

# **Interstitial multiplicity**

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*Translated by Millay Hyatt*

This article came out of research on temporary urban interstices, intercultural spaces under construction, and neighborhood localities that was conducted under the auspices of the interdisciplinary research program “Art – Architecture and Landscape” of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Infrastructure. The research was carried out in collaboration with Constantin Petcou, Doina Petrescu, François Deck, and Kobe Matthys. The findings are largely based on conversations we had with the inhabitants of La Chapelle and with the numerous artists, activists, architects, and nonprofit groups who were associated at one point or another with our work.<sup>1</sup>

Interstices represent what is left of resistance in big cities—resistance to normativity and regulation, to homogenization and appropriation. They embody, in a sense, what is still “available” in the city. Their provisional and uncertain status allows for hint, a glimpse of other ways of creating a city that are open and collaborative, responsive and cooperative. The importance of the interstitial experiment is borne out in this very register, in methodological, formative, political, as well as heuristic terms.

## 1. Questioning from within

Interstices ease constraints. And yet this liberating tendency does not relieve us from reflecting on the resulting autonomy and how we want to shape it. Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers put it this way: “[W]hat an interstice can do cannot be known in advance; we can only say that it is a concept that invites plurality. [...] The interstice in fact does not provide answers but instead gives rise to new questions.”<sup>2</sup> The interstitial experiment creates its own dimensions based on the terrain it explores and the ways in which it organizes it. Its measure is its own process, namely “what it is about and to whom it matters.”<sup>3</sup> The experiment, in other words, turns back on its initiators and confronts them with their own involvement. To whom does the project matter? What is its intension? The critical relationship the experiment maintains with itself is not primarily determined by an external authority that would give it meaning (an ideal) or from which it would distinguish itself (a form of domination). It is rather as undecided, open, heterogeneous, and plural as the dynamics it itself sets in motion. Following Henri Lefebvre, we could say that an interstice opens up on several levels of reality and that each of these levels is defined in relation to the others. Each one becomes, in a way, the critical experiment of the other; the different levels of reality interpellate each other reciprocally. Here we find tucked away the origin of a host of questions. There we see traced the contours and trajectory of a form of autonomy to come. The interstice constitutes itself on a political level; it wants to break with the classical organization of the city. But it also confronts its own everyday limitations, integrating rhythms and rituals, habits and familiar practices. The interstitial experiment thus “encompasses a critique of art by the everyday and a critique of the everyday by art. It encompasses a critique of the political by everyday social practice and vice versa. It also includes, in an analogous sense, the critique of sleep and dreams by waking life (and vice versa), and the critique of the real by the imaginary and the possible (and vice versa). This means that it begins by establishing dialectical relationships, reciprocities, and implications.”<sup>4</sup> The interstitial experiment is thus above all about calling things into

1 More information on this project, initiated by **Doina Petrescu** and **Constantin Petcou** and undertaken between 2005 and 2007, can be found at [www.le-commun.fr](http://www.le-commun.fr)

2 *La sorcellerie capitaliste - Pratiques du désenvoûtement*, éd. La Découverte, 2005, p. 149.

3 *Idem*, p. 149.

4 **Henri Lefebvre**, *Critique de la vie quotidienne 2 - Fondements d'une sociologie de la quotidienneté*, L'Arche

question, about a questioning that diffracts into multiple points of view at different levels of reality: a questioning that proceeds from within and by way of the inside, making the experiment fundamentally undecidable. “[H]e who already knows cannot go beyond a known horizon. I wanted experience to lead where it would, not to lead it to some end point given in advance.”<sup>5</sup>

## **2. Moving ahead**

There is no guarantee that a fissure, no matter how distinct, will stay open. The initial impetus fades; the rupture becomes difficult to maintain. Weariness, which weakens the best of intentions, and institutionalization, which insidiously assimilates and neutralizes the experimental process, can both cause some of the most creative and radical experiments to end by succumbing again to the given order. Once the interstice was alive; now its perspectives are narrowing, becoming restricted. There is no such thing as the unassimilable initiative or the irrecuperable project. Nothing in the way they are defined or constituted can protect them. Only their movement toward autonomy, their ingenuity, and their intelligence about particular situations allows them to resist; only their experimental and existential performativity provides them with the resources to endure. Their salvation is neither to be found in an alleged original purity (the worm was in the fruit from the beginning, the beautiful souls will tell us), nor in a great divide that would infallibly separate the grain from the chaff (sell-out was inevitable, the aspiring attorneys will conclude). No, nothing like this could ever guarantee the outcome of an experiment. Once opened, the interstice can only stay active and creative by moving forward and relentlessly pursuing its task of recomposition, and by preserving its indestructible singularity. But in the case of failure, the inventors of interstices, both those who find them and those who create them—for those who find treasure are indeed known as inventors—will find the hypercritical and the dogmatic turning against them. Instead of analyzing why an experiment was hijacked or undermined, these critics prefer to “attack those who took the initiative or put forward an idea.”<sup>6</sup> This error in analysis is tragic, because the fact that an experiment was aborted “does not mean that during a certain period the concept or project was not potentially active.”<sup>7</sup> Concentrating the criticism exclusively on the moment of failure (the closure of an interstice, an experiment’s return to the given order, the cooption of a project) prevents an assessment of the experiment as a whole and does not allow for it to be grasped in its entire scope and creativity. Focusing on the result (recuperation) prevents taking stock of the process (autonomization). Once the answer is no longer in doubt, the question that was investigated in the experiment and activated in the interstice becomes relegated to the background. But does is there still time to concern ourselves with the nature of a process once its end is no longer up for debate?

## **3. Shifting, reversing, diverting our perspectives**

Michel de Certeau urges us at length in his works to shift our perspective, to reverse or divert it. For the author of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, a society is made up of certain

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éditeur, 1961, p. 25.

5 **Georges Bataille**, *Inner Experience*. Trans. Leslie A. Boldt. SUNY Press, 1988, p. 3.

6 **Henri Lefebvre**, *Critique de la vie quotidienne 3 - De la modernité au modernisme, Pour une métaphilosophie du quotidien*, L'Arche éditeur, 1981, p. 105-106.

7 Idem, p. 106.

prominent practices that are structuring, encompassing, noisy, and spectacular—and others that are “innumerable, [...] that remain ‘minor,’ always there but not organizing discourses and preserving the beginnings or remains of different (institutional, scientific) hypotheses for that society or for others.”<sup>8</sup> If our perspective is limited to what is most immediately before us—what reality presents to us as the most complete and legitimate—we will miss numerous realities that are quietly in the process of becoming. The society described by Michel de Certeau is a society of multiple ontologies that cannot be reduced to its most visible and encompassing developments. For it is also composed of a multiplicity of fragmentary becomings, barely sketched, but waiting only to be activated: a multiplicity of becomings, minor or minoritarian, certainly, but with a constructive reach that should not be underestimated. An interstice is a privileged space where suppressed questions continue to make themselves heard, where certain ideas rejected by the dominant model affirm their topicality, and where many fettered and blocked minoritarian becomings demonstrate their vitality. Interstices are there to remind us that society never coincides perfectly with itself and that its development leaves numerous potentialities unexplored—opportunities for authentic sociality or citizenship left lying fallow, when they could give rise to the most ambitious experiments. It is often art that fulfills the role of disclosure or revelation, that deploys or unfolds this potential accumulated by a society become multitude. Such a society-multitude is far from cultivating all the prospects it opens up. It neither lives up to its own strength nor manages to raise itself to the heights of its own creativity. By working in the interstices, by making breaks, by venturing off the beaten path, the multiplicity of becomings—denied, scorned, obscured, neglected—fights back and imposes its own perspectives. The interstitial experiment is a privileged opportunity to take up the potentialities and becomings that have been disqualified by the general economy, that have been kept on the fringes of society’s development or buried under a mound of commercial products.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4. The art of cunning**

Interstices are at work both within and in opposition to the city and its urban planning. They combine antagonistic (disjunctive) forces with constitutive (affirmative) ones. They are a counter-power emerging at the heart of the very reality being confronted—we could just as well speak of a counter-experiment or counter-existence given how much this form of antagonism is nourished by “positive” forces. The interstitial experiment distances us from the classical conception of counter-power, which derives its energy (and reason for being) from the negative relationship it has with its institutional context. There is nothing of the kind in interstitial work: its force comes instead from the very processes it is able to initiate. Its gain in strength is realized and modulated according to the (lived, perceived) intensity of its creations and experiments. The interstitial experiment is a form of radicality and subversion that is essentially “positive;” it is directly pegged to the dynamic it sets in motion itself. Its power of opposition and contradiction does not come from the outside (in the sense of a reverse reflection of dominant reality) but is developed one step at a time from out of cooperations and alliances among participants, from the intensification of living assemblages (sharing, human contact), from the coexistence of multiple singularities...

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8 **De Certeau, Michel.** *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Trans. Steven F. Rendail. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 48.

9 Cf. **Michel Foucault,** *Il faut défendre la société - Cours au Collège de France, 1976,* Gallimard-Seuil, 1997, p. 8-9.

The interstice disrupts the flattering, aestheticized, efficient image the city has of itself, but not from an external point of view—such as a competing image of the city or an alternative program—but by being cunning with the city, by playing with its internal tensions and contradictions: it embraces what the city neglects and disinvests, its vacant lots, whatever it no longer manages to integrate, its transcultural mobilities. The interstitial experiment signals the end of the dream of purity in politics,<sup>10</sup> the idea that the alternative can be self-determined in a pure sense (such as an ideal or utopia). If another world is possible, its possibility comes from hybridization, displacement, detournement, reversal—but certainly not from the implementation of an ideal or a program for the realization of hope. As such, the interstice is the perfect metaphor for what could be a movement of antagonism and contradiction in the post-Fordist city: a movement that establishes itself at the pace of its own experiments, that increases in intensity thanks to the modes of life and desire it liberates, and that enters into opposition only to the degree that it is capable of inventing and creating.

### **5. A politics of singularities**

Every interstitial experiment is based on very specific interests and desires. It is difficult to transpose what it does into other contexts or to have other actors integrate it into their own experiments. What it expresses is not immediately translatable. It would be delusional to think that, in an urban environment, interstices will end up by joining together, naturally unifying so as to plot another kind of urbanity in the texture of the city itself. The process is likely to be much more risky. Following Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, we have to admit that such experiments do not mesh with each other as do the links of a single chain of revolt.<sup>11</sup> The impetus, the trigger, and the motivations of the various experiments are certainly similar. In every case, there is a will to share other forms of sociality, a desire for the “common” and for cooperation. But these are desires and wills that enact different perspectives and play out in very different contexts (political, aesthetic, intellectual, social, emotional, etc.). This multiplicity does not spontaneously form a discernible and legible unity; it is not, in a word, politically coherent. But, according to Hardt and Negri, what these experiments lose in extension and generalization, they gain in intensity. They are barely communicable; they are difficult to transpose. On the other hand, each one of them, by the sole virtue of its own dynamic, achieves a high degree of experimentation and creation and a great intensity in the elaboration and exploration of its assemblages. As the authors point out, precisely because these modes of struggle and resistance do not become extended or reinforce themselves horizontally, they are forced to leap vertically and achieve immediately a high level of creativity and constitutive intensity.<sup>12</sup> Because they define themselves by their authentically biopolitical character and are concerned with creating new forms of community and life, these experiments rapidly come into contact with what is essential and engage with global questions. This forces them to confront the kinds of “absolute” problems that directly affect life and existence. What characterizes them is their own energy: their ability to initiate, to put things into gear, to get things started. Interstitial experiments are emblematic for a politics of singularities, that is, a politics that derives its strength from its mobility and intensities, from its ability to experiment and from the “quality” of its assemblages, from its openness to questions and its “commonplace” and immediate relationship to

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10 **Michael Hardt** and **Toni Negri**, *Empire*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 46.

11 *Idem*, p. 54.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

“absolute” questions (these are “how” questions: how to cooperate, how to create, how to educate and think? They are questions posed by the forms life takes).

## **6. The ground floor of the city**

Vacant lots and abandoned buildings make up the ground floor of our cities today.<sup>13</sup> What does the ground floor represent? It is an intermediary space between the intimacy of a residence and the global nature of the city. It is a building's threshold that, once crossed, opens onto the multiplicity and the transversality of the streets. It is also a common area, neither private nor public, but a space that is shared by all the residents. The ground floor is a space-time where our paths can cross, where we can meet or ignore each other, where we can stop long enough to have a conversation, or through which we can pass as quickly as possible. It is a place shared by the most unlikely objects: bicycles, strollers, pieces of furniture left behind after a move, piles of junk mail, letters waiting for their addressees on top of mailboxes... We use the phrase “on the ground floor of the city” to express a methodological principle. A sociology of “urban interstices” can indeed have no better epistemological point of view than that afforded by the multiplicity of the ground floor with its interfaces and intervals, its intersection of many working and living communities. This “common space” is composed of a large variety of collective space-times, each rejecting a withdrawal into identity or a supposedly protective intimacy as much as a verbose and intrusive “publicization.” Where are these ground floors of the city located? Where are our common places? They are to be found in the multiplicity of uncertain spaces—in vague terrains and abandoned sites, everywhere transitions and transversality remain possible, everywhere we can still imagine there is something common, something shared, something that connects us.

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13 Cf. **Constantin Petcou** and **Doina Petrescu**, “Au rez-de-chaussée de la ville,” in *Multitudes*, n°20, 2005, p. 75-87. The article can be found online on the magazine's website: <http://multitudes.samizdat.net>.