ground (language): One can mention the various works of François Dey on musical culture, the work of Ricardo Rivera and Chris Daubert on the politics of territory and identity, Michael Jakob’s conference on the history of the landscape through the bench as an apparatus, Gilbert Vogt’s photographs of local vineyards, the Emmanuel Reynard’s conference on the management of the commons in the Alps, the work of Olivia Leahy and Lou-Atessa Mercelein on the memory of the local *bisses* (the local irrigation system which disappeared in the 1940s in Leytron), between fiction and reality etc.

Indeed, the urbanisation and tertiarisation process at play in the rural world, which started after WWII, took new forms with the Internet, faster transportation methods, the urban exodus, and the development of nomadic working modalities. The countryside is not only seen as a tourist destination, a source of authenticity in a world becoming increasingly homogenised or a natural reserve on the way

to being museumified, it is also becoming a hub of various innovations, on an agricultural level as much as a cultural one. There are a number of examples, like *Grizedale Arts* (UK), the *Centre d’art et du paysage de Vassivière* (FR), *Piacé le Radieux* (FR) or *Somalgors 74* (CH) among many others, which show that one shall not envisage contemporary culture in rural areas from a paternalist or patronising point of view (to bring contemporary culture to the countryside) but rather create new approaches from this territory, from the bottom to the top...

#### **Having a better understanding of the economy of project work**

At a research level, Leytron allowed us to complexify our critical approach, which was too schematic at the inception phase of the project (as exemplified by Brita Polzer’s interview in our first journal). One of our first postulates was the potentially instrumental nature of the project economy: Artists’ work would be hijacked for economical means by the creative industries and the managerial cultural policies that stem from it.

Would contemporary art be hoisted by its own petard? Indeed, if the set of practices gathered together under this umbrella crystallised around a critical approach to modes of production and diffusion, and a will to engage with political and social spheres (the “real”), one shall argue that the creative economy served all of that on a platter by offering the art world’s actors the possibility of operating in all possible contexts, in the city as much as in the countryside, in institutions and in the public sphere, commissioned by peers as much as by politicians or local communities. To understand what went on, one can sum up the turnaround by saying (following critics and artists such as Hal Foster, Miwon Kwon or Andrea Fraser) that the creative economy transformed contemporary art practices (such as site-specificity) into *services*, in particular through the spectacular comeback of art commissioning. Such a move raised questions on the role of culture and artists within contemporary society. When actors from different sectors collaborate on an artistic project, what are the primary objectives? Artistic, economic, social or touristic stakes? How do you manage objectives that can be contradictory? Who makes the final decision? The artist leading the project, the funder or even the local community?

If, in regard to these questions, it seems legitimate to suspect some kind of instrumentalisation is at play, the discourse, however, must be nuanced. First, one should avoid victimising the art world. Such a position would not only be unproductive (as it is a dead end), but also reductive. It is a matter of fact that the project economy offers a growing number of opportunities for artists and curators. Secondly, the structure of the project being open-ended and horizontal (as opposed to systems that are vertical and hierarchical such as Fordism), one must think in terms of *dynamics*. These dynamics touch curators and artists’ relationships with other actors involved in the project, as much as the management of all the parameters external to the project. Among other concerns, artists and curators must be flexible enough to deal with the choices of the commissioners, with



the criteria of funding schemes, the objectives of the cultural policies and the conditions of the context. Third, one must note that, together with the professionalisation of the art world and its reorganisation as a proper *sector*, this field became much better positioned to turn power dynamics to its advantage, in particular through its institutions. In the end, any actor involved in the project might be in a position to be the instigator or “instrumental” dynamics, artists and curators included. Is this a win-win situation?

As open as the project economy seems to be, it however proves problematic in many regards. As artists and critics (such as Andrea Fraser and Bojana Kunst) pointed out, in terms of working modalities, this economy is emblematic of post-Fordism and, by extension, the creative economy, which favoured the development of a “self-entrepreneurship” (conditions of self-employment) relying on values such as creativity, flexibility, and nomadism, ironically inspired by the figure of the artist. (see Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello).

Considering the growing importance of this precarious model in the current economy, the issue of “instrumentalisation” is often associated with a lack of realism. It is indeed symptomatic to note that, when an artist or a curator takes the risk to wave such an accusation in a debate involving various actors of the project economy (from political, governmental or tourism sectors for instance), a feeling of malaise appears. Such an allegation, breaks a tacit contract: If everyone can benefit from the project, why would one cut off the branch one is sitting on, thus dragging everybody down? The *bad player* will be told in return that “nobody forces artists to be involved in a given project. They shall keep on doing their studio work if they complain.” Deeply ambiguous, such an assertion evacuates dynamics of exclusion, which artists are very aware of, sometimes at their own expense: The decision to not play the game of the project economy, could have the effect of marginalising the artist and condemning him/her to go downhill... The conclusion is quite clear: The economy of project work is increasingly important in parallel to the art market, artists have no other choice but to carry out one project after another if they want to thrive.

From this standpoint, project management is emblematic of the neoliberal drift at the level of the job market, relying on a wild concurrence. As Anne Gombault very clearly expressed during the workshop “The New Products of the Land” in Leytron, artists can play a key role within the creative economy, but they “must be hungry!” Such an ambiguous assertion implies that the responsibility of failure rests on the individual only. If she or he doesn’t have the requested qualities, isn’t “hungry” enough and doesn’t meet success... so falling into French President Macron’s category of the “lazy ones.”

Considering such dynamics, one shall (following writers like Hal Foster and Miwon Kwon), postulate an impact of the project economy on artistic production. Its self-entrepreneurial logic (pushing to carry out projects shaped by external agendas, one after the other) might lead to the transformation of



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artistic practices (such as site-specificity) into mere protocols, within production framework which, on the one hand, have the tendency to elevate compromise and consensus into work ethics and, on the other, to encourage the development of individualistic strategies meeting one’s own agenda.

In a context where *creativity* tends to overtake *creation*, artists and curators are seen more and more as *experts*, to whom contemporary governance is assigning the task of solving concrete problems. This raises the question of the very nature of the *skills* attributed to these *problem-solvers*. Through their projects, artists can create social bounds in a problematic neighbourhood, relaunch the activity of a village facing depopulation, build a feeling of authenticity in a world that is increasingly becoming homogenised, boost the public relations of a ski resort looking for visibility or play the role of a mediator for issues regarding sustainable development or climatic warming... From this point of view, the outcomes of an artistic project can be quantified in terms of audience, visibility, sociability, and return on investment. When they are top-down, such fields of application reveal the deeply ambiguous nature of the project economy, within which the various agendas of artists, commissioners, governmental bodies and local communities have to cohabit, however antagonistic they might be (but they can also be in line with each other). Such dynamics raise the question of artists and curators’ positioning, when they are taking part in processes such as territorial engineering or soft power.

Beyond the local applications of the contemporary arts sector, artists’ abilities to produce and mobi-

lise knowledge of all kinds, their ability to learn and invent new methodologies in response to changing contexts, which they learnt to evaluate and scan very well (through site-specific practices), also makes them skilful actors of the knowledge economy. One can indeed see a growing number of interdisciplinary projects, in the academic framework (see Bruno Latour's Master's degree in experimentation, arts and politics) as much as in the private sector (see *The Camp*, in Aix-en-Provence, defining itself as a hub for SMEs), gathering together around the same table, artists, scientists, designers, coders and other creatives, in order to elaborate innovative ideas and develop new products. As it is especially flexible and reactive, the artistic field is a perfect platform to achieve interdisciplinary processes oriented towards innovation, such as think tanks. This leads us to propose a highly speculative hypothesis, in the vein of Dominican alchemist Tommaso Campanella (1604): Would it be plausible to assert that in the "war of intelligence" predicted by French surgeon and entrepreneur Laurent Alexandre in response to the development of Artificial Intelligence (a war which would start by due to a major crisis of highly specialised and technical professions in favour of transversal intelligence able to create links), the artists would end up being part of an "aristocracy of knowledge", after having been associated with the figures of the dandy, the marginal or the activist?

#### **Towards a poetic of the project**

At the light of the previous paragraphs, now follows the critical analysis resorting to rigid grids of power dynamics to be unveiled (for example the Institutional Critique) doesn't fit the logic of the project. In a moving context within which positioning of the involved actors and their ability to make decisions in response to the circumstances matters, the Action Theories (and why not the art of tragedy?) seem to propose more accurate reading grids. In the spirit of the *Kairos* of Ancient Greece (the divinity of the right, critical or opportune moment), it is important to identify the right occasion, the right moment to act. One must be able to adapt to the situation and make the best of it. This observation pushes to go beyond the notions of aesthetics and politics, in favour of a *poetic* of the project, whose contours have yet to be defined.

The fact is a vision too stereotypical of artistic creation, relying for instance on the notion of *autonomy* (of art or the artist), doesn't fit the current conditions. In the framework of the project economy, indeed, the artwork as idiosyncratic product of its *Creator*, gave way to the *project*. A project conceived as a "mille-feuille" made of the various strata of a production process leaving considerable place to external actors and factors. Considering the predominance of the project in terms of action modes, one must act from within the production system (the project economy), which nowadays is integral to international governance, through resorting to *tactics* such as metalanguage or cunning intelligence.

Taking over Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the *cunning intelligence* of Ancient Greece (the *mêtis*) – which has been defined by Marcel

Detienne et Jean-Pierre Vernant as a given type of intelligence involved in the practice, faced with obstacles that one needs to dominate through resorting to cunning methods, in order to be successful in all possible areas of action – indeed seems to be perfectly accurate today. According to French scholars, the *mêtis* implies a complex ensemble, but a very coherent one of mental attitudes, intellectual behaviours, combining intuition, wisdom, prevision, flexibility, feint, resourcefulness, vigilante attention, sense of opportunity to be applied to fleeting, changing and multiple realities. For all of these reasons, cunning intelligence represents the perfect skill to sail in the universe of the "project" and dominate its principle of uncertainty.

This skill doesn't only provide us with a tactical tool, such a reference also offers a revealing analogy. Resorting to the *mêtis* in the context of today's society is indeed even more accurate, knowing that, in Ancient Greece, it has been associated with a "pre-political" state (before the order instituted by Zeus for instance). This skill which gains ground for being disguised and proceeds through turnarounds, thus stands in opposition with the values of the once established Greek city. Now, according to scholars such as Alain Deneault, current *governance* is consistent with a failure of the political, in particular through adoption of managerial ideology and modes of actions. If one agrees with this parallel identifying the mark of an *archaism* in present time (let's think about all the domains that suffer from a lack of regulation such as the internet), then it is the perfect moment to invent new forms of cunning intelligence...

#### **A matter of deontology**

If, in the open market of the project economy, one must be able to *take the opportunity*, one must not necessarily become *opportunistic* or cynical, by becoming a better strategist than artist or curator. During the workshop "The New Products of the Land," Jacques Cordonier (chief of the cultural service of the State of the Valais) encouraged to encompass the idealised and romantic vision of the uncompromising artist. According to Cordonier, it is normal that artists must dedicate part of their working time to alimentary activities and projects. This vision is of course pragmatic: Artists must find ways to make their living. But does it imply that in particular frameworks, such as the project economy, artists are legitimized to develop "sub-products"? Might such sub-products start to be omnipresent in the cultural offer? This would be a perfect illustration to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's argument, claiming that the true *raison d'être* of the project is not the result, but the network of actors whose function, in the end, is to maintain the activity of entire system. Ultimately, this type of question leads to a crucial issue of the project economy, evoked by the exhibition of artist Carmen Perrin in Leytron: The personal positioning. Indeed, in a production system favouring the individual initiative (and within which actors must be "hungry"), the matter of choice, the ability to make the right decision and take risks to maintain the line, is fundamental. In such a context deontology and responsibility shall be at the core of a critical discourse.

# IMPRESSUM

Ce journal a été publié dans le cadre de *¿Creative Villages?*, un programme artistique pilote réalisé par l'École cantonale d'art du Valais dans le Village de Leytron de mars 2016 à avril 2017, en partenariat avec la Commune de Leytron.

Ce programme, comprenant une résidence d'artistes, des tables rondes, des workshops, des expositions, des projets dans la sphère publique, un journal et une série de reportages diffusés sur Canal 9, a pour buts d'interroger avec un regard critique l'approche curatoriale du territoire rural, les modes de production actuels dans le champ artistique ainsi que les rapports entre art et économie.

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