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Creative and sensitive research, an in-between committed position

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Creative research is seen as a kind of research that uses both introspective and demonstrative methods inspired by art forms. It is a kind of action research leveraging experience based research, based on support, skills and participation. It is a hybrid and cooperative form of research (Gonzales, Laporte, 2014). More than an intersection between two disciplinary fields, it is a hands-on disciplinary field involving both experimentation and reflection. It is a territory for methodological innovation that ponders the rightful place of creation and sense in developing methods that make it possible to grasp aesthetic and urban complexity.

Sense is about perceiving the object of your research with a kind of affectivity that makes the observer sensitive. It is as well used as a tool to describe places and hotspots (Vulbeau, 2007) and as a research method. It grasps sensation and perception of a hotspot, such as emotional awareness, emotionalism and receptiveness, and is significant enough to be perceived.

For Pierre Sansot, it is a "significant residue" (Sansot, 1986, 35). The sense based approach is the opposite of an abstract approach. It makes it possible to report sensitive concepts in order to make the observer mindful of social vulnerabilities and to preserve his collective memory, identity and vision for depreciated areas. It is a way to gain proximity to the object of your research, to take identity and otherness into account (Sansot, 1985). Sense makes it possible to depart from pre-established theoretical dogmas and reimagine social constructs through fieldwork.

What can spatiality experts gain from both sense-based and creative research approaches?

How can data produced by creative research be used as data, results, and/or methods?

This research position, set between introspection, auto-ethnography and auto-poietic brings up questions about the distance between the researcher and his object of research, but also about how information and data are collected and analyzed (Fortin, 2014).

Through case studies analyzed in my PHD thesis, we will see how experimenting with new tools of creative research contributes to questions related to field commitment and research position.

Firstly, I will show how creative research enlightens social complexity and how it can be used to grasp complex issues. Secondly, I will show how specific the in-between position is. Finally, I will analyze the legitimacy of results produced.

1. Creative research, a sense based approach to hybridization

My observation is based on creative research principles and one of my case studies analyzes an urban tree nursery created by a group of inhabitants in an urban renewal area for 8 years in France.

I have tested several creative approaches—pondering what kinds of influence a researcher can have on artistic actors.

In other words, I was trying to determine how my research position was hybridized by the other hands on actors on and how they influenced me.

Therefore, I both took part in the writing of a short film and a fictional short story. I also created mental maps and took part in collective urban promenades.

The short film had several goals. The first one was to use it as a methodological tool for my case of study. It allowed me to have an external point of view and, after a while, I used it as a tool for introspection. My main goal was to deflect the a priori knowledge that the project's participants had on me. Interestingly, behind a camera, I could get closer to them. The choice of being involved in a short film made it possible to grasp the everyday routine and to be an invisible part of it. Therefore, as a researcher, the film was a way and a reason to be on site daily, invisible and not seen as a researcher.

After a while, I realized that I had created a tool to show my own understanding of the project. It was a way of showing the demolition, the dehumanization, and the reestablishment of human communities, driven by the development of do-it-yourself methods shared between friendly inhabitants. It allowed me to completely embrace my involved position.

Concerning the writing of the short story, it was driven by pure observation, as the short film was, but a request from the artist directly. He needed a fictionalized tale to assess the current state of the project. At first, it was a way to test my hypothesis about what was in action within the co creation process of the project, as I experienced it myself. In the end, I understood what was in action in terms of legitimacy when an actor ventured outside of his original field. I have worked with the artist for serval weeks to create a storyline and to develop characters inspired by the participants and actors.

The short story writing allowed me to become critically detached. Although the characters in the story were fictional characters, we ensured that places and situations remained recognizable both participants than to non-participants.

I have also used mental maps in order to show the mobility traces of the tree nursery upon space, to show the main phases of the project and occupation of the site. As analyzed by Sarah Mekdjian (2016), mental maps are methodological tools as well as a potential research result. It is a collective work and a

construction that is neither set nor projected. In my case, the maps have not been used as data maps, but as a way to understand the collective work and to reflect.

Finally, I took part in collective urban promenades led by the artist, on site. It was a way to spread his ideas, through spatial in situ experimentation. As far as I am concerned, it made me understand how the decentralization and the fatigue that enlarges the attention sphere was an opportunity for the artist to make his work more visible and understandable for the greatest number of people. In addition, it was another way to be move together, in a private and trustful relationship.

The sense-based approach is a way to find a place for intuition, for storytelling (of oneself, of the others and of the situation). It is at once a way to get closer and become detached, a way to take a walk within. And by doing this, producing a vision, as analyzed by Pierre Sansot, not as a way to escape from reality but, on the contrary, a way to become more connected to reality (Sansot, 1993, 411).

2. In-between research position

What do we understand by "in between"?

This research position is built during the experimental time, when one can test his own research, and by doing this, experience it firsthand. This experience can be summed up by this Taoist aphorism: "the goal is the path". What is important here is not the result but the dynamic.

The in-between concept is analyzed through the approach of the philosopher Francois Jullien (2007) "on the way" and the concept of the "middle path" described by the sociologist Pascal Nicolas le Strat (2015).

The idea refers to the understanding of an outdoor, otherness, external elsewhere. Through digressions and returns, changes of scenery, it allows thinking about what is unconceivable in the researcher way of thinking. The in-between is not falling into two chairs, though it can be reproached to the researcher to not choose between a hands on approach and a theoretical approach, and instead to adopt a position that is seen as a consequence of a non-choice. On the contrary, it is a complete position where the researcher assumes to be both within and outside of the game—a simple observer and a participant at the same time. He can also observe himself moving and changing the game. To be in-between is to be linked, in an introspective process, what Pascal Nicolas le Strat calls the "middle path".

3. When legitimacy is negotiated

There is no inside without there being an outside being included sometimes means being excluded.

Who excludes who? How is exclusion visible? What are the reasons for exclusion?

The analysis of situations of exclusion is a learning experience about the untold expectations and the implicit requests towards me.

For example, the short story was ordered, but I was never paid. Moreover, it was never added to the project edition assessment, because its content were considered too inaccessible for the inhabitants. Therefore, another version was ordered from a local cultural actor that has written a story that suited the expectations of the financial partner more.

A fictional content, written by an outsider that did not belong to worlds of art is considered inappropriate. What we have here are issues of legitimacy, not only for the researcher but also for the artist that shared his expertise and savoir-faire with others, and for the inhabitants that became artistic and political actors.

By using a sense-based approach, the researcher feels illegitimate. For technical actors, researchers are only capable of snobbish and inoperative theoretical jargon. The researcher is caught in a professional environment and by expressing his will to do his job he is perceived as suspect. His presence is seen as a menace against the actors of free will.

Ironically, the researcher is as much rejected as flattered. However, the occasions for concretizing collaborations with researchers are rare: no one knows what to ask him and how to ask it. The payment, and more frequently the non-payment, of the researcher are very revealing of the perceived value of the researcher. He is supposed to produce a public work, free of charge. Therefore, the fact of not asking how much it costs is in fact a way to ignore his professionalism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the sense-based approach makes it possible to understand the actors' hybridization, to reveal it, but also to show how this hybridization creates ways of working through issues and surpassing limits, especially due to the constant and repetitive demands to explain the legitimacy of the project. The hybrid becomes capable of crossing the gap between different actors and their worlds. Therefore, to fully understand the hybrid, one must venture outside of his disciplinary field, because the hybrid is only perceptible from the in-between.

What is inherent in creative research and sense-based approaches is an in-between that is not a by-default position.

Finally, this position is limited by the constant renegotiations of legitimacy with the other actors. The researcher has to navigate moving between the center and outskirts, inclusion and exclusion, creating, leading to the emergence of a novel mediator-type figure.

Also, pondering my own research position was a way to enlighten my results, allowing me to more deeply understand my projects, characterized by transfers of knowledge and savoir-faire.

In addition, it was a way to remain vigilant about my own role in the projects, and my own expectations. I realized that this led to a demystification of the research worlds, for me as well as for the other actors.

There is no a priori position. A researcher can adopt many different positions. He can adopt a “critical distance” as meant by Nathalie Heinich or he can adopt a hands-on approach, and become deeply involved in the evolution of the project. Here, I propose that the researcher can adopt both modalities, giving him the full picture. By marrying theory with hands-on action, the in-between researcher opens up a third path.