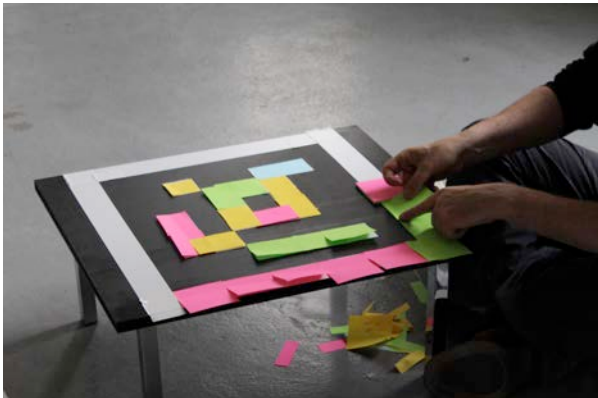


**I DON'T
WHERE
IS**

**KNOW
THIS
GOING**

The scene unfolds at iMAL, an arts centre and experimental lab for new technologies, located in Brussels, or Molenbeek to be more specific, along the canal. On a wall of the entrance hall there is a projection. On it I can read 'THIS IS GOING', in black capital letters. I move towards the large adjacent exhibition room and I discover the rest of the projection, 'I DON'T KNOW WHERE', on another section of the wall. The space of the large iMAL exhibition room is white, bright, punctuated with columns. Tables on which rest laptops, webcams, headphones and Raspberry Pi computers labelled with first names – Antoine, Peter, Annie, Claire, Julie, Donatella, Reni. The floor is strewn with Ethernet cables. In between the columns, fibreglass strips mark out the sub-spaces. At the centre of the room, foam cubes still wrapped in plastic. On the window sill, a copy of the book, *Lines: A Brief History*, by the English anthropologist Tim Ingold. In this space, with these objects, women, men, are bustling with activity. Some are working at their computers, either standing up or sitting down. Someone else is sticking fluorescent post-it stickers onto a coffee table. I learn that it concerns a gigantic QR code, intended to be read by a camera and to trigger an action-event within the room. Now and again they begin a discussion, in twos, in threes. The atmosphere is nevertheless particularly calm and concentrated. Then suddenly there is a shout: by placing a gigantic QR code under a camera, images have appeared on a screen. Everybody gathers around the screen, seemingly satisfied. It appears to have worked ... Lunchtime has come and gone: nobody thought about eating.





This scene is one moment among many others, part of a work in progress which has led the artists Pascale Barret (BE/FR), Miriam Raggam (AUT), Claire Williams (BE/FR), François Zajéga (BE), Julien Deswaef (USA/BE), Annie Abrahams (NL/FR), Reni Hofmüller (AUT) and Peter Westenber (BE) to come together around the development of an installation entitled 'I don't know where this is going'. This installation – with a cryptic title, to say the least – fits into the framework of a long-term project, *Iterations*. This project was born in 2014 on the initiative of Constant* and ESC† and is on its second edition. For these organisations the idea was to explore over a number of years the possibilities of carrying out collaborative artistic practices, in a networked world, technologically connected. It was thus a question of bringing together a series of artists interested in the idea of collective creation and new technologies. For each edition the collective changes: some artists were already there for the preceding edition, others are new; some know each other, others don't. This temporary collective first meets online, by pad and/or video-chat. It then meets up 'physically' by moving into a space, with on the horizon a concrete creation and a moment when this creation is made public. Unlike certain artist

* Constant: Association for Art and Media, Brussels, Belgium.

† Esc: medien kunst labor, Graz, Austria.

residencies, there is thus a double constraint: that of collective production and public sharing. Each edition takes as its starting point the previous edition. In this case, the starting point for the work was 'The Tech Oracle', an installation developed and exhibited in 2015, in Graz, at Esc. 'The Tech Oracle,' a kind of 2.0 version of the Delphic one of antiquity, invited the visitor to ask a question about their future at the beginning of the installation's route. Having registered a series of personal data (fingerprints, name, age, sex, profession, etc.), entered while moving through the installation, the visitor could leave the oracle, with a print-out of their oracle prophecy. A means of questioning our (blind?) trust in technology when it involves finding a response to our questions, or even 'guiding' our lives. A means also of questioning what we are prepared to (blindly?) 'give' in exchange for these answers, in order to limit uncertainty.

'I don't know where this is going' continues these questions, but redirecting them elsewhere. Going somewhere, leaving, taking off. Technology is playing an increasing role in our movements. Locating a site, working out an itinerary or a journey time, booking a hotel or a flight. So many things which we do 'online', all of which have something to do with planning. Voluntary acts, therefore, aided by tools whose effectiveness we have no reason to doubt, which connect the here and the now with a space at a lesser or greater distance and with a future time, in the mastered continuum of prediction. For some people, however, travelling is also fleeing, escaping. The decision to leave a place and the time of departure are less a question of personal choice than of necessity. And if the destination, the time and the conditions of the journey can be the subject of various hopes, they are not predictable for all that. Does a predictive technology still have any kind of meaning in a context where you do not know the destination exactly, or if you not know if you will be welcome there? Can it give us some assistance on a path littered with obstacles and dangers which are a lot more important than simple 'hitches'?

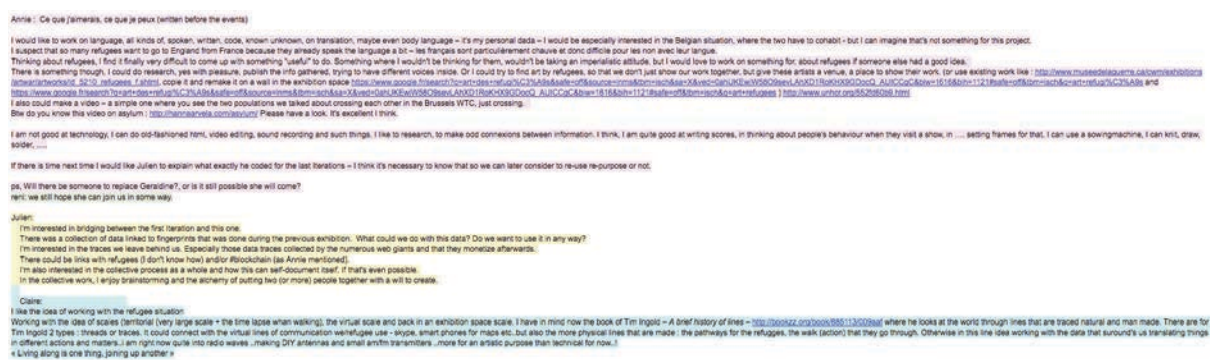
This text aims to give an account of and take a look at the process of collective creation carried out in the framework of this second edition of *Iterations*. It is based on texts written by the artists themselves, on-site observations during the period the installation was completed and during the exhibition's opening preview, informal discussions with some members of the temporary collective and filmed interviews which Tom Van den Wijngaert and I carried out with them. It extends the account produced by An Mertens during her visit to 'The Tech Oracle':

http://www.constantvzw.org/verlag/IMG/pdf/tto_report.pdf

Tension between the plan and the journey

At the beginning, during the online discussions, the process seemed very open, even if there were already a whole series of factors which needed to be taken into account. There was the result of the previous edition, the double constraint of achieving something concrete and of offering this something to a public, but also the particular individuals included within the collective, with different concerns, different skills, speaking different languages:

'We try to understand who is who, in the sense of understanding what interests each person, what is important for each of us, and what doesn't interest us. It is like having a table, and everyone decides what they want to put on the table, then we have a discussion. Sometimes we say, 'That's interesting, but not for now,' and so we take it off the table. It has to do with the interests and skills of each person and what can be pooled together. And at the same time it has to do with the historical moment in which we find ourselves. In this case, I think we were all shocked, affected by what is going on at the moment in the world, shocked by the means by which the European Union is 'managing' migrants, refugees, displaced persons ... And interested in exploring the ways by which these migrations question the use of technology. For example, I come from Graz; to come to Brussels, it is completely obvious that I can use the tools which are available to me online. And that I can count on them, up to a certain point. If I had a different passport, if I came from another country and I wanted to come to Brussels, it would be a completely different story.'
RH.



Thus, during the four months that these long-distance discussions lasted, the collective's horizon and common theme took shape, but also, up to a certain point, its form: as in Graz, it was a question of producing an installation during the residency, which would lead to an exhibition. Next there came the moment of the physical meeting, in Brussels. New data were added to the project: the site of residency, the systems used, meetings with people outside the project, but also the artists as 'incarnate' people ... According to some people, it was time to discover each other physically. In effect, for them, the online discussion, in being disconnected from the experiment in its 'material' execution, remained geared towards planning, towards the most explicit formulation possible of common objectives and the modalities of enacting them. Yet, taking this straight line prevents trying out more winding paths, tacit consensuses, more muddled yet sometimes more effective synergies, which flow from the fact of sharing a space, an atmosphere and situations as much as time and ideas. We are here in the realm of the opposition developed by Étienne Souriau in his text 'Du mode d'existence de l'œuvre à faire', between a project's straight line, in other words '*that which in ourselves roughly cobbles together the work in a kind of impulse and as it were throws it ahead of us to discover it at the moment of its completion*', and the winding path of the journey, which assumes '*discovery, exploration, all the experiential input which arises throughout the historical unfolding of the work's progress.*'[‡]

[‡] Étienne Souriau, 'Du mode d'existence de l'œuvre à faire' in *Les différents modes d'existence*, presentation de Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, Paris, PUF (Métaphysiques), 2009, pp. 195-217. Quotes above-mentioned have been translated from the original essay in French. The reader will find a published English version of Souriau's essay

Risky business

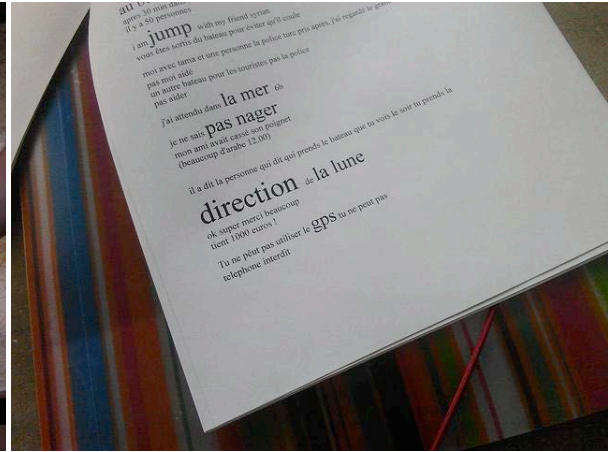
But neither is the meeting with others along these winding paths without its own risks, without obstacles, mishaps, reversals ...

'You have had online discussions for four months. You have already take care of the communication, the text is there. You tell yourself, 'All that remains is to do it.' Then you meet up 'physically' and the online personalities are very different from the people in the flesh. You have to sit down and discuss everything anew. And once again ask everybody else, "Who are you?"' P.W.

Along the journey, moreover, the configuration of the group has changed. One of the artists was not able to come to Brussels. After ten days or so, another left the residency. Personal reasons, but also, probably, a certain difficulty of situating themselves within the process. Another, on the other hand, joins the experience midway. The synergies need to be redrawn: how are the tracks which the absent have left behind to be respected? How to join an ongoing collective? How to open up the group to a new individual? How does one find a variation on a theme, among the many possible ones, in which each person can discover her' or himself? How does one reach an agreement? As it turns out, at any moment, many things can still be called into question, whether the content of the collective experimentation or its form. To quote the words of Souriau from the same text, while *'the work is still at the construction stage, the work is imperilled'*. Each person who joins the process gives it a new colouring. In fact, *'the trajectory thus followed [that of a work] is not simply the impetus that we have given ourselves. It is also the outcome of all the encounters'*. During their stay in Brussels, the members of the collective had the opportunity on two occasions to meet newly arrived immigrants who were learning French[§]. These two meetings with people who, out of political or financial necessity, had to leave their countries of origin – Syria, Iraq, Morocco, the Philippines and Pakistan – were particularly decisive in the work of the collective. They notably led the artists to ask themselves a series of questions, sometimes troubling, always important. How to position themselves as artists regarding this subject? How to give an account of situations which are not their own? What can they offer to be seen or listened to from these stories of which they have become custodians, without slipping into sensationalist exploitation? In fact, through these stories, through these personal histories, accounts emerge of overcrowded boats, smuggler mafias, impassable borders, nights spent walking along railway tracks and running out of money. And even though the people whom the artists had met, finally arrived in Europe, the uncertainty regarding their future does not stop there: one is never sure that one has completely arrived. When one is seeking asylum or looking for a work permit, for some form of regularisation or other, there often remains the threat of having to leave again, of being sent back to where you have just come from, and there remains the time spent waiting, which is sometimes counted in years, to have your situation made legal, to get your papers, etc.

under the title: 'On the Work to Be Made' in *The Different Modes of Existence*, Introduction by Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour, Translation by Erik Beranek and Tim Howles, Minneapolis, Univocal, 2015, pp.219-240.

§ These meetings took place thanks to the mediation of the Cellule de Lutte contre l'Exclusion Sociale in Molenbeek and the SAMPA association (Service d'Aide aux Molenbeekoïes Primo-Arrivants asbl).



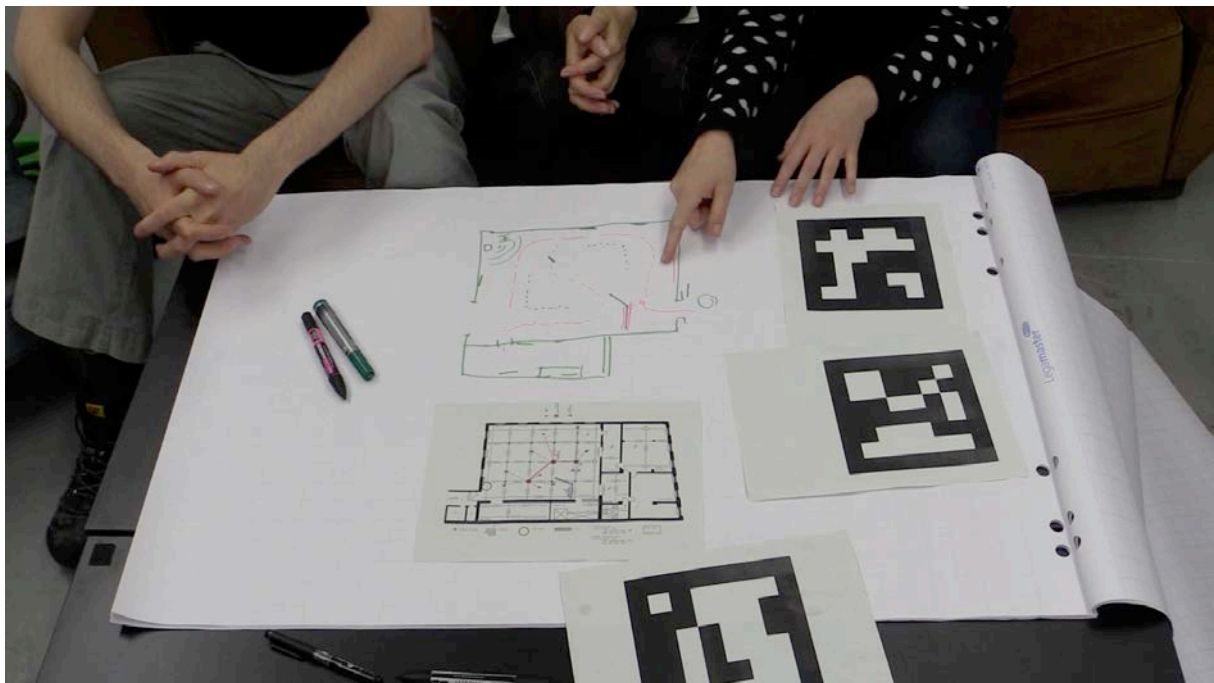
So many realities which are not those of the members of the temporary collective gathered around *Iterations*. So many realities already widely broadcast by the media, at times without much of a sense of propriety. For the members of the collective, therefore, the need emerged to shift the focus, to both renew their own outlook but also, potentially, to redeploy the question. One of the artists in particular suggested that the iMAL exhibition room serve as a space of expression for the asylum seekers and refugees they had met. That there they could make their voices heard and make their journey visible, through drawing, through painting, etc. Some of the other artists – nearly all of them, if I understood correctly – resisted this idea: they wanted to retain a certain liberty to propose things, as artists. And above all, they did not want to stray too far from the point of convergence for the members of the collective: the relationship with technology. On the one hand, it seemed important to them to extend the question to the role played by technologies in journeys taken, whether voluntary or not. On the other hand, they wished to explore the artistic possibilities of a series of technological apparatuses – meshed networks in particular (we will return to these). The meetings and the interviews with the displaced people would nevertheless assume an important position in the installation set-up, not without a work of translation, of transcription.

'We had meetings with people who were looking for official papers, who were taking French lessons, who don't speak French. We had a first meeting, where we carried out interviews, made videos, maps, then there was a second meeting which was a little more focused on the things which interested us, such as the means of communication which they used between them, to find routes, or to travel outside border channels. [...] We could not simply keep the interviews, the videos, as they were. The transcription enables a whole corpus of words to come to light, either because they crop up regularly, or because they interest us or give us technical or geographical information. This is also how [through the meetings] we came across Facebook pages, pages on which people passed on telephone numbers, contacts, how people smugglers arrange meetings in the street, how they make transactions, of money in particular. These interviews and the research we had undertaken added things to the exhibition space. We made choices as to the things we wanted to show and what we didn't. We had many discussions between ourselves, in particular ethical discussions, and by the way we are still not completely convinced about certain things. More specifically, when we came across a reality like Facebook pages, where we literally have access to information such as telephone numbers, where there is a certain form of advertising, soliciting with the image of refugees on boats. The idea was not to fall into sentimentalism or exploitation. [...] Above all we wanted to change the

viewpoint. We really wanted to have multiple viewpoints. The exhibition takes into account the idea that the people we meet, that the people who come to the exhibition, by leaving traces or by modifying the data, bring their story to the situation. Thus there are media which spring from or are inspired by these conversations, these interviews, such as routes, the environments, seafronts, the sea, the forest, byways, pathways. For example, Claire made a whole journey in looking for an itinerary by foot between Palmyra and Brussels, to iMAL, here.' P.B.

Mesh networks

Little by little, the installation takes shape. It will be configured like a journey, with a departure point and a destination. Between them, an unfolding course will be outlined thanks to a number of transparent partitions, but also thanks to elements – projections, soundtracks, images, etc. – which signpost the route. This outlined course will nonetheless not constitute the sole possibility of wandering around: shortcuts, loops and detours will also be permitted. And unlike the online services offered by Open Street Map and Google Maps, the itinerary suggested in this installation will signal bad weather, obstacles, difficulties and uncertainties that one might encounter on a journey and which are triggered by uncontrollable factors. Out of this fake labyrinth, this quasi-treasure hunt, the collective's members wish to construct a genuine site of exploration, however, not a simulation or an illusion. The idea being to constantly cross different 'threads', to weave together the interests of the artists, the stories of the people encountered, and the activity of the visitors who will invest the space with the possibilities offered by the site, the questions which the situation raises – here, for example, the fact of being in Molenbeek, or close to the Petit Château[≈] – as well as the material and technological configurations of the installation's systems.



≈ Molenbeek-Saint-Jean is a municipality in the Brussels Region with a high immigrant intake since the 1960s. Le Petit Château is a reception centre for asylum seekers in Belgium.

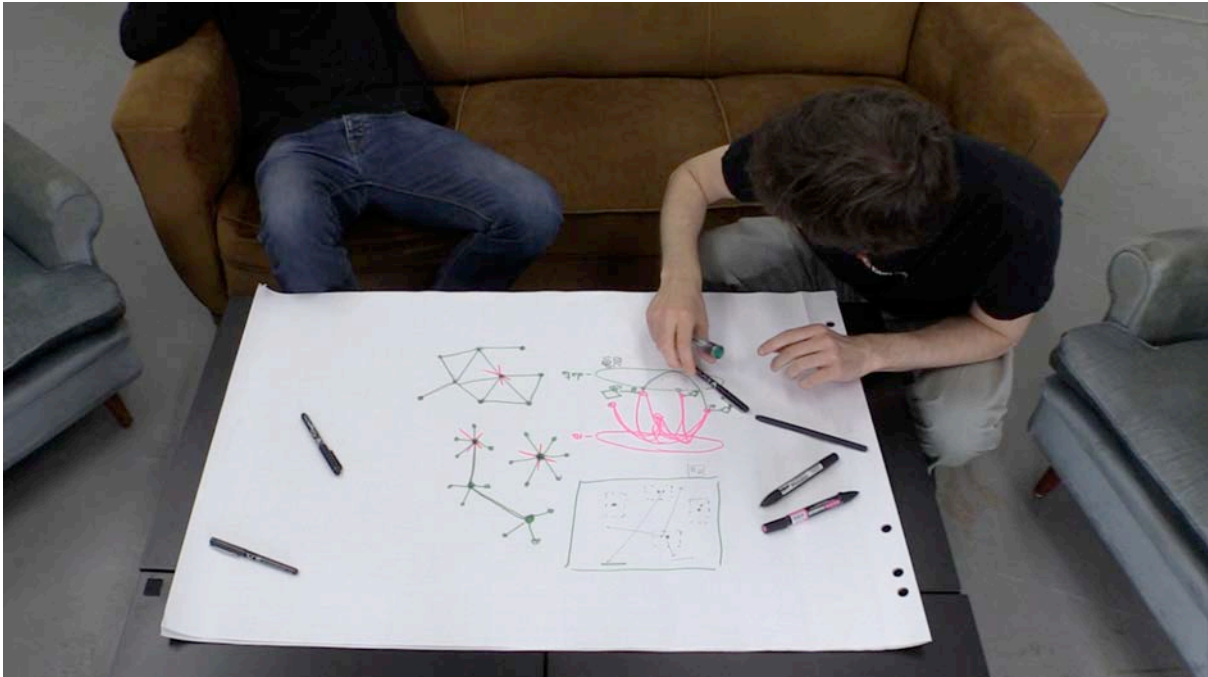
But how will all that function in concrete terms?

'When you arrive as a viewer, you just see the title of the exhibition. There are no clues as to what will happen. Then you arrive in a space and after a moment things are triggered, there are clues, and either the viewer becomes aware of them or does not pick up on them at all. Thus, s/he will pass through areas where s/he will be filmed, s/he is under surveillance, and in handling objects, which have kind of tags, a schematic logo, that will enable certain things to be triggered. You thus may become aware that you can trigger videos, sounds, that, for example, what one does has effects on a map which one distorts. But it will not be systematic, there will be a random element to it. And then there is another room, devoted to documentation, where the participatory process will be highlighted, as well as the things that inspired us. There you get to understand the system you are in, in a physical or technical manner. You get a kind of overview of the digital and physical traces you have left in the site.' C.W.

The space will thus be equipped with a series of cameras and objects 'tagged' with a QR code and which can be moved around. The cameras will film and detect the movement of the visitors, but also the different tags on the objects, as and when they are moved around. These movements will set off a series of actions in other areas of the installation: a map being deformed, the projection of a series of words or expressions (no water, mafia, the night, red, don't sleep, etc.), a soundtrack, etc. To get these devices to communicate with each other, the members of the collective started out conceptually[≡] from a mesh network rather than a centralised network (in which all the communications pass through a centre) or a decentralised network (where the communications pass through several centres, linked up by a 'skeleton'). The characteristic of a meshed network is that it is a-centralised, in other words that there is no centre, or each point is 'its own centre', connected peer-to-peer to other points of its entourage. What is valuable about a mesh network is its robustness: if one point stops functioning, or if censorship is applied, the information can find other routes, can move around the network differently. Comparatively, centralised or decentralised networks are more vulnerable: if a central hub experiences a fault or is subjected to censorship, then the whole network is affected. But, beyond this technical 'stability', the choice to start out conceptually from a mesh topology also resulted from the wish to set up a network which, metaphorically, would be closer to the group's interactions and work methods, as well as to the possibility of experimenting with the establishment of a network which, on a larger scale, has political implications that are not insignificant:

'For my part I am interested in mesh networks through the experience I have had with a group here in Brussels which is called "Réseau citoyen", and with a group in New York as well, called "NY mesh". The value of mesh networks is their horizontality, the fact that no one has power over anybody else, and getting around censorship. It is very difficult to set up, but from the moment it exists, it is very difficult to dismantle. So, politically, it is interesting, and it is a form of opposition force, in a way, vis-à-vis the dominant systems. Because the centralised network is a kind of cultural stance one assumes, to centralise things. A leader organises the conversation, decides, gives orders.' J.D.

[≡] Inasmuch as the collective did not use the protocols of meshed networks, but conceptually re-transcribed this topology into their own protocol, based on OSC, a point to point data exchange protocol.



Echoing Julien's words, it is not surprising to note that mesh networks are proliferating precisely there where Internet connections and access to certain networks (notably social) are non-existent, deficient or censored – whether because of war, an authoritarian regime, a natural disaster, economic precariousness, etc. From Egypt to Syria, Tunisia to North Korea, Hong Kong to Detroit, wherever the dominant networks are lacking or are subject to censorship, mesh networks enable militants, activists, members of civil society to create bubbles of digital freedom.

An involvement which implies letting go

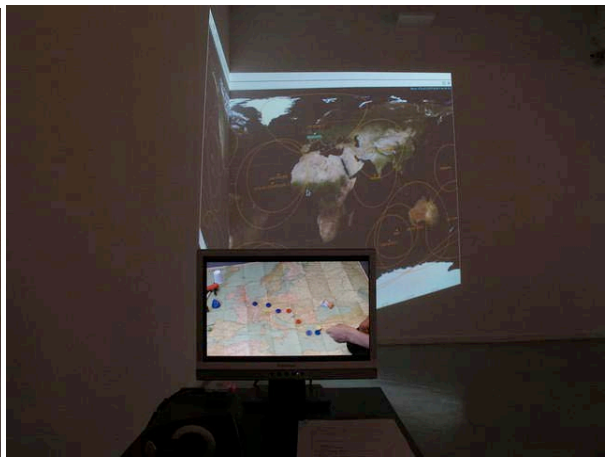
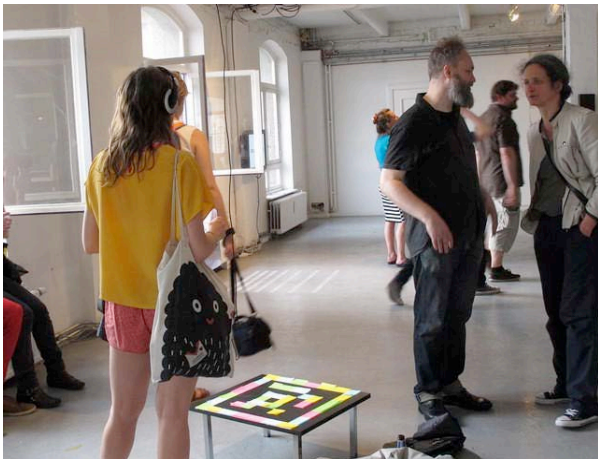
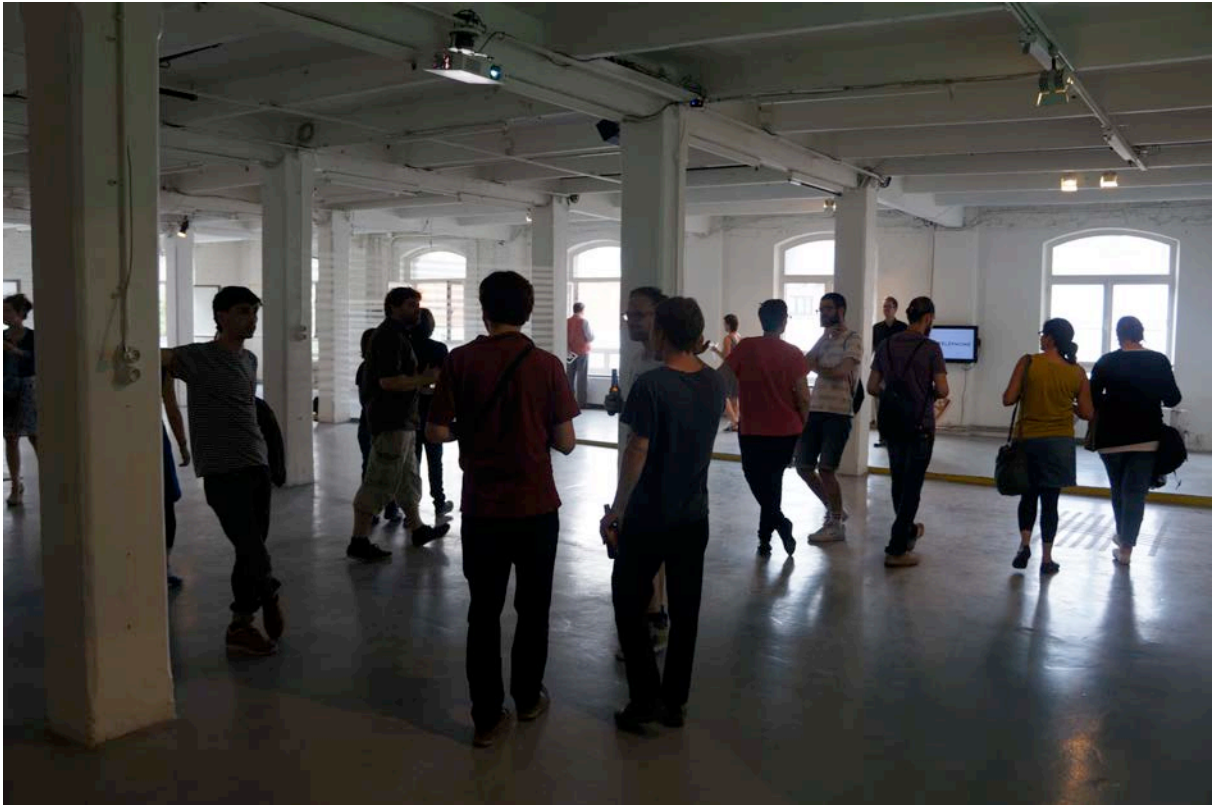
'I don't know where this is going' seems to be a story of involvements. An involvement such as participation in the joint venture, in which you invest things: you give of yourself, your time, knowledge, skills, ideas, hopes, disagreements. An involvement as regards others and the situation, which is the promise and the responsibility to take into account what each person and each thing inputs as a share in the process, even if it means transforming it, translating it or sidelining it. An involvement which is also a form of political engagement, in other words a participation in things which are communal, a way of situating yourself in the world, of setting down forms *'which matter, invested with values and reasons to hold onto them, to stick to them and also even to combat them'*[‡]. Being involved, however, does not only mean committing yourself, in its active, intentional and responsible form. It also means being grabbed by the situation, the locations, the people, the material and technological apparatuses, the time, being gripped by them, sometimes even at their mercy. Over the course of the observations made during the process of the installation's conception, interviews and discussions carried out with the collective's members, and my visit to the exhibition, I several times considered that one of the ways of taking hold of a situation, of escaping its potential grip, is paradoxically to know how to give yourself over to it, and to not always resist it.

[‡] Marielle Macé, *Styles: Critique de nos formes de vie*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016.

'I wasn't very convinced by the title, at the beginning, when it was discussed. I said, "Really? Are we really going to put 'I don't know where this is going' on a wall, on the website?" Then finally it was rather a relief. It's a way of saying that it's more of an exploration, an experiment. It is not an installation by the book which you put on at MoMA. The exhibition is the result of that. [...] On Thursday, at midday, I will discover everything that everybody has done, because I haven't seen everything either. And so I will take a look at what is in there, to see, by and large, everything that has taken place. There are different systems: there is a cloud, there is a repository; I saw that there was something going on in the cloud, but at the moment the exhibition will be ready, that will be the moment when we will all discover the extent of the work which has been carried out by the group.' F.Z.



I arrive on the day of the opening preview. I feel curiosity, a little apprehension, a lot of expectation. Have they managed to get everything ready? What is the installation like? More than anything I want to try out the devices, some of whose ins and outs I am aware of. I want to discover the effect of my passage through the installation, the elements – sounds, images, distortions – which I can trigger. The result is quite other than I had imagined. The number of people present – who all leave their fingerprints or set off reactions in the installation – do not really let me give myself up to the slightly geeky pleasures of controlled interactivity. All for the better, since it is there that the installation expresses its full meaning: the events which punctuate the tour are independent of our will, are generated by multiple actions and interactions which escape us. The journey is thus to be lived, the situations are to be discovered *en route*. To involve yourself, sometimes you have to take the risk of letting go, of not knowing where it will lead you.



Rafaella Houlstan-Hasaerts – November 2016. Translation by Ericks Uskalis & Patrick Lennon.