16th September 2011

Dear LUTSF,

Following the completion of my project in Gottelborn, Germany, I am writing with details of the work carried out and my reflections following this journey.

My scholarship enabled me to participate in the 2011 Interaktionslabor, held at the Industriekultur Saar, Boulevard der Industriekultur, 66287 Quierschied – Göttelborn, Germany, from the 13th till the 24th August 2011.

I spent the time immersed in a creative environment, developing new professional relationships and learning more skills in the field of Dance and New Technology. In my time there I created three short works in progress, inspired by the landscape of the mine and my relationships and conversations with members of the group. One particular highlight was learning how to work with PD (Pure Data) however, I was also very inspired by the set up of the laboratory itself, where a policy of 'individual autonomy' was given precedence over structure. I am not sure that this was entirely successful, however it lead to many interesting problems that seem very relevant to the process of making in the current climate. Getting to the venue was very difficult and I was lucky not to have experienced any delay with my flight on arrival, since this would have meant missing the last bus from Luxembourg City to Saarbrucken. I would definitely recommend that future participants travel from Frankfurt since this is a more reliable route.

My reflections on this journey will be posted on the DanceDigital blog site as well as my own wordpress blog. More details about the participants and other work carried out by the group can be found on the Interaktionslabor website: http://interaktionslabor.de/lab11/index.htm

I hope you enjoy reading my account of the lab. If you need any further information please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you once again for your support.

Kind regards,

Marguerite Caruana Galizia

The Problem with Autonomy

My experience of the 2011 Interaktionslabor, Göttelborn, Germany, August 2011 - Marguerite Caruana Galizia

In August 2011 I travelled to the small village of Göttelborn, in the West German region of Saarland, to participate in the 2011 Interaktionslabor. The Interaktionslabor is a yearly event, organised by the multi-media performance artist and academic Johannes Birringer, during which a group of artists spend ten days living and working on the site of an old coal mine. The intention of the lab is to offer a space for artistic development, critical discourse and theoretical enquiry, precipitating a creative interaction and forging new professional relationships amongst the participants and their associated organisations. The particular focus of the lab is on work that involves a combination of performance and multi-media practice. The lab champions the notion of artistic and personal autonomy and implements this, though somewhat vaguely, through its open structure. Participants are invited to bring their knowledge and experience to the group and in turn to learn from other members in a peer to peer situation. Guest artists run workshops throughout the lab, however, whilst these workshops are selected for their relevance to the group's interests, attendance is completely down to the individuals.

The lab itself takes place in a purpose built space. The guest rooms in one wing, with large potato shaped balconies, look into an open square space. (The largely working class community typically survived on a diet of potatoes and onions, which is why the root vegetable has become a local symbol.) The building operates as a hotel throughout the rest of the year, which accounts for the comfort of these rooms equipped with a writing desk, a small fridge and TV etc. On the ground level, the dining room and kitchen look into the expansive studio/ lab space on the lower level. The group cooked and ate meals together for the duration of the lab, and this communal space became an important part of the creative routine, where we could discuss the progress of the lab and put forwards new ideas and thoughts for the coming days. The lab space is located on the lower ground level, a large high ceilinged space surrounded by full length windows along one side with views out over the coal mine and a nearby power plant. The space could be divided into two rooms with partition doors, but these were mostly kept open so that we worked in parallel at all times. Johannes equipped the lab with all the necessary technical paraphernalia: lights, projectors and cables. We were given more or less free access to whatever equipment or space was available, which allowed us to pick a working time and routine that suited us.

Figure 1: A view of the Coal Mine taken from the guest room.

There was no studio booking or rules about when to stop working. In fact many artists chose to work late into the night. An adjacent board room was used by artists who preferred a more contained working space, particularly those editing video footage and working on costume or sound devices.

The coal mine boasts one of the tallest towers in the region. Having operated since the nineteenth century, the mine had three towers of escalating heights, reflecting the need to dig deeper into the earth as demand grew and resources ran out. The last of these was only completed a few years before the mine closed in 2001. Despite its relatively recent closure, the space has quickly fallen into disrepair. Whilst some initiative has been taken to turn the outer buildings into what they call an Industriekultur campus, other buildings, such as the old shower rooms, have been completely destroyed.

On a tour of the site we were given rare access to the main buildings, many of which are no longer open to the public. The miners would arrive in the morning and change into their garments before walking down a long corridor into the mine itself. One side of the corridor was the entrance file with regular paved slabs on the ground, whilst the other side was grated to allow the dust and dirt to fall off the returning miners' shoes. Johannes took us into the second mine tower, a chamber full of cart tracks, pulleys and machinery. A lift took the miners underground into the tunnels (now blocked up), hoisted by large wheels at the top of the tower. At the tunnel gate a sign on the wall lists the system of knocks that was used for the miners to communicate with the ground staff in case the tunnel collapsed.

Figure 2. : The wheels at the top of the third tower

> *Footage taken during the tour of the second mine, where Johannes Birringer describes the "system of knocks" used in case of an emergency:*
>
> http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbTllec1k6s&feature=player_embedded

The coal was loaded into carts, hauled up via the tower pulleys and sent via the cart tracks to the washing room, where it was purified to different degrees before being loaded onto trains to be transported across the country. A large basin just outside the rinsing rooms would collect the soiled water which was carried into the drainage system. The chamber beneath this basin is a vast empty coliseum. Today these spaces stand empty, stripped of the functions they were developed to sustain. As a result they command a new attention from their inhabitants: a question not of what they were meant to do, but of what they can do. This empty, un-lit coliseum on the underside of the basin, for example, a space that simply existed by default rather than by intention, is one of the most acoustically rich sites I have ever experienced.

Some areas were less accessible and could xc only be entered by unlocking several gates (set up, one supposes, to protect the disused buildings from vandalism.) One such space was the main brain centre of the mine, and by far the most chilling of all scenes on the site: the central operations room. A board across one side of the room showed a graphic representation of the entire mine. A panel of radio control devices and dials covered the main desk. The floor was littered with notes, updates on the progress of the

Figure 3: The Central Controls Room

miners, reports and faxes. It seemed as though the normal operational procedures had simply been arrested mid flow, with no warning and no time to clear up, as though they fully intended to come back to work the next day. A power plant close by to the mine still functions. It uses solar energy generated by an adjacent solar field, but it also uses coal which is now imported from South America.

Many of these buildings became the inspiration for work that emerged amongst the group members. Our surroundings, an empty relic of what was once a noisy industrial centre, now slowly being reclaimed by nature and newer, less dusty, enterprises, provided a rich source of material for our creative explorations. Sound and video pieces were developed by artists using the mine as their starting point. Others began working on pieces generated through their interaction with members of the group. The group began to organise itself in a more or less organic way, with small pockets of artists generating new collaborations that developed into new works. Ludmilla Pimentel and Bette Grebler (Brasil) created video dance works filmed on location. The fashion designer Michele D'Anjoux (UK) worked first with Bette Grebler and Sosanna Marcelino (France) on a video that involved climbing around a prominent stone jutting out of the small hill outside the lab space. She later went on to work with Sosanna Marcelino and John Richards (UK) on a new work incorporating wearable sound devices in choreography. Hana Ma (Germany) and Sonia Rodrigues (Portugal) collaborated on a video piece which was inspired by Hana's pregnancy, in which a video of Hana moving on the grass was projected back onto her belly and re-filmed to create a video piece with an interactive sound component developed by John Richards (UK). Tania Soubry (Luxembourg) moved in and out of other projects before doing some work with her voice using short loops. Bernard Baumgarten (Luxembourg) created light sculptures and developed a video piece that grew out of his experiments with one particular light installation, where stage lights were reflected against a steel pane.

During my first few days I struggled with the general lack of direction in the group. As a participant I came to the lab with no preconception of what it would be like. I knew that I wanted to learn something and I wanted to immerse myself in a creative environment. I travelled there alone and I had not even met Johannes Birringer before I arrived on the Saturday night. During two evenings of participants' presentations it became clear that few of the group members had much experience of working with technology, apart from the group of students from Saarbrucken who sadly became

side-tracked by other work and gave up on the Lab early on. My initial frustration in being left to do whatever I wanted was not so much related to not having structure for its own sake, but a frustration with the limitations of my way of doing things. Recognising the need to at least start somewhere, I set up a work station in the main lab space where I projected onto one of the partition doors. Our group discussion earlier that day had concluded with the task of setting up a kind of algorithm in the form of some rules that could facilitate an interaction with the space/ object/ idea. A camera captured the movement in front of a second door in the space, which was projected back onto the first door with a short delay. The dancer's task was to weave in and out of the two doors to create a situation where she seemed to be running after her own image.

We established two rules that led to the most interesting outcomes for the viewer:

1. You can go in front of wall 2 only after you go behind wall 1.
   BUT
2. If you go in front of wall 1 then you must go behind wall 2.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWf61edt0w0&feature=youtube_gdata

I abandoned this project after the first day. Like most discussion points raised over the course of the lab, this idea of generating an algorithm disappeared into nothing beyond the first day. It is only with hindsight that I am able to recognise the value of this game like structure and wish I had kept on going further with it.

The group was joined by several guest artists. Marco Ciciliani joined the group at the start of the week. A musician and composer, Ciciliani's recent research is in the combination of light and sound. He also creates some interesting compound tracks, where he superimposes all the tracks on a popular album over each other and slowly removes tracks bringing the initial noise down to just one song before building back up again. John Richardson carried out a dirty electronics lab, where the group used wires, batteries and empty tin cans to create instruments that use the electrical current through the body to activate when held in both hands. (Lifting off one hand would break the circuit and cut the sound.) We also had a presentation on the Kinect box. This inexpensive motion capture device has created quite a stir amongst digital arts communities. Whilst conventional motion capture devices remain beyond the reach of most arts budgets, this compact and cheap piece of hardware can be easily hacked into and used to generate data on the body's location in space and time in a 3-D capacity rather than a regular camera's 2-D. It still requires some programming knowledge to manipulate the data, and the main programme currently being used is Motion Builder, which is still beyond most artist's budget, although it can be accessed for free if you work in an education context.

Three days into the lab a guest artist, Stefan Zintel started working with us on PD (Pure Data). This is the non-commercial version of Max MSP, available on open-source. Having worked with Isadora which is built on Max, this programme was like a raw version of the same thing. Whilst its language is slightly less user-friendly, it has many similarities to Isadora. We spent two days putting together these patches, during which time several participants simply gave up. For me these workshops were crucial. They allowed me a chance to look at interactive software in a slightly different way. One of my reasons for not working with a programmer and choosing to do the technical work myself is that, despite the less sophisticated patch work, having that hands-on time with the tools means that I cut

out any potential filters in the form of another person's pre-conceptions. Working with PD gave me a similar feeling. Whilst Mark Coniglio's Isadora provides a number of interesting and easy to use tools, it has still been organised by him and, therefore embodies his viewpoint in some way. PD is slightly closer to a blank slate, less manipulated or tainted by another person's ideas. Our very first patch on PD involved an 'actor' called a 'Bang'. This generates an impulse when triggered, like many of the trigger actors on Isadora. To trigger the 'Bang' to send a signal to a note generator, we linked it to an impulse generator. The possibility of setting up an automatic trigger to carry out actions on a patch was always possible in Isadora. I later found the equivalent actor in Isadora, the 'Frequency Generator' in the sound tools, which formed the basis of another work which I will describe later. I also learnt how to develop a patch on PD for motion tracking and hope to be able to use this in future projects.

It was not until almost four days in to my stay at the Lab that a chance viewing of some video footage precipitated a conversation that then led to a collaboration between myself and two Luxembourgian artists Gianfranco Celestino and Anne-Mareika Hess. During those initial days I was not alone in my ramblings. Many artists moved around the space 'scratching' for an idea. During this time Celestino had taken some video footage of Hana Ma walking in a straight line in different locations of the mine. I instantly connected this image with an idea that had struck me whilst sitting in the Lab space on the morning of the first day as Birringer led a discussion amongst the group. Allowing my mind to wonder, I looked around the actual lab space and traced through all the available lines that the space had to offer. I then considered the possibility of filling in the gaps between the lines with video footage of the outdoor space and imagined a continuous walking pattern along these lines that would involve a dancer in the real space walking into a projection of themselves in the filmed space.
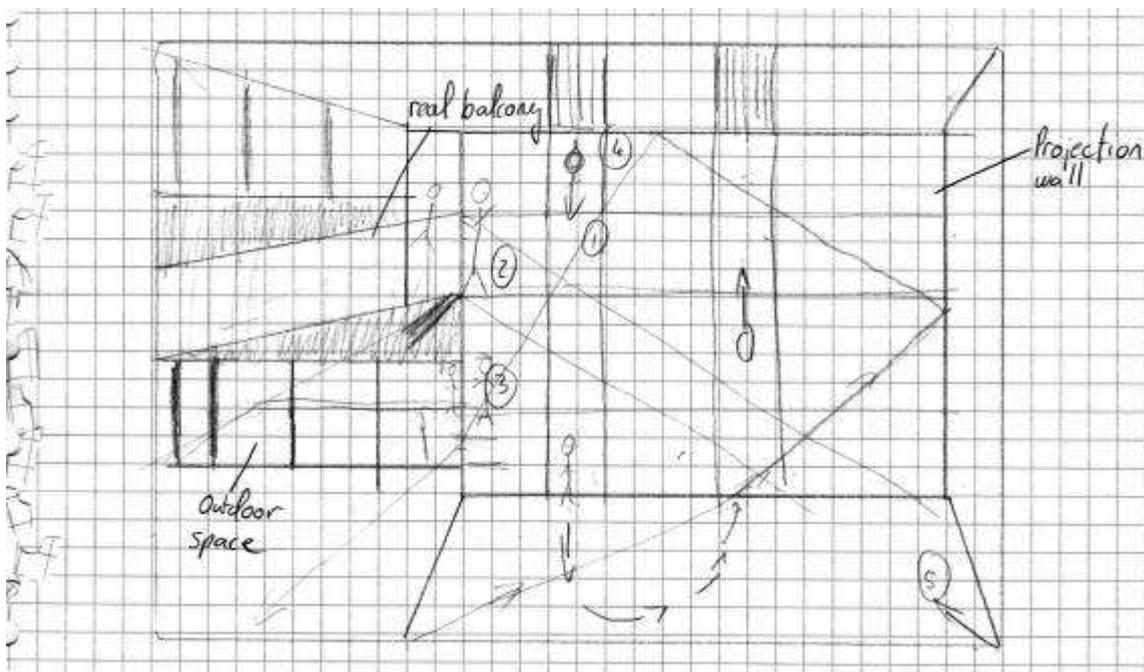

Figure 4: This rough sketch shows the set up of the performance space and the intersections between the real space with the projected image which formed the basis of the MAG project.

Over the next two days we set out to create MAG, a combination of projection in performance with a focus on drawing the design and architecture of the outdoor spaces into the indoor performance

space. We created a story board of the different intersections that we wanted to create, based on the lines that we could see in the performance space. We then went outdoors to find the locations that fitted in with the lines we had identified. Whilst filming we aimed to achieve the neatest possible fit, so that in transitioning from the real dancer into the projected dancer the dimensions of the space and the height of the dancer remained consistent.

Figure 5: A scene from the MAG project with Anne-Mareika Hess walking away from the camera. The image shows a view of the guest rooms with the potato shaped balcony to the right.

We found ourselves caught up in a conversation between the dimensions of the actual performance space and the perspective of the camera viewpoint. Our resulting work in progress was a very raw proposition. As a group we would like to develop this into a work that can be re-made on different buildings. We are also interested in the possibility of using an indoor space with projections of the outdoors during the daytime, and an outdoor space with projections of the indoors at night.

It was a natural reaction to the environment and the context in which we found ourselves to assume that all that was available was free to use. However, whether or not this applied to our own work, was not clear from the outset. The idea of using found objects, spaces and materials and re-presenting or re-contextualising them in an art work, was the basis of one particularly fractious interchange over the course of the lab. A dispute arose from the use of video footage taken by one artist of another artist's work and being used as the raw material for a video installation piece. The specific details of the situation demonstrate the interwoven layers of relationships that resulted from the parallel creative practices – in itself an interesting result of our working structure. The video artist Sonia Rodrigues took some video footage of another participant, Sosanna Marcelino, wearing sound devices imbedded into a costume developed by Michelle D'Anjoux in collaboration with John Richardson. Rodrigues used the footage to develop a video piece that investigated the layering of images to produce a 3-D video effect. When the video piece emerged in the final showing, the costume designer D'Anjoux took umbrage at this use of her work without her knowledge, and requested that the work be removed and deleted from Rodrigues' library on the basis of there having been no discussion on the usage of the footage. During a group meeting the situation was discussed resulting in a more or less unanimous agreement that the question of copyright should have been raised at the outset of the lab. This could have been in the form of a contract signed and agreed by all on the nature of the forthcoming exchanges of information and ownership of material generated, shared and re-used by the group members in the course of the lab.

The group as a whole changed over the ten days, with people arriving at different times in the week and a large number leaving after just six days. In the final few days three UK based artists, Anne

Laure Misme (France), Jennifer McColl (Chile) and Sandy Finlayson (UK) arrived with their video installation work that was projected onto a window pane in the lab space. They also began making a new work in the three days that they were resident at the Lab. As a result of the movement of people, the group dynamic changed several times, as did the relationships and conversations amongst the group members.

In the last few days, frustrations with the set-up of the lab came to the fore, with suggestions that some kind of structure could have facilitated a richer experience for all the members of the group. The key issue was the lack of consistency with which the term "autonomy" was applied. On the one hand the lack of formality was extremely liberating, but it was also at odds with the timetable of workshops and performances that required participants to at least work towards some kind of end. My own frustration lay in the way this ideal of autonomy, a concept that gripped and inspired me on my first evening at the lab, rapidly disintegrated. It gave way to a more sceptical concern that the term was being used in some way to justify a lack of any real plan. 'Freedom' and 'control' are difficult concepts to identify, and claiming to have either is never as straightforward as it may seem. To me freedom needs structure in order to support and protect it from being hi-jacked by known or unknown hierarchies. The problem with autonomy is that it requires an enlightened self-awareness, like an internal compass, to keep it on course against underlying currents.

Despite my frustrations with the lab, I am still re-assured by its existence and what it stands for. As an emerging artist I am often disheartened by the amount of applications and selection processes which seem to dominate my working practice. Money is short, and the number of makers is high. So selection is an obvious necessity. But it does feel important that there are spaces where artists can select to participate in a research project, as opposed to being selected by a panel. This self-selection is the basis for a bottom-up approach which I think will become increasingly important if we are to find a way to bypass the agendas and politics of organisations. By co-incidence, a few weeks after this Lab, I attended the Digital Futures in Dance Symposium in Bournemouth, where this notion of individual agency and empowerment was discussed in the context of open web platforms. Marlon Barrios Solano (a dance artist and founder of Dance tech. Net) called on artists to consider how they might make use of the web in order to generate and support a 'Bottom –Up' approach to the distribution of dance work. But this, he argued could only be achieved through some kind of 'architecture of participation.' My true disappointment with the Interaktionslabor was that it seemed ideally placed to provide a space for open interaction, but it lacked the direction to facilitate this in a meaningful and considered way.

By the end of my stay I began to view the space and its intention as a kind of proposition. It gave me one valuable resource that is hard to come by in London: time to think and try things out. During my last few days at the Lab I set up a series of patches on Isadora that involved delays, live capture and instant playback and used 'Frequency Generators' to trigger an automatic movement from one patch to another. Entering the first scene sets off a chain of impulses by which the software will automatically move from a delay scene, to a pre-recorded playback, to a real-time relay during which frequency generators start and stop a live capture and then returning to the first scene (the delay mode). Every time the second scene is activated a 'Counter' actor is triggered to increase the movie number by 1, which loads the movie recorded in the previous loop. When the movie comes to an end it triggers a jump to the next scene and so on. All this happens without the need for any

manual actions on the keyboard. It generates a loop during which actions are played back, or recalled creating a constant forwards and backwards movement in the work.

On the final day of the lab Sosanna Marcelino worked with me for one afternoon to begin integrating this series of patches into a live movement piece. Due to the quick movement through the scenes, we focused on small gestures and decided to contain the projection and performance space by using a configuration of tables. We started off just placing objects on the table, an orange was added to the configuration and soon became one of the features of the piece. The choreography lay in the accuracy of timing and spacing with which we worked through the series of gestures and exchanges.

Figure 6: the set up of my final project with Sosana Marcelino (left) and myself (right)

This all took place on the final day of the lab, when emotional and mental exhaustion were beginning to set in. It was also the hottest day of our stay, with temperatures of 33 degrees in the shade. But something of the neatness of the structure we were dealing with forced us to push through even though the work became increasingly complex. It grew to involve a dozen oranges, plates, knives and napkins. Our final sharing at 10pm that night, watched by the few remaining members of the group, Johannes Birringer, Claus Behringer, Sandy Finlayson and Sonia Rodrigues, concluded a journey through anxiety, frustration, inspiration, tensions and friendships that have come to define my ten day experience at this gem of a space. It was appropriate that this final work was set around a table and portrayed the exchange of food and thoughts. Our own eating space was a meeting place for ideas, cultures and practices, and so this virtual meal seemed a fitting note on which to end.

Figure 7: An image taken from the final sharing shows the projection on the standing table with the remains of our orange meal like a still life in the background.

Notes and Credits

Interaktionslabor 2011 was held at:

Industriekultur Saar
Boulevard der Industriekultur
66287 Quierschied-Gottelborn
Germany

Links: http://www.iks.saar.de/
           http://interaktionslabor.de/

Photos taken by Marguerite Caruana Galiza and Klaus Behringer
Video footage by Marguerite Caruana Galizia