



L'Art Rue
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Reflective document on the « Counter Museum of Individual Liberties »

Project supported by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Foundation (Tunisia)

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

ADLI	Association for the Defense of Individual Liberties
ATFD	Association Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates
ATL MST/SIDA	Tunisian Association for Combatting STD and AIDS
CM	Citizen museologists
CMIL	Counter Museum of Individual Liberties
IL	Individual Liberties

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Foreword

This document comes as an answer to a request made by L'Art Rue association. It consists of documenting the experience of creating a counter-museum of individual Liberties, using a reflexive approach. Given the uniqueness of the project, the document is not a narrative report (including a chronologically narrative of the different stages of implementation), but is a reflection around the different phases that marked the process. It is important to position this work in its general theoretical framework (*museum studies*, history of the exhibition, etc.) and to identify the various key concepts.

This document was drafted in coordination/consultation with the CMs. Indeed, it was a question of sharing the results along the way, through a series of exchanges and discussions. The organization and planning of these sessions was achieved thanks to the invaluable collaboration of Bilel el Mekki who, in addition to his active role as CM, ensured the coordination that led to the implementation of the CMIL.

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General context and genesis of the project

Supported by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Foundation (Tunisia), the idea of a “counter-museum of individual liberties” was born of a collaboration between L'Art Rue association and the ADLI. More specifically, this is a project that initially crystallized through an invitation issued by the ADLI, having been immediately welcomed and developed by the artist-researcher Thomas Bellinck, whose work entitled "Museum of human hunting" was a kind of catalyst¹. The collaboration between L'Art Rue and Thomas Bellinck on this project as well as the interest in his work motivated the invitation extended to the artist by L'Art Rue in order to reflect artistically on the invitation made by ADLI.

Moreover, the tenth anniversary of the Tunisian revolution was also an opportunity to consolidate this initiative which, in addition to its strongly artistic and cultural vocation, aims to echo the post-revolution achievements in terms of individual liberties. Indeed, the CMIL project aspires to extend all this heritage under all the achievements that we list here anachronistically:

- Birth of the Civil Collective for Individual Liberties (2015/2016)
- ATFD Movement
- The ATL/MST Sida: first breeding ground for future human rights defenders
- First attempt to bring together civil forces: the Tunisian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LTDH)
- The birth of associations working directly to defend individual liberties and outspoken LGBTQI++ associations

The project somehow draws on this victorious yet fragile momentum evolving under the threat of a conservative populism that, despite everything, persists. At its embryonic stage, it was a question of wanting to implement a long-term artistic approach, rather than a one-time action². It is about designing something that would be an experimental laboratory, reflecting the entire body of research so far gathered by the ADLI since 2011. The primary motivation emanated from a concern for archiving and documentation, capable of leading to a collective narrative that is co-written with citizens, thus outlining a new way of living together.

¹“ The Wild Hunt” by Thomas Bellinck is an audio exhibition developed as part of the Dream City festival (2019) that presents contemporary practices of human hunting. It's about who hunts whom and how, who watches, and how clear or reversible those categories are. Based on their intimate knowledge, experts from around the Mediterranean were invited to bring each a hunting scene to the museum's collection. This work of art led to Wahid Ferchichi and the management of L'Art Rue's invitation to reflect together on a museum of individual liberties.

²Concept note 2 written by Wahid Ferchichi of ADLI, on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the Revolution.

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From then on, the first creative impulses of the project revolved around a community museum that would be alive, decompartmentalized, breathing new life into the initiatives inscribed under the burden of this fight against ambient stereotypes. If we trust the critical position openly adopted by citizen museologists³ vis-à-vis an official state museum - imposing its history and its ideology - we are entitled to recognize that the idea of a museum without walls, without objects, went hand in hand with that of a *counter-museum*.

Who are we, for whom, why, how?

A crucial question has been raised during the first think tanks especially⁴, the representativeness of the established core and its possible extension is subject to discussion: who are the CMs⁵? Do they represent a very particular community or an evolving cause, necessarily involving possible plural actors? However, these questions have revealed their equivocity, along the way, given the highly subjective nature of the perception that everyone has of the individual liberties' notion. These perceptions are rooted in a multiplicity of bodies, geographies, socio-political contexts and different frames of thought, implying a good number of privileges. Indeed, the exchanges that have been carried out in this direction underline the conflicting nature of this issue, which is located in a gap, difficult to grasp, between the experience of each CM on an individual scale, on the one hand, and the social codes as operated and accepted in society, on the other hand. Thus, this inevitable ideological interference, anachronistically bringing together *micro-narratives* and *official narratives*, had the symptoms of a tension that did not cease to weigh on the entire process.

However, the question on the *how* had benefited from a clearly established consensus from the beginning: it was agreed that each CM individually develop his/her working methodology and approach to individual liberties, which was further shaped in the presentation of final works⁶. Separated by markings on the ground, the approaches are as much diverge as they deploy a common resonance conveyed by this shared spatiality: that of an undeniable desire *to make the forms of realization of individual liberties tangible* and to offer citizens the opportunity to thwart the codes. For the CM group, in so far as the challenges are on a large scale, there is a *need* to create a counter-museum in this sense.

The discussions around the process and the ontology of the project necessarily led the various actors to ask questions about what a new perception of citizenship could there

³We adopt here the inclusive writing used by the CMs throughout the process.

⁴This is the first phase of the process following the drafting of the project's concept note. We will return later to the sequence of all the steps that articulated the project's methodology.

⁵The core team formed around the project is made up of amateurs, artists, activists, researchers, filmmakers and directors.

⁶These are the workshops presented in the "32 bis" between 04_07 October 2021.

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be (question rendered legitimate by the observation that "we are first and foremost citizens before being museologists!"⁷). Here again, this question is no less paradoxical. It makes you wonder to what extent it is possible to dissociate the legal dimension of this concept, the legal framework in which it is exercised, from the subjective spectrum that everyone carries internally. In this perspective, the debate takes shape, despite the differences, from a vision that wants to be rather freed from any form of recognition linked to the instances of social legitimization. Indeed, the form of citizenship that has been deemed most in line with the CMIL approach is the form that is expressed symbolically, pertaining to the bodily presence of the citizens that we are. Thus, promoted in a spirit of *deconstruction* (deconstruction of citizenship as a fixed administrative existence), the vision in question is a more *perceived* citizenship (on a daily basis) rather than recognized (by the texts of legislative rights).

A certain perception of individual liberties will also emanate from this vision of citizenship. Making-up one of the fundamental phases of the CMIL process, the individual meetings with the artists were the subject of reflections around the representation of a form of freedom, which is in no way reduced to the texts of laws, but rather seen as sharing cultural codes, even through the sharing of a common language. It is still important to point out that the brainstorming sessions carried out in this direction converge towards a de-objectified vision of ⁸ the individual freedom, relying instead on the participatory sense of the public and the forms of adaptability of the latter with the experiences to which it is invited. This immersive dimension is based on an appreciation of non-academic forms of knowledge; that is, a content that tends to make visible within official discourse what we are used to pass over in silence. Essia Jaibi's work entitled "Office of ongoing investigations" (Bureau des enquêtes en cours)⁹ is indeed part of this perspective. Based on a phase of research and reflection on media narrative and narrative fiction, to which several journalists and caricaturists were associated, a performance-installation was set up during the open days questioning - in a direct relationship with the public - the relationship to memory and authority. It is a matter of questioning liberties as a construction site still in progress, in which we are pushed, according to political tendencies, to be interested in it or not¹⁰.

⁷Idea developed for the first time during the presentation time of the works on 12_04_2021

⁸We point out here that the answers of the CMs to the questions (asked by T. Bellinck) related to the identification of objects/things illustrating the IL, do not refer to objects as such, but rather to anecdotes, actions, experiences, etc

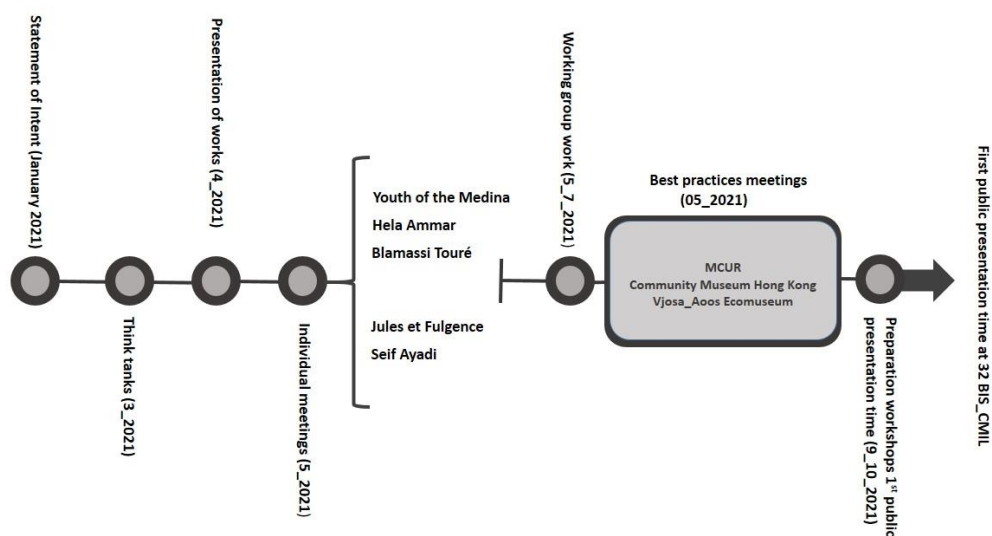
⁹This work of art was preceded by a workshop carried out by E. Jaabi in collaboration with Sarah Ben Ali, who then led the process in September 2021 ahead of the public presentation time. This workshop was the basis of reflection starting from which Essia created the performance installation, office of ongoing investigations, around the media story and narrative fiction.

¹⁰The main issue to which E. Jaabi would like to respond through her installation consists in asking the following question: what ultimately remains of our direct relationship to our own individual liberties and what are the filters that interfere with this practice of liberties in recent years.

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Used Methodology

The final presentation of the workshops embodies the culmination of a process that spanned on different phases; drafting of a concept note, organization of think tanks, individual meetings, steps of the synthesis, transpositions and creations (specifically for the installations/performances of Bochra Triki, Ridha Tlili and E. Jaibi), encounters with best practices and finally the workshops as a final phase.



It is by no means a premeditated action plan, but an organic sequence of reflections and exchanges, where the focus is less on “doing” than on the relevant questions to ask. To this end, the protocol of questions implemented by T. Bellinck did not aspire to find answers to the questions asked, it aimed rather at probing the conceptual universe in which the idea of a "counter-museum" would bathe in the spirit of the protagonists. Here again, a methodology has been adopted, combining both introspective questions and others that are more of a semi-structured type. Applying somewhat the funnel technique, these questions¹¹ chosen by T. Bellinck try to reconcile a phantasmagoric and nostalgic ideal (time machine: desired result or even fictitious theory of change) with a concrete perception anchored in the present (object representing or symbolizing IF). Thus, the questions led the participants to reflect on multiple levels:

¹¹We mention here the protocol of questions prepared and implemented by T. Bellinck: if you travel back in time, which era would you choose? If you are a curator in a museum on individual Liberties, which panel will you create? Add a victory to the party and be responsible for it (an uncelebrated victory)? If you had to invite one curator to decorate your display case, who would it be? What dream would you like to set up in a room?

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- Individual nostalgic memory & narrative of events
- Individual memory vs programmed forgetting: focused on uncelebrated victories
- The potential role/function that the citizen could play in this museum
- Ideal persona of the curatorial choice or personification of the idea
- Achievable attribute Realization of a dream and anchor point in the present

Group work has been planned in order to proceed concretely with the implementation of the ideas developed so far. However, these sessions took a rather theoretical orientation given the health situation, which did not allow a common residence (that was however planned). The priority was to grasp the urgency of these IL-related questions, starting from a central reflection on the body and citizenship. Thus, the reflection process carried out gradually focused on a practice of a performative nature, justified in a way by the nature and sensitivity of the CMs group.

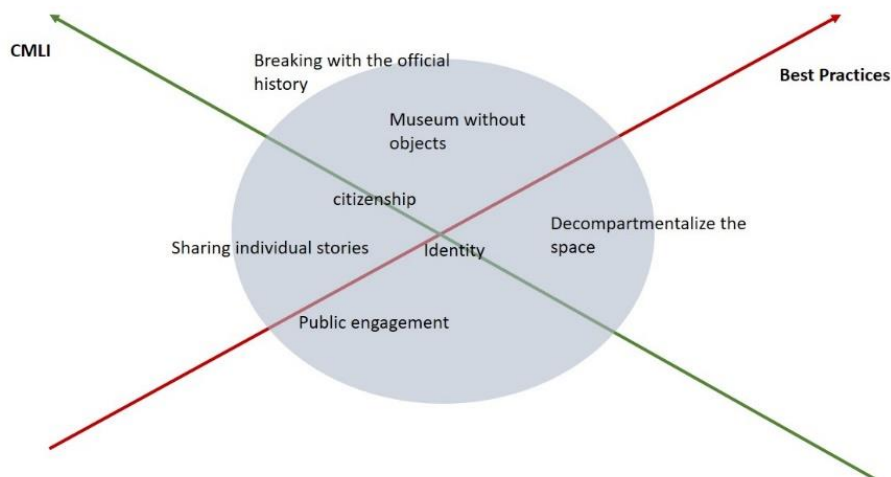
Also, the stage of discovery of best practices and documentary review was able to confer on the reflections, carried out until then, models of territorial anchoring capable of inspiring the CMs. Indeed, the three initiatives in question overlap with the CMIL process in that they place the question of identity at the heart of their concerns, demonstrating a spirit of deconstruction in the face of the mechanisms of domination. This applies to the case of "La Maison des Civilizations et de l'Unité Réunionnaise (MCUR)", where it is a question of lifting the veil on the ethnic richness of the society, victim of a cultural standardization that advocates the colonial ideology. In this attempt to "decolonize thoughts", it is necessary to get the public out of a static and passive state (museum contemplation) by propelling it towards a gesture of sharing (sharing/recounting one's life experiences). This "stepping aside", to use the expression of Jean-Claude Carpanin Marimoutou, highlights the sense of plurality as a bias of living together, a reflection which is not foreign to the CMs.

In a similar perspective, the "Community Museum project" initiative in turn questions the museum institution by highlighting exhibitions devoid of predefined systems. Using cultural tours in neighborhoods threatened by gentrification and collections of objects that are usually non-permanent, the members of the "Community Museum Project" act by fully involving the inhabitants of the locations as the major actors in the projects. This project remains an inspiring practical model for the CMIL, in that it aspires to blend as many artifacts as possible between visitors and the work presented.

Also, "Vjosa/Aoos Ecomuseum (Greece, Albania)" is indeed an essential reference for the counter-museum approach for CMs. Valuable lessons are to be learned from this eco-museum located on a cross-border riverside, highlighting the natural and cultural heritage of the region; not by "showing" anything, but through the stories and perceptions of its inhabitants themselves. If this initiative has aroused the interest of the CMs, it is because it underlines one of the major conceptual foundations of the CMIL; adopting both holistic and inclusive approaches, it is a question of presenting green spaces from the

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cognitive spectra of the inhabitants. Moreover, it is in this perspective that the “Off-screen” (Hors-Champs) workshop of the Tunisian director Ridha Tlili falls, involving women farmers from the border region of Kasserine. The question of the rights of women farmers and their emancipation remains crucial here, forming in the eyes of the artist the “shadow of a reality” (ombre d’une réalité) rather than a reality.



Indeed, whether for one or the other, it was a question for the CMs to support their awareness of certain issues related to the terminology adopted, but also to the conditions of implementation this type of projects and the resulting territorial stakes thereto. This would mean that more vigilance should be used with regards to the assumptions at the start of the project, so much so that they were led to take into account this risk underlined by J.-C. Carpanin Marimoutou: the idea of a counter-museum, does it not imply that we accept a certain idea of a museum?

From contemplation to action

Throughout the questions raised in the think tanks, a criticism of the institutional museum - as above-mentioned - constituted a permanent refrain, expressed with determination on the part of the entire group of CMs. It was a matter of asking a question: how is it possible to design more lively and more accessible works? Considering the discriminatory aspect of the museum, excluding, among others, the visually impaired, is it necessary to imagine sound devices? The very idea of outright involvement of human beings as “living works of art” was one of the tracks considered during the discussions that were carried out. That said, the CMs were careful not to give into the idea of a “human zoo”, which would lead to a form of exoticization, making this an institutional museum in a way: stuff people, beings and objects to control their narratives

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Thus, it was a question of getting rid of an exclusivist museum intended for a particular class of society; a museum that acts as a barrier, freezes and categorizes works of art based on a particular ideology. It is clear that this same representation emerged from a questionnaire conducted with a group of young people from the medina around the way in which they imagine a museum: it is always a question of representing a closed, partitioned and cubic space. A museum, so to speak, associated - through the prism of a school imagination - with an obsolete historical past.

Looking closely at this approach, the reflection itself carried out in the CMIL project goes beyond a criticism of the classic museum system, to test the history of the exhibition and its epistemological origins. We rightly recall that the exhibition, in its current form, goes back to this medieval ideological matrix specific to cabinets of curiosities (16th century). Moreover, we can trace the origin of the museum back to this "loss of contact", which is linked to the history of the relics¹². If desecration "by touch" has generated the use of "protective glass" as a guarantor of the aura of worship objects¹³, this sanctification constitutes the very object of derision specific to the CMIL approach, which, conversely, wants to rebel against all the fixed classifier systems, whatever its content.

In short, in so far as the approach would be built on a diversion of the building-museum, the fact remains that it is the system set as a "collection of the modern cosmography of taxonomy"¹⁴ and of encyclopedic ordering of the world that is here doomed. In this respect, it is not strange for the reflexive premises of the project to already announced this reluctance vis-à-vis the institutional museum perceived as a "technology of power"¹⁵. The CMIL aspires to take shape *first through its method, which is its very essence*, as it is standing against a "top-down" history¹⁶.

Official history vs individual narrative

One of the major challenges is of course to defuse stereotypes linked to IL, with a view to diverting the museum system. The approaches adopted free themselves in a way from the classic historical paradigm (a single linear time) to solicit the story of one's self (singular qualitative temporality). To this end, in this instance the work of the academic psychologist

¹²Sanctified remains and body parts. According to medieval belief, this is about an object with a strong religious connotation transmitting a spiritual influx by touching it.

¹³Lecture by Tristan Garcia & Vincent Normand: *theatre, garden, bestiary, a materialist history of the exhibition* [URL] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MwbgAMMjJY>

¹⁴Ibid.

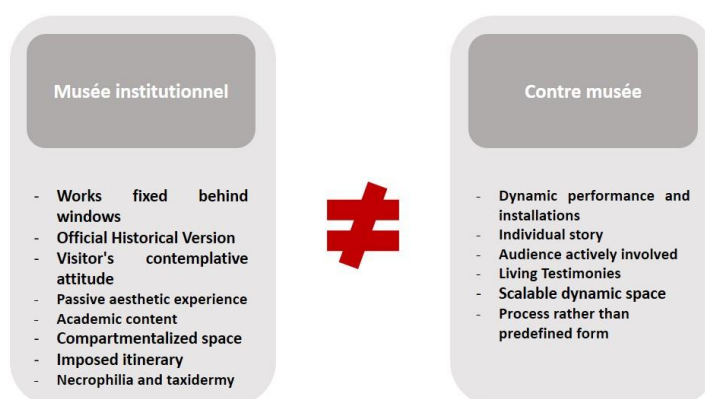
¹⁵Expressed by Thomas Bellinck in the 1st virtual round table of 15_03_2021.

¹⁶According to an excerpt from the 2nd concept note of the project: "the essence of a community museum lies neither in the propagation of a single narrative, from top to bottom, nor in an architecture exhibiting the power or the enclosure of venerated objects. His essence is his method. A community museum is a process, living, breathing, moving, always evolving with the community".

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Dorra Ben Alaya is part of a premise according to which changing mentalities requires a brutal cognitive shock. Indeed, "The thinking cabin" implements an eponymous installation in the form of a workshop, leading everyone to question their perception and their logic of thought. At the end of a journey that visitors were able to go through, the objective of which being to act and produce a text or a drawing, based on their reactions to a contradiction in their own thinking. Thus, we are emancipated from any disinterested historical archiving – which was nevertheless one of the primary motivations of the project – leaving room for a living reflective testimony.

The performance-installation entitled "The walls have your ears" by Bochra Triki is also part of such an approach. The workshop proposes to begin a process of collecting invisible experiences, where stories of multiple desires are shared. It was initially about having conversations with sex workers, which later gave rise to stories of desires shared by other people. The sound device made available to visitors transcribes these conversations through the voices of actresses. "Making the walls speak" in this way would amount to resurrecting this captive memory of brothels, by providing a certain *relevance* to these shared stories. This incredible proliferation compared in the same stories, known and lived, is admirably described by François Niney in these terms: "memory is not a question of accumulation of information, but of assimilation and forgetting, of condensation and displacement (like dreams, like film editing): without this affective work of integration, but also the collective work of objectification of history, with its repressions and its rediscoveries, its blind spots and its discoveries, there would not be no updating, no reinvestment of the known in the lived or of the lived in the known and no stories"¹⁷.



¹⁷François Niney, "L'épreuve du réel à l'écran", De Boeck University, 2000, p.248.

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By such scenarios, there is no recourse to the uniform official narrative: it is a performative¹⁸ and experimental act, condemning the systemic domestication of stereotypes linked to the question of IL. This appeal to individual memory and introspection opens the CMIL process to an extensible and qualitative temporality, which is diametrically opposed to that temporality marking the usual aesthetic experiences in museums. Doesn't the distraction in front of the works of art characterize today the relationship that binds us to these works of art? Haven't we noticed today that even visitors, especially with the arrival of Android, no longer linger long enough in front of the works of art?

The CMs did not fail to address this theme, as they are aware of the importance of "taking your time" when it comes to internalizing the aesthetic experiences advocated. In this regard, Blamassi Touré quotes Honoré Balzac using his own terms: "Balzac, for example, is an author who takes the time to describe everything. Takes "too much" time, but this allows him to dive into an imaginary world"¹⁹.

Form and Content

Since the first discussions started, the format of the final presentation and its mode of implementation in the territory was a secondary question alongside that of the methodology of the project. The priority was rather to question the process for actively involving the public and raising awareness of the issue of IL, as it is intended to be a non-place devoid of borders. Decompartmentalising conventional space or occupying a space with political connotations – which is the case with the work of T. Bellinck – constitutes in itself a subversive and "counter-museum" gesture. This was illustrated through the concrete avenues that were mentioned during the think tanks. Indeed, adhering to the exchanges carried out on the subject, it is possible to collect ideas such as: museum visits in the form of urban walks, revisiting contested or invisible territories, stories, traveling exhibition "of disobedient objects" created collectively (made by street protesters before, during and after 2011), a series of speculative museum workshops and lectures on the possible futures of Tunisia²⁰. Here again, the counter-museum is thought of less as a form than as a significant content.

¹⁸ There was also this intention to make this process of "museumification" a means of making accessible the expertise acquired by ADLI in the field of struggles for individual liberties and of making it a stimulus for the different experiences embodied by the people who make up the community.

¹⁹Reply shared during the meeting with Blamassi Touré, made on May 20, 2021

²⁰Temporary exhibitions organized by communities outside Tunis, decentralizing metropolitan narratives, memory projects in which teenagers with no memory of the dictatorship interview adult members of their family; a festive pop-up museum room, dedicated to victories that have never been celebrated.

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Despite the few divergences around this question, the key idea was to explore, in spite of everything, a common space, leaving room for a pluralistic expression. Three courses of action emerged:

- The shape is not defined in advance
- Take into account the subjectivity of each person
- The priority is to seek the establishment of a *space for dialogue*.

In a situational approach - which was especially the case of the CMs having devoted a preparation workshop with the public in question - the CMIL process finally resorted to the concept of a *workshop*; not as a traditional place for developing works of art (a place where one retreats to create) but a place where one asks questions and interacts with the participants. It is, in fact, a space for meeting and discussion focused on a common discovery and a shared experience. The idea was then to operate in the laboratory, as a reflective tool allowing to discover/understand problems without giving into preliminary conclusions. Again, the exhibition itself is operated as a *medium* (and not as a final form of presentation of works of art) in so far as it is a question of maintaining a dialectical engagement vis-à-vis it.

Seen in this way, this process goes beyond the simple frame of our beliefs and prejudices around IL, to completely propel us into our being in the world experiences. Let us agree then that this is what converts all passive receptivity to a real "sharing of the sensible". We attribute to this expression the meaning defined by Jacques Rancière in these terms: "sharing of the sensible is the way in which the forms of inclusion and exclusion that define participation in a common life are first shaped at the very heart of the sensible experience of life"²¹. This consideration is shaped through the collaborative dialogues that have governed the different phases of the CMIL, where it is a question of shifting the dominant parameters that decide what is visible, audible, feasible and imaginable.

The CMIL: between friction and subversion

Moreover, this situational work has made it possible to scramble the codes of the exhibition, giving way to a dynamic and evolving scopic regime. This critical momentum acknowledges both the museum-institute and the hyper-institutionalization experienced by the cultural offer these days as its main object, extending the old eighteenth-century paradigm carrying "aesthetic judgement"²²: the work of art, as soon as it is judged and classified, already aspires to a historical (therefore museumable) future. However, the

²¹Jacques Rancière, "Le partage du sensible" (sharing of the sensible), published in the review "L'obsession du réel", number 59, September-October-November 2002, [URI]:<https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9703ac>, document shared on 11 Feb. 2022.

²²We refer to Immanuel Kant's *critique of the faculty of judgement* (1790)

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conventional system of any museum contemplation reveals its limits, when it is essentially an *experimental art*; an art which criteria escape any classificatory reasoning, and which value is measured by its ability to internally affect the involved society/community. What remains crucial in this approach is that the public wants to be part of the work of art process, through a shared construction of micro-narratives reflecting the uniqueness of each. Indeed, involving the public as an active actor in this counter-museum process awards sustainability to the construction of stories for citizens. The very idea of a people's court (agora in the street, choosing a place that represents a court or is completely out of step) was among the proposals made during the exchanges between the CMs.

There is no doubt that the adopted approach aims at becoming a potential place where personal stories and the co-construction of social realities intersect. To achieve this, the CMIL has the advantage of freeing art from its official ideological gangue (forms of societal aestheticization) to operate it in the wake of a serious reflection on living together. It necessarily follows a revitalization of the notion of "culture", in accordance with this declaration: "Culture is not simply art or literature, it is also living together"²³. A counter-museum could thus correspond to something of a "postmuseum"²⁴ (an expression we owe to Eilean Hooper-Greenhill) in terms of questioning the social cohesion of a complex today that is constantly evolving.

In this way, this project reaches the rank of textbook cases appearing among those studied in *museum studies*, recently theorizing a re-examination of the notion of the "public", a notion of the works of art receptivity, but above all the heterogeneity and the multipolarity of today's societies. Starting the historical narrative in reverse, this *bottom-up* approach, although aims at being micro-societal, contributes to the construction of new national identities that are centered on the future. In this sense, it has everything that would be described as a "site of consciousness", being rooted in the present²⁵, as it enlightens the spectators as much as it brutalizes them vis-à-vis the urgencies of the present moment.

The performance-installation of D. Ben Alaya's work of art is an unparalleled illustration of this. The work of art presents itself as a place of discourse and negotiations capable of defining new forms of public culture; it is a space of friction and citizenship, where societal representations are put to the test and are shaken up.

²³GODELIER M., *Community, Society, Culture. Three keys to understanding conflicting identities*, CNRS Éditions, Paris, 2009, p. 49.

²⁴Ibid., p.13.

²⁵This is a concept developed since 1999 within the framework of the www.sitesofconscience.org alliance, which has 17 approved sites and 100 members. The concept refers to places (institutional or individual in the world) that speak of establishing links between contemporary problems and historical events related to their site, through programs stimulating dialogue on pressing social problems. For more details see the article: "Post-colonial museum: a museum without an object" by François Vergès, article available online at the address [URL] <https://www.cairn.info/ruptures-postcoloniales--page-455.htm>