The Civil Potency of a Singular Experience
On the Role of Cultural Organizations in Transnational Civil Undertakings

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The Civil Chain and the Origin of Civil Action

Civil action is born from emotion, says the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells (2015). Although such actions always imply the hopeful expectation that something in society can be improved, this initial emotion is often of a negative nature, fed by fear, discomfort or at least irritation. The reasons for this can be manifold. An individual may feel threatened by beggars or by drug dealers hanging around in the neighbourhood. But they can also feel ill at ease because there are too many policemen, soldiers or security cameras in the streets. Employees may feel intimidated by their boss or colleagues and may also experience stress because of a too heavy workload. Others may be utterly frustrated because their printer is malfunctioning, again. In short, feelings of annoyance, irritations, frustration or injustice can have many causes. And, as may be evident from this broad range of examples, certainly not every negative emotional experience leads to civil action. People who experience stress at work can speak to their employer or can seek professional help or therapy to learn how to cope with that stress.

Discomfort can be channelled in many ways. Those who choose therapy or decide to hire a lawyer opt for a private and individual solution to their problem. Such an initial step undoubtedly requires courage. Discussing our sometimes highly personal and therefore subjective perceptions always assumes the will and courage to communicate. Once that obstacle is overcome we are still not dealing with a civil action yet. Indeed, communication with our therapist or lawyer has little to do with citizenship or public spirit. In order to 'enter' civil society we need to specifically address a collective and generate public support. The initial emotion must be recognized as a shared emotion, as a shared fear, frustration or irritation. Civil action is only possible if we take our personal discomfort out of the private sphere, when we 'de-privatize' the subject matter. However, such a step towards civil space requires an important skill: the ability of (self-)rationalization. This is required to articulate an initial intuition or basic emotion. It is the cognitive competence of analyzing one's own feelings and perhaps point out possible causes. Rationalization, and especially self-rationalization, therefore precedes communication, although the causes of certain emotions might be further clarified in dialogue with others.

And, finally, after the processes of rationalization, communication and de-privatization, the skill of organization is required in order to set the civil action in motion and, if necessary, keep it going in the long run. For instance, one must organize oneself in order to write an opinion piece, but also encourage others to do the same. Protesting in the streets or rolling up our sleeves to clean the neighbourhood requires at least a modicum of (self-)organization. What is important here is that those processes of self-rationalization and of self-organization can temper the initial emotion that triggered them in the first place. For instance, having to find one's way through a maze of legal rules, being obliged to study political procedures, or having to follow the long and winding road through bureaucratic institutions in order to arrive at the right form of (self-)organization can make one lose the energy to go on. Both processes therefore require that we literally rationalize that initial emotion, to distance ourselves from it and in a sense 'bureaucratize' it (all forms of organization presuppose setting up a minimum number of rules and procedures and sticking to them). In themselves such processes are not dramatic and even necessary to initiate civil action. However, this points to the fact that the basic emotion as mentioned determines the 'drive' or the energy of the civil undertaking. Or, in an analogy by Castells: it is an initial fear converted into anger that defines the engine of civil action. It is the steam that powers civil organization or an initiative with a civil mission. This also means that civil action derives its basic energy from very direct, mundane and mostly local human experience. The chances of success and continuance of every civil initiative therefore depend on finding the right balance between rationalizing and organizing on the one hand and keeping up the energy that is obtained from a basic emotion on the other hand. This balance is all the more urgent the more cultural organizations 'scale up' their activities, for instance from a local to a regional or from the national to the transnational level. Each step up the ladder demands more rationalization and organization, and thereby one risks evaporating the initial drive and emotion, as well as losing track of the local problems that started it all.

From the above we may conclude that a cultural organization that adopts a civil role situates itself at the end of a chain of successive, distinctive operations. And that such an organization will continuously have to take into account all the previous stages

in the chain in order not to alienate itself from its own source of energy. Analytically, this succession of processes — which we call the civil chain — looks like this: (1) emotion — (2) (self-)rationalization — (3) communication — (4) de-privatization (or going public) and, finally, (5) (self-)organization.

A cultural organization that adopts a civil role finds itself at the end of this chain. It is indeed an organization. It only plays a civil role because it de-privatizes or makes public a specific social issue. It can only do so through communication, which it not only needs in order to bring its civil mission in the public eye, but also to extend the organization itself, for which it needs communication through its founders, members and other involved parties. This communication assumes an ability to articulate and thereby rationalize a basic feeling. At the same time, however, it is important to maintain that initial emotion. Necessary processes of rationalization and organization can after all take away the drive and energy from the organization.

Looking at the chain analytically, we can see that the civil ambition can only be fulfilled through three transitions. The first one takes place at the emotional level. An initially negative feeling (of discomfort, injustice, etc.) must be converted into a sense of positive energy, of simple enthusiasm to 'get cracking' or at least of not resigning oneself to the situation. Castells gives the example of fear that must be 'positively' converted into outrage and hope (2015, pp. 247–248). By 'positively' we mean that outrage and hope lead to action. However negative the results of bursts of outrage may be, they always indicate an accumulation of energy. Through outrage, the paralyzing effect of fear changes from passive to active. Feelings of discomfort, irritation, insecurity, injustice and the like often result in defeatism or resignation. Especially when people feel they are alone in their efforts, they tend to resign themselves to the situation. Only when a sometimes hard to pinpoint 'spark' turns negative energy into positive energy does civil action become an option. It is from this same emotional transition that a civil organization derives its energy.

A second necessary transition is to be found on the level of communication, as only through communication can a transformation take place from the individual to the collective level. We can, for example, test whether we really feel what we feel by consulting a therapist, in the sense that we can check whether such a professional recognizes our feelings as also occurring in others

or is familiar with them from the scientific literature. It is only in that confirmation that an individual problem can become a collective one, in the sense that others share our supposedly individual feeling. In the same sense city dwellers can have a chat with their neighbours about street litter. This is also communication in which a basic experience is shared and tested. Only if a neighbour confirms that: 'Yes, you're right, there is a lot of litter here these days', the feeling of discomfort is collectivized and the possibility of civil action emerges. Organizations that adopt a civil role often originate in such shared sentiments. So, without collectivization there is no civil action and no organization. Both examples of collectivization also illustrate, however, that de-individualization in itself is not enough to speak of civil action.

To do so requires yet another transition, from the private to the public sphere. As indicated earlier, feelings and issues can be shared and therefore collectivized in both the private and the public sphere. For example, as long as the employee suffering from stress only discusses the problem with a therapist or only collectivizes it in a self-help group, we cannot speak of a civil action. Only when this worker, perhaps together with the therapist, articulates the initial feeling or syndrome in social terms does it acquire civil value. This means that, say, stress is no longer only explained as a mental condition but is recognized as a structural problem too. Stress is then not only about the irritated nerves of individual employees or about the annoying personal character of their boss, but also about, for instance, high work pressure, about increasingly precarious working conditions such as flexible and mobile project labour, or about the decrease in long-term employment contracts and job security. In other words, in the transition from the private to the public sphere a personal issue (being a stress-sensitive person) is not only translated into a collective problem (a stressful environment, stressful working conditions), but the cause of the problem or feeling of discomfort is then also located in broader social phenomena. This is why the transformation from the private to the public sphere implies the politicization of the initial feeling. If 'the political' stands for openly shaping our living together, this translation is an appeal to the political to articulate and address the issue. Note: we deliberately speak of 'the political' and not 'politics', as the latter may suggest that the politicization of an emotion would only mean addressing politicians or authorities, while 'the political' is much broader.

To paraphrase the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (who is more extensively discussed below): the political is defined by taking part in living together and in actions that (may) rearrange the relations within a society. The political therefore does not simply coincide with a fixed position within political institutions (parliament, government or political party), but is all about questioning and moving such positions (Rancière 2015, pp. 35–52).

This notion has a bearing on our study object, since it means that any civil action or any civil role adopted by a cultural organization is potentially political in nature. And perhaps here also lies the rarely made distinction between the public sphere as understood by Jürgen Habermas (1989), and the civil domain. As mentioned in the introduction to this book, whereas the former is a space for expressing opinions or views, the latter goes one step further. An opinion piece in a newspaper or a debate among intellectuals remains, after all, too easily confined to the discursive domain of verbal dispute and rhetorical musings. In the civil domain this 'non-commitment' vanishes. There, opinions are linked to political demands and administrative responsibility and will at least stir up or irritate the political, for example by referring to civil and other rights and obligations related to an expressed opinion. Besides, in the civil domain those responsible can be addressed. Who, for example, should enforce these rights and who should fulfil these obligations? The very moment that answers to these questions are demanded, civil action occurs or transforms the public sphere into a full-fledged civil domain. We may suspect therefore that the cultural organizations with a civil role studied here are specifically intermediating between the public sphere and the civil domain. In that case they also contribute to the process of politicization.

What About Culture?
Before we begin our quest with specific cultural organizations, let us pause to look at another crucial matter, i.e. culture. For this we will make use of a definition we have given in previous work (Gielen and Lijster 2015) which was built on a description by Belgian sociologist Rudi Laermans (2002). He defined culture in a broad anthropological sense as 'a socially shared reservoir or repertoire of signs'. Culture is in the first place all about the semiotic process of signs and assigning meaning (signification) and being able to do so. To Laermans' definition we added that

culture is not only about a formal semiotic play but also about signification in the sense of giving 'meaning' to life. The use of signs to give meaning to oneself and one's environment is very much an affect-charged process. Stated rather solemnly: culture always also concerns questions about the meaning of life and just as much about the meaning of one's family, friends, and colleagues, one's city, region or nation. From this extended definition we were able to argue that culture is in fact the basis or foundation of all societies. All human practices depend on assigning meaning, after all. How we trade, but also how we make laws or define rights and civil rights, has everything to do with the way in which we assign meaning. Likewise, everything about how we see an abstract European or transnational space, is the result of processes of assigning meaning and 'sense'.

To observe organizations from a cultural point of view also means paying particular attention to these processes of assigning meaning. We assume that especially cultural organizations play a crucial role, as they have all the means to 'signify' civil interests at their disposal. They can even play an important role in a battle to define what is civil and what is not. Our focus will be on how culture is used in said strategies of rationalization, communication, de-privatization and organization.

Also, in line with our definition of culture, we will not limit ourselves to a semantic analysis. It is precisely the affects that are expressed in morality, values and ethics that play a crucial role in these processes of assigning meaning. As we already noted in relation to Castells, a basic emotion is the engine for civil action. The question therefore is how this affect acquires such meaning in processes of rationalization and organization that the energy of the organization is maintained.

Finally, the above definition of culture demonstrates that we do not reduce culture to art or Culture with a capital C. That does not alter the fact that we will give attention to the functioning of art and aesthetic design in adopting a civil role. This is because we suspect that especially artistic expression has a special quality of expressing feelings that are at the roots of civil action. As a specific form of assigning meaning, art may therefore play a vital part in the conversion from a negative to a positive energy. Besides, artistic forms of expression provide the chance for alternative forms of rationalization, communication and organization. After all, as the cliché has it, art expresses exactly that of which

one cannot speak. This popular notion aside, we know only too well how easily images and music can reach out to a wide audience and bring masses into action. Perhaps, more than words and most certainly more than scientific reports, they have the mobilizing potential to make an idea catch on, to make people engage in civil action. But art can be more than just a mobilizing force. It is first and foremost imagination and as we know, quite a few artists have used that capacity of the imagination for much more than expressing their most private fantasies. Quite often they also create a possibly different world, for example by showing that social interaction can take place in a completely different way than was thought of before. Or they make it heard, seen and felt how a dominant political regime would work out if we would radically think through certain positive or negative aspects of it. Works of art often do create both utopia and dystopia. When we read such books or watch such performances or movies we understand only too well that we are in a world of fiction. However, it is precisely this transference to an imaginary world that provides us with the possibility to look at the non-fictional world or simply everyday reality from a completely different perspective. We may suspect that this fresh but sometimes strange perspective will at times feed political and civil ambitions. In that sense, culture and cultural organizations also provide the signs and the imagination to think of and shape a transnational civil space.

Culture in Transnational Public Spheres
In the new transnational context it is no longer obvious where to locate the public sphere, who belong to it or feel it concerns them or how far its influence reaches. The 'public' is no longer identical to the civil population of a certain nation state, also because through migration (either voluntary or forced) the inhabitants of a certain place are increasingly not citizens of that nation state (but are, for example, expats, labour migrants or people without documents). According to Fraser we should therefore disengage the notion of 'the public' from the traditional notion of citizenship (as in being born in a certain nation state) and see it as all those who are 'affected' by certain political issues: '[T]he all-affected principle holds that what turns a collection of people into fellow members of a public is not shared citizenship, but their co-imbrication in a common set of structures and/or institutions that affect their lives' (Fraser 2014, p. 30).

The critical power of a transnational public sphere depends on two questions: that of legitimacy and that of efficacy. We could also say: the first question is to the 'who' of the public sphere (who is being represented, who feels it concerns them?) and the second question is to the 'how' (how are public opinion and emotion transformed into action and policy?). Below we will further discuss these questions and also outline each time how specifically art and culture can play a meaningful part.

When it comes to the 'who' of the public sphere, a weakness in the classic theory of Habermas of that sphere presents itself. It is the assumption that in principle anyone can participate in rational deliberation and communication, which, according to him, should lead to the consensus that forms the foundation of democracy. (Admittedly, he himself calls this a 'contrafactual ideal', but he does not seem to provide any concrete indication of how this may transcend the elitist affair of intellectuals, which this deliberation traditionally is.) By contrast, the already mentioned French philosopher Jacques Rancière rejects thinking in terms of foundational elements and states that democracy is created time and again through dissensus. Besides, and here we return to the importance of art and culture, according to him politics is not a matter of looking for the right arguments, but a matter of aesthetics. Or: in his view, politics is the way in which our shared space is divided.[1]

He means this in a very literal sense as well: so, for example, how the communal space of the city is divided between public and private (just think of the political struggle surrounding Gezi Park in Istanbul, a public park that was to make place for a shopping mall), how visible various social, cultural and political groups are in the media, or in parliament. But also in how far people are seen and heard figuratively speaking or in a political sense: in how far people are represented or see their interests expressed in policy, legislation, et cetera. The 'sans papiers' are often not only invisible because they are in hiding or kept out of sight in refugee centres, they are also invisible politically because hardly anyone speaks on their behalf and because their interests are hardly looked after in national parliaments. According to Rancière, every political act is aimed at a rearrangement of that communal visible space. In relation to this he speaks of the common basis of art and politics as 'the sharing and (re)distribution of what can be perceived with the senses' ('partage du sensible').

This is the aesthetic moment of politics, but also precisely the 'political of art', in that it is capable of showing what had been neglected until then. As stated earlier, art and culture can make us aware of voices that we did not hear before, of political emotions and interests that suddenly acquire a public face. A striking example of this is the project *Ausländer Raus* (Foreigners Out) by the Austrian artist Christoph Schlingensief. In 2000, he had twelve asylum seekers stay in a shipping container in the centre of Vienna and had the public decide who was to be extradited through Big Brother-like voting rounds. Naturally, this performance led to much controversy but it also catapulted an interest group into the public space. It shows that art and culture can play an important part in making the invisible visible and in creating a communal space in which similarities and differences can be 'fought' over (in a playful sense).

Since the 1990s, the notion of 'cultural citizenship' has emerged in political philosophy. The term was introduced to do justice to the fact that nowadays the notion of citizenship is very much interwoven with culture (through processes of globalization, migration and mediatization, as mentioned before) and also to counterbalance the idea that having a passport or civil rights is all that is required to be a full member of a society (see Stevenson 2003 and Vega and Boele van Hensbroek 2012). Citizens do after all also need to feel that their culture is recognized and respected and that they can manifest their presence in the public sphere. Especially art and cultural organizations have a task and responsibility here. However, do note: cultural citizenship is a two-edged sword, as culture not infrequently is a reason to make people who have had civil rights for a long time already, feel they are still not full members of the community (see the official use of the word 'allochtone' in the Netherlands, which refers to someone who themselves, or one of their parents, was born abroad).

As to the second question, that of efficacy or 'how', it is harder to tell how art and cultural organizations may play a part or even if we can expect them to. One of the problems of the crisis in the contemporary public sphere is that local or national authorities are less and less able to autonomously address the interests and concerns of their citizens because they neither have the power nor the policy instruments to solve transnational problems. As Fraser says, the challenge nowadays can be summarized thus: 'on the one hand, to create new, transnational public powers; on the other, to make them accountable to new, transnational public spheres' (Fraser 2014, p. 33).

This quote from Fraser does however provide a hint for one way in which art and culture may contribute to a transnational public sphere, i.e. the representation, mapping and identification of contemporary power structures. In describing the 'civil chain' we already mentioned the step of de-privatization or making public of emotions, by which we can transform these emotions into a political force. Precisely in that step the power of imagination is crucial and imaginative power definitely belongs to the domain of culture and art. We see this imaginative power at work in, for example, the projects by Renzo Martens, who, in his controversial film *Enjoy Poverty*, encourages inhabitants of Congo to turn their misery into profit by selling photographs of war victims and undernourished children to international press agencies. The film basically works as a *J'accuse* at a transnational level and has triggered many a debate about the role of Western businesses and NGOs in Africa. But also a more gruesome example like the worldwide popular fury among Muslims about the Danish Muhammad cartoons demonstrates how art and culture can be a power that can either bind or split communities and do so in a way that transgresses national borders.

However, the next step in the civil chain, that of making the self-organization public, is perhaps the most challenging one. Manuel Castells lists a number of characteristics of contemporary networked social movements, including their ability to connect the local to the global, their tendency to go 'viral' — to jump from one place to the next — and their self-reflexive nature (Castells 2015, pp. 246–271). For each of these characteristics, cultural organizations can be a platform. Because of their embeddedness in a local, often urban context they are usually quite well-informed about what political, cultural and social issues are at stake in a city, and they also know how to link these to transnational themes such as globalization, commodification and multiculturalism. In addition, the international network that is often at their disposal anyway may serve as an infrastructure of (self-)organization for social movements and as a place for experimenting with forms of protest and community building. The Württembergischer Kunstverein in Stuttgart is an example of this: here's an art institute that opened its doors for the protests against Stuttgart 21, a large-scale renovation plan for the inner city in which cultural

heritage would be sacrificed for the sake of gentrification and streamlining traffic and large parts of the public domain (public parks and squares) would end up in private ownership. The Kunstverein not only literally offered its rooms for meetings and events of the protest movements, but also organized exhibitions around themes such as critique, the commons and public space (see Christ and Dressler 2015).

These are of course only a few examples. The formation of a transnational public sphere is a political challenge that by far transcends the interests and responsibilities of art and cultural organizations. Nevertheless, this challenge allows us to say something about the role of these organizations in the public space, namely that they not only and not mainly try to connect to an existing public sphere, but rather that through their activities they contribute to shape and transform this public sphere time and again and in doing so they also may shape society anew, every time. Perhaps this is where their most important task lies, in the fact that by their participation in and transformation of the public sphere they can provide a new and alternative interpretation of what a transnational civil society might mean. To understand better how this works concretely, we will have a closer look at two cultural organizations.

The Art of Mirroring
Les Têtes de l'Art, established in 1996 in Marseille by three actors, in the first place wanted to have a legal structure for their professional concerns. Although current director Sam Khebizi and his two colleagues Laurent and Lavigne were quite successful as a comic trio, they soon found the theatre scene too confined and self-absorbed. With Les Têtes de l'Art they wanted to build a bridge between the artistic and the social world, or, as they put it, make the connection with 'the real world'. The latter is regarded as more diverse and therefore more challenging than the traditional art world and its audiences.

When our field researcher Philipp Dietachmair probed a question about an 'initial irritation' or 'emotion' in an in-depth interview with the current director of Les Têtes de l'Art Khebizi, the latter did vaguely refer to a 'shock' that he experienced as a young resident of Marseille, when he found out that there were still *bidonvilles* (slums) in the city. Perhaps this is just an indicator that informs the social sensibility and fuels Khebizi's and

Les Têtes de l'Art's drive. This almost natural link between an individual sensibility like Khebizi's and the organization seems a relevant element. Castells also notes that the basic emotion and drive for civil action often reside with individuals, and that organizations are frequently the result of initiatives by one individual or a handful of charismatic persons (2015, pp. 12–13). More or less durable forms of organization stand on the shoulders of a single individual, which immediately also reveals the potential weakness of such initiatives, as quite a few of them are totally dependent on the person who started them. This figure also embodies a definite but sometimes hard to determine drive.

Khebizi is definitely aware of this 'fragility'. Several times during the interview he states, for example, that Les Têtes should be a structure that could also continue without him. It is one of the reasons why, after ten years in place, the board of Les Têtes was reshuffled. Khebizi's wife and close friends have been replaced by an assembly of artists, which not only makes the organization more professional, but also means that Khebizi must give account of his functioning within a more critical framework. At the same time we see how the organization rationalizes an initially mostly intuitive way of operating by putting it into words and by formulating a vision in 2008. Khebizi even took a course in management and no longer calls himself, as he did in the beginning, an 'artist' or 'artistic director' but 'managing director'. This also illustrates a tendency towards rationalization and especially professionalization. From then on the people of Les Têtes work more according to plans and more tasks are being delegated within the organization.

Returning to our 'civil chain', we see on the one hand a confirmation of the logic and chronology we have outlined. An admittedly vague basic emotion and personal drive are gradually framed by a solid and professional organizational structure. On the other hand, an important qualification of this chain, which is a result of these first observations, is that the organization itself is also transformed and becomes more rational. The stages or phases in the chain that we described do not seem to 'hook up' in reality, but rather 'slide' into each other in an almost organic sequence. This observation means that from here on, we will no longer speak of a civil chain but of a civil sequence. The various stages remain recognizable, nevertheless. For instance, in the case of Les Têtes de l'Art we can discern clearly defined periods of rationalization during which not only initial intuition and intuitive acts

are taking shape in an articulated view, but the organization itself also becomes more rational. In addition, from the interview with Khebizi we can deduce that this process of rationalization is not only initiated in part but most certainly also enhanced by that other element in the civil sequence, communication. The head of Les Têtes de l'Art specifically stated that the municipal authorities of Marseille approached him in 2003. They were interested in his activities and even had ideas for specific 'assignments' for Les Têtes. At the time, however, Khebizi felt slightly 'embarrassed' as he could not precisely explain to them what the organization was actually doing. After all, neither vision nor methods had been written down or rationalized yet. It was this very invitation to communicate that more or less forced the artistic leader to further specify certain self-rationalizations — such as 'bringing art closer to social reality' — and make them more explicit. In that sense, communication enhances the rationalization process.

Although all these endeavours support better communication with governments and potential partners and also make both the approach and the methods of the organization itself more effective, it is not these rationalization processes that sustain the drive within the organization. The initial emotion as well as the personal drive remains relatively vague, even after this process of rationalization. And perhaps making explicit these words, concepts and methods is not what catches on with people (both within and outside Les Têtes de l'Art) and keeps the drive and energy in the organization. But then, what is?

Answering the question as to how they keep the fire burning, Khebizi talks about wanting to work *with* people and thus bridge the gap between art and society. It is precisely this simple act of making art together with others or 'doing things' that plays an important part. Drive is not so much communicated in words, and energy rarely comes from a well-articulated view. Rather, they emerge from the activities that are organized, the artistic interventions that are staged and the actions that are undertaken. Just like the transference of emotions can take place subconsciously and non-verbally through mirror neurons, the drive and energy are primarily communicated through the actions themselves. It is therefore not surprising that at some point in the interview Khebizi speaks of 'mirroring' when he mentions other actors and organizations that imitate or partly take over the methods of Les Têtes. Seeing others act makes us act as well, actions generate

actions and energy generates energy. In this we also see the power of culture-specific artistic interventions. They generate a 'mimetic effect', which spurs others into action. Artistic interventions and performances in public space, or an educational project with children often indirectly and in an especially positive manner point out the social issues within a group, neighbourhood or square. Cultural civil actions not only bring to light what is not visible, but also make manifest how the surroundings, a space or a neighbourhood may be experienced differently.

In this respect, artistic activities differ from other civil actions such as protests, opinion pieces or petitions. Whereas such civil actions are generally limited to social criticism, the artistic civil action has an extra element: an alternative experience. For a little while the artists provide an often quite modest, but possibly different world, which in most cases generates positive energy. Les Têtes de l'Art illustrated this quite literally with their initiatives named Place à l'Art, a sort of 'fair' where people in the neighbourhood can together engage in all sorts of creative and artistic activities, producing a very positive social dynamics in places where before drug dealers and other petty criminals created an unsafe social environment. The outrage over an unsafe environment is immediately 'compensated' for with a positive alternative. Or, referring again to the transformations in our civil sequence: at the emotional level, especially artistic interventions provide opportunities for converting negative feelings or irritations into a positive experience and energy. Conversely, for some it might be precisely this alternative experience that makes them understand that their living conditions or precarious social environment are far from ideal. Crucial in this is that it is 'through' the artistic process or the work of art itself that participants are given an experience of alternative possibilities. Our other field researcher, Maité Juan, provides the following example of Bel Horizon (a degraded building in the centre of Marseille):

> After the request of an inhabitant of the high-rise flat, the participatory television of Les Têtes de l'Art organized a collective work of several months in 2013–2014. A group of adults and children from the tower block worked together on a script and collectively produced a fictional video about a problematic situation that affected all inhabitants. The fiction involved children and adults of the tower block

as actors. It told the funny story of an investigation carried out by the inhabitants to find out who threw waste out of the windows of the building. The artistic vector allowed for alternative representations to the negative image attached to the place and encouraged the meeting of inhabitants in the tower. After this fiction, a second project, in 2015, consisted in realizing five short films about the wishes of inhabitants about the rehabilitation of the tower.

The Bel Horizon case is just one of many actions by Les Têtes de l'Art that demonstrate how an artistic experience works within civil action. As noted earlier, (negative) criticism of a certain situation goes hand in hand with theatrical action that generates a rather positive experience of an alternative situation. This positive experience in turn evokes new criticism and civil action. Or, as we said: the artistic activity of Les Têtes is what is keeping the energy alive. If such a positive experience does no longer or not yet exist in the social reality, this actually provides a cultural organization with an interesting tool to create this experience all the same, especially in a fictional setting. A play or film creates a distance from the world we actually live in and precisely thereby generates the context for an alternative world. It is this experience that can make participants reflect on their real social reality. For them art generates — in the words of the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1997) — a 'second order observation': from the artistic, imaginary or fictional 'second order' experience they can better observe how they live and experience their own everyday 'first order' reality. In the cases of Place à l'Art and Bel Horizon we see how this experience then encourages people to intervene in real life or at least long for and demand a different reality.

From our modest observations of Les Têtes de l'Art's activities we also learn something interesting about the difference between civil actions and artistic civil actions. In the first place, artistic processes provide the possibility to transform an initially negative emotion or an irritation into a positive (aesthetic) experience. In the second place, especially the artistic aspect provides a chance to experience something that is lacking in reality within a different context, albeit an imaginary one. This experience of a fictive 'reality' may — and indeed this is only a potential — bring people to start questioning the reality they are living every day. Finally, whereas many civil actions (such as protests or petitions)

derive their energy but also their legitimacy and efficacy from representativeness, cultural actions do so from their theatrical character or, literary, their 'performance'. A rally or a petition is as convincing as the number of people showing up or signing: the greater the number, the more convincing. In other words, public support in quantitative terms determines the value of the civil action to a high degree. But in cultural civil action there is at least one other element. In those actions the experience itself of, for example, working together in preparing and presenting a performance, production or music recital, co-determines the efficacy of the civil endeavour. Here it is the quality of the experience rather than the quantity in terms of the number of participants that determines the civil potential. What we are trying to say is: with cultural civil action it is precisely this unique sensation that is sometimes experienced by a very small group which charges them with energy and makes it convincing. It is this singular experience that makes the civil engine run and keeps it running.

It is for good reason that the sociologist Luc Boltanski and the economist Laurent Thévenot (1991) have described representation or representativeness as a crucial quality of what they call the 'civic world'. A union leader can only be effective if he is able to convince the members (sometimes by opening the strike fund); a politician only derives his mandate from his electorate; and special interest groups can only look after their interests if indeed there is a group behind them. What we have discussed above is that cultural civil action introduces a new element into this classic civil value regime of quantitative representation. The persuasive power of an artistic intervention or cultural manifestation does not depend on the size of the group involved or the wider consensus on a criticism or new idea. It can just as well base itself on precisely the unique, idiosyncratic, even most deviating and 'crazy' sensation. In other words, civil power and power of persuasion are thus based on the quality of a singular experience.

Our initial observations of the civil activities at Les Têtes de l'Art teach us something about the specific role of the arts. As we said, deploying art 1) makes it possible to transform a negative emotion into positive energy, 2) has a mirroring or 'mimetic' effect and keeps the energy alive, 3) offers the chance to look at lived reality in a different way and perhaps criticize it, and 4) increases the possibility to bring a unique, deviating or uncompromising idea or view of society into the civil arena. How persuasive

such an alternative proposition is depends not so much on the number of people who already support it, but rather on the quality or persuasiveness of the experience of the execution of this idea (albeit fictional). We could therefore say that the requirement of representativeness does not fully apply to artistic civil actions. Not having to speak in the name of a group, or the members of a union or political party, does mean that one can address 'non-affiliated' groups or members of society. Cultural civil actions therefore also have the potential to reach out to very diverse segments of the population and professional groups throughout society. How that exactly works will be discussed further in our Zagreb case.

Transversal Action

The first surprise we got when starting our investigation into our Zagreb case, Culture 2 Commons, was that it did not exist. Or rather, not in the form of a 'traditional' organizational structure: Culture 2 Commons is in fact a provisional hub or cluster, founded tactically in order to make optimum use of several funding programmes, and consisting of three previously existing organizations, namely the national Clubture network, Operation City Zagreb and Right to the City Zagreb. It operates within a network configuration that addresses issues or initiates actions, thus channelling temporarily accumulated energy. Or, as Teodor Celakoski, one of the key figures of this scene, describes it in an interview with Dietachmair: 'It is like an ecological system and it is not coordinated by one subject, but as a kind of swarm of intelligent knowledge.'

As with Les Têtes de l'Art, we observed some distance between theory and reality in Zagreb. Although the basic emotion from our 'civil sequence' is much easier to point out here than in Marseille, we can however not pinpoint one specific 'irritation' in Culture 2 Commons and the scene around it. What does stand out is one very concrete problem: space for independent culture. A shortage of physical space and accommodation for cultural activities and the lack of visibility of the artistic and cultural expressions that the independent scene represents in the mainstream media, initially formed the core of the civil struggle and generated the basic energy for civil action. The founding of alternative media such as magazines and the occupation of empty factories to give place and face to their alternative culture occur more or less simultaneously. In Zagreb, this tactical fight rapidly

expands to domains outside the cultural sector that oppose the privatization of public spaces. Such actions range from protests against the construction of a shopping mall on a formerly public square to resistance against the privatization of the highway network in Croatia.

The activities of Culture 2 Commons thus are spreading out on at least two levels: 1) geographically, the civil actions are soon disseminated across the whole of Croatia, for example via the national network of cultural organizations within the independent scene, and 2) at the social level, we see a widening of the artistic and cultural sector into, for example, trade unions and ecological pressure groups. In other words, the cultural scene joins a broader social movement that connects transversally to many different segments of the population and spheres in life. One example of this is Pravo na Grad ('Right to the City'), which was established as a collaboration between civil society organizations working in the field of culture and youth, and was later formalized as an NGO. All activities of Right to the City are implemented in collaboration with 'Green Action — Friends of the Earth Croatia', one of the most relevant Croatian environmental NGOs. This social broadening is crucial in increasing the power and charging the energy of civil actions. In this respect too, well-known civil activities of traditional representational politics in which for instance trade unions and their members play a central part are forsaken in favour of actions that no longer rely on quantity alone but look for the quality of the singular dissonant voice.

This brings us to an important note: the transversal nature of contemporary civil action should be considered as an expression of the broader socio-economic shifts from welfare state to neoliberalism and from Fordism to post-Fordism in the workplace (see also Gielen 2015a and Gielen 2015b), that have the effect that both social problems and struggles are and can no longer be limited to the sphere of labour or, in classic Marxist terms, be reduced to class relationships. Nowadays, working conditions affect all aspects of life — or become 'biopolitical', to use the phrase by Michel Foucault (1997) — with the increasing flexibility of working hours (the line between work and leisure or private time is less and less strictly drawn) and the increased immateriality of work. It seems therefore almost obvious that civil actions that run transversally through various spheres in life fit better within this macro-sociological evolution. Neoliberalism affects

the whole of our personalities, and it therefore seems evident that civil actions too are aimed at this totality of the world with its various life spheres (home, ecology, economy, education, politics, et cetera). Any contemporary civil critique or action will therefore be most productive when it engages in this 'total life sphere', i.e. when it becomes 'cultural'.

The independent scene engages in a struggle for its own culture. That is, a struggle in which artists claim space to signify themselves within a society. Earlier we already stressed that this is the very essence of culture: assigning meaning and sense to our own existence within a certain society. Civil action therefore not only joins a political or economic struggle but is always also a cultural undertaking to represent or 'signify' oneself, one's own lifestyle and values within a certain society. Like art, civil action is a way of breaking open and expanding this container of meanings called 'culture'.

To what extent do the rationalization, communication and, finally, organization of the basic emotions in Zagreb, and Croatia as a whole, follow the civil sequence? That we can learn from one of the organizations there, namely 'Multimedijalni Institut' (MI2) and its Net.culture club MaMa. The founders of this organization play a defining role in inspiring, driving and coordinating the whole scene. Since its establishment in 2000, this organization has been weaving together interests of diverse cultural fields, such as 1) critically infected digital arts, film, music and open access; 2) digital commons; 3) philosophy and theory; 4) cultural networking, advocacy and grassroots organizing, and 5) protection of public domain and struggles for spatial justice. Locally, MI2 is mostly identified with the social and cultural centre MaMa in Zagreb, where it organizes cutting-edge cultural, educational and technology programmes, hosts a local hacker community and provides an open venue for other cultural initiatives. But it is also a co-organizer of a Human Rights Festival, electronic music events, publishing activities and the Croatian distributor of Creative Commons licenses.

It is immediately clear how these cultural organizations operate. To put it simply, we could say that in Zagreb and elsewhere in Croatia they are in fact turning an open access on-line system into an off-line model. In any case, new media and digital network culture are among the most important sources of inspiration for 'real-life' analogue organization. Not only does the virtual world

work as a mirror for developing organizational models in the 'real' world, it also provides inspiration for civil actions such as 'hacking' tactics and communication via open access. For example, MaMa was the direct inspiration for founding the Clubture Network of similar-minded local 'clubs' in 2002. Clubture Network brings together over fifty independent cultural organizations that are active in various contemporary cultural and artistic disciplines all across Croatia. It functions as a collaborative exchange platform through which organizations directly collaborate, on principles of mutual decision-making and inclusiveness.

It is again interesting to note how cultural and artistic practices play a unique role in civil actions. In Zagreb we were able to observe how debate converts into hands-on practices and also how artistic skills can help in this. Although none of the people from Culture 2 Commons that were interviewed stated that they are practising art while engaging in civil actions, it can hardly be denied that art, or rather creative practices, do inform these actions in a unique manner. The use of powerful visual as well as theatrical means not only make their actions more visible in the media, but the inventive and sometimes playful character of their actions also makes them contagious and generates positive energy. Their techniques convert initially negative emotions or irritations into action while simultaneously preventing them from being stigmatized as 'sourpusses' or doom mongers. Applying creative methods demonstrates a remarkable optimism, or at least inventiveness and the readiness to approach social and cultural problems in a different manner. For example, submitting a petition with 54,000 signatures as a pile of paper or digitally, has a quite different effect than when you hang those 54,000 postcards physically in the public space, as the activists of Pravo na Grad did. And a protest against plans of the Ministry of Construction comes across stronger when you actually cordon off the ministry's building with yellow crime scene tape than by writing a traditional opinion piece. The same goes for a theatrical performance in which activists dressed as tourists arrived at Kulmer Castle — with media attention — to claim their hotel rooms. Kulmer Castle is registered as a public hotel but has for many years now been used as a private residence by the Todoric family, one of the richest families in Croatia. The caste is built in a green area, where facilities for private housing are not allowed. Underlining its official public purpose as a tourist location, Right to the City

— arriving by tourist coach — demanded access to the non-existent hotel rooms in the building. The original imagination and theatricality of such actions not only pays out in media coverage, but their innovative and playful character also has a contagious effect with other social movements, NGOs and civil action groups.

In other words, we see once again the already mentioned 'mimetic' or 'mirror' effect of forms of artistic expression. In any case, the use of such artistic means and involving the media was replicated nationally in very diverse places in Croatia. And although, as in Marseille, Europe is not at the front of everyone's mind in Zagreb, perhaps here we have an important medium for arriving at a more international support base. Like the Guy Fawkes masks seen all over the world, likewise original forms of expression and performances may at least work as 'carriers' in shaping a wider civil playing field. In order to do this, the cultural sector must indeed demonstrate the will 'to break down its own walls', as Croatian cultural activists mentioned on the spot. This means in the first place that the cultural sector realizes and acknowledges that its own problems are also the problems of others. The issues of a shrinking public space, 'enclosure of the commons', precarious working conditions, but also of a diminishing autonomy or chance of self-regulation, is after all not exclusive to the world of artists and cultural organizations. Today, it is a problem shared by education, health care, the legal system, the press and parliamentary democracy. In short, constituting a transnational civil domain not only demands an international but also a transversal and a 'trans-sectoral' approach. That is perhaps one of the most important lessons so far that we can draw from Marseille and Zagreb.

Towards a Transnational Public Sphere?
We have discussed how cultural organizations contribute to the civil domain and to civil action. To a large extent, our case studies followed the logic of the 'civil chain' we laid out in the first section, although the cases also led us to adapt or specify the model in some aspects. The cultural organizations we studied channel and translate emotions, resulting in interventions and activities in public spaces. The most important lessons from our cases were, in the first place, that the added value of culture in these organizations exists in the 'mirroring' effect of their actions, which communicate the 'spark' that once inspired their initiative. In other words:

the emotion that we situated at the beginning of the 'civil chain' is also its result, intended or otherwise. It was clear that the cases we chose were very much aware of their position and role within civil society, not only at a practical and strategic level but often also at a theoretical level. In the second place, we learned that these cultural organizations are increasingly part of wider social movements. It is remarkable that when asked about the initial 'emotion', 'irritation' or 'frustration' that started the 'civil sequence' for them, both the initiators of Les Têtes de l'Art and of Culture 2 Commons also referred to the obstacles to their artistic practice: for example, an excess of bureaucracy or the lack of a physical space to practise their profession. The comparison with Matryoshka dolls made by one of the interviewees in Zagreb is quite apt: when trying to address a certain issue (for example, the lack of space for cultural activities) you discover other political issues behind it and in order to solve those issues you stumble upon other interests (cultural, political, economic or otherwise), et cetera.

This brings us back, finally, to an issue we already addressed earlier, namely how a civil domain could function on a transnational level. Could these organizations themselves contribute to a transnational civil domain? When asked about this possibility the actors involved proved to be sceptical. They often already have their hands full with activating local citizenship, putting local political issues on the agenda and dealing with local authorities, and hardly have time and energy left to worry about such an abstract entity as, for example, 'Europe'. Still, in the development of these organizations thus far we already observe, in a relatively short time span, an impressive expansion of their network, at two levels: from internal-artistic to social, and from the local to regional level. We have seen, especially in the Zagreb case, that an expansion to the rest of the region and collaboration with other regions in the former Yugoslavia are high on the agenda, but Les Têtes de l'Art too strives for a wider network in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur. If we extrapolate this trend it is very well possible that their agendas develop in such a way that, sooner or later, a cultural-political network for Europe becomes more concrete. And in fact, both cases we studied are currently part of the ECF-supported Connected Action for the Commons, which tries to extend such initial encounters among local actors towards exploring the possibility for creating a cultural civil agenda on a transnational scale. Within these kinds of networks

culture organizations soon realize they are often dealing with similar problems, albeit in their own (local) context, and therefore can also learn from each other.

Furthermore, the notion of a transnational civil domain does not need to be as general or abstract as it is often considered to be. Of course the contexts of the various European cultural organizations and their local civil domains differ, sometimes even radically so, but nonetheless they can find each other on the theoretical and sometimes ideological level, and inspire each other. One example of this was the Connected Action for the Commons workshop that we took part in ourselves during our visit to Marseille. One thing we noticed, was that a discussion about the fact that residents around the 2015 Place à l'Art location and other neighbourhoods could soon not have plants or flowers in front of their houses anymore (because of a pending city ordinance) seamlessly progressed into a discussion about David Harvey's notion of 'commoning the city' (2012) as the claiming or reclaiming of the urban public space. During this discussion the participants from distant locations such as Warsaw, Zagreb, Chişinău and Barcelona had no trouble at all understanding each other. In other words, the sometimes indeed perhaps 'abstract' quality of the notion of a transnational civil domain and of the ideals that we as European citizens might want to see as the foundation of the European Union, can certainly contribute to articulating protest and to channelling and directing political emotions.

But it is not only concepts and theories that bridge transnational networks of civil undertakings. As we have described above, the singular experience of an artistic project or an artwork can let people immediately 'feel' and understand what is going on or what is at stake. It is the *aesthesis* of the artistic that has the potential to touch all of our senses. This quality can make very abstract things very concrete and indeed 'sensible'. Aesthetics as aesthesis can make you grasp an abstract idea without losing its complexity, and allows you to literally 'make sense' of it. Besides, aesthetic forms and actions are very easily mirrored because of the transgressional and transnational nature of their 'methods' such as play, humour, irony and exaggeration or travesty. Last but not least, the singular experience goes beyond the abstraction of theoretical notions, or figures and numbers in scientific reports, because it can touch us directly, provoking our emotions. In that sense, art offers us a wonderful tool to fuel civil action.

Notes

1 Rancière speaks of 'le partage du sensible'. In French, partage means both sharing and dividing.

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