

## Rhyzom: Local Cultural Production, Translocal Dissemination: Review of an European networked project

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We live in a moment of re-assessment of cultural practice and redefinition of the role of culture in a society which faces a number of economic, social, political and environmental crises. Globalisation has demonstrated its critical effects and localism is becoming a key term for the way we envision the management of the future. We are moving towards 'deglobalisation', to quote French landscape designer and ecologist Gilles Clement, which translates into a localised consumption and production of goods.' What is the role of culture in such a deglobalisation process? How is culture 'produced' and 'consumed' in a 'deglobalised' world? How can local forms of cultural production circulate and be connected through alternative channels? And also, what should be considered 'culture' and what are the criteria to assess it?

These were some of the questions that were addressed by the collaborative project Rhyzom, which was set up between five organisations, within the framework of the EU Culture 2007 programme ([www.rhyzom.net](http://www.rhyzom.net)). All these organisations had in common an interest in local cultural practice but each of them brought a different perspective and a specific set of questions. atelier d'architecture autogérée were interested in cultures of resilience, Agency in education as cultural practice, PS2 in regional and rural aspects of cultural production, Cultural Agencies in models of cultural collaboration and institutional practice within peripheral contexts, Public Works in methodologies of exchange and networking cultural knowledge, goods, and people.

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Clément, *Toujours la vie invente*  
– Réflexions d'un écologiste humaniste,  
(éd. de l'Aube, Paris 2008), p.47

Fieldtrips were organised by each of the five organisations to investigate together with other participants their own questions and discover existing practices and initiatives in their field of interest with the idea of setting up connections and networks of production and dissemination. The Rhyzom project tried to literally 'make a rhizome', that is to say, if we quote Anne Querrien, *'going towards the other (...) in the perspective of an alliance and the construction of a temporary micro-territoriality that will soon after be shared with others, by the new offshoots of the rhizome'*<sup>1</sup>

It is this micro-territoriality that we wanted to discover when we visited a series of projects in different European regions that had in common lifestyles that questioned stereotypes and shared authentic values anchored in the local.

In the South of France, we visited a series of self-managed farms (Cravirola, Bauchamp, Caracoles de Suc), eco-villages and intentional communities in Germany (Brodowin, Gut Stolzenhagen and Siebenlinden) as well as traditional forms of self-organised projects in Romania (Obste and Monasteries), emerging eco-networks like Transition Towns in Totnes or rural art networks like myvillages in Höfer Waren. We have also participated in gatherings that addressed the role and necessity of creating new types of organisations or institutions that can stimulate the idea of common knowledge production and dissemination. (i.e. Casa Invisible in Malaga, Grizedale in Cumbria, Mobile Community Centre in Ballykinler Northern Ireland, Organic Centre and Leitrim Sculpture Centre in Ireland).

A number of workshops followed and sometimes overlapped with the fieldtrips. These workshops were moments of collaborative experimentation, fabrication and critical reflection which engaged directly local and trans-local participants. Notably, three workshops related to the projects of the three partners have involved students from Sheffield: aaa, PS2 and Cultural Agencies, addressing issues of pedagogy in relation to differently contextualised local cultural practices. Another workshop in Höfer Waren addressed the idea of the transmission of feminine skills and creativity in rural contexts.

The production of workshops was disseminated locally in different formats (exhibitions, installations, shops, fanzines, etc.) but we have also decided to put together a collective publication in order to reflect on the experience of our networked collaboration and the findings and connections this has facilitated.

These workshops were connected to five projects run by the main partners of Rhyzom: **Cultural Agencies, International Village Shop, Fields, R-Urban, Agencies of Live Projects.**

**Cultural Agencies** is a project initiated by a group of curators, artists, architects, planners and cultural workers during 2009-2010, and seeking to develop contemporary models of cultural collaboration and institutional practice within the context of Gulsuyu-Gulensu, a *gecekondu* neighbourhood in the Asian outskirts of Istanbul. The project attempts to forge a trust-based relationship with selected local communities, conducts field surveys involving local residents, and draws participatory mapping of existing forms of agency.

**International Village Shop** project by public works, explores 'trade' as a methodology for exchanging and networking cultural knowledge, goods, producers, consumers and users. The trade is not driven by commercial interest but by a shared interest in contemporary cultural production and value systems. It is set up as a pan-national platform to include and connect producers and audiences across cultural, geographical and language barriers, and uses formal and informal networks to grow and operate, engaging with grass-roots economic models. The International Village Shop works as a dispersed network of temporary and permanent production and trading places.

**Fields** investigates regional and rural aspects of cultural production. PS<sup>2</sup> collective from Belfast invited artists, architects, a geographer and a gardener from north and south of Ireland to work around the theme of cultural production in small towns and villages of the border regions between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. One island, similar in landscape and population, both nations developed politically and culturally different, especially between the 1970's and early 1990's during the political troubles in Northern Ireland. The collaboration questioned to what extent the rural is integrated in the provision of cultural centres and what alternatives it generates.

- <sup>i</sup> Anne Querrien, 'Les Cartes et les ritournelles d'une panthère en ciel, Multitudes 34 (2008).



Fig 1. Rhyzom workshop at Ballykinler, Northern Ireland  
photo credit: Peter Mutschler



Fig 2. Rhyzom fieldtrip at Siebenlinden, Germany  
photo credit: C. Petcou

**R-Urban** project developed by atelier d'architecture autogérée in Paris and its outskirts, explores the ecological, economic and social complementarities between four types of local territories, spaces and activities: collective housing, ethical economy, urban organic agriculture and local cultural production. What is at stake is how to re-assemble economic, temporal, social and ecological bottom up initiatives into new agencies and collective processes that will facilitate the emergence of another political space and a new politics of the common(s).

**Agencies of Live Projects** is a critical reflection by Agency, a Research Centre on Transformative Research into Architectural Practice and Education. Agency has been involved in the Rhyzom project through three live projects at the School of Architecture, the University of Sheffield. Live projects are student led projects in a real context, happening in real time with real people and clients. In these instances the clients were three of the partners of the Rhyzom network: PS2 in Belfast, Cultural Agencies in Istanbul and aaa in Paris.

All three live projects were specifically concerned with a local cultural production, addressing the issues through different methodologies: exploratory mapping, consultation and construction work. They also questioned whether architectural education can take the form of a local cultural practice, and if new forms of pedagogy can be a vehicle for trans-local production and exchange.

These five projects are true experiences of collective production, representation, negotiation and networking within their local contexts, which have also developed collaborations using the Rhyzom network. They were as such ways of testing and demonstrating the possibilities of a trans-local organisation.

The main project outcome is a book called **Trans-Local-Act: Cultural Practices Within and Across** which addresses ways of framing cultural acting through trans-local networks and agencies that connect without hierarchy and ideological limitation across heterogeneous locations (rural and urban), following very specific affinities between local practices of all kind: practices which create collaborations between existing and newly invented formal and informal cultural institutions - in rural areas, at the peripheries of cities or at the border between different kinds of identitarian systems (political regimes, disciplines, territories, etc.)-, practices which activate new type of socialites, alternative economies and ecologies, practices that are concerned with commons and communality, with the collective production of knowledge, etc...



Fig 3. Trans-Local-Act book, Paris: aaa/peprav, 2010

*Rhizom* is a manifestation of cultural biodiversity brought into existence by architects, artists, activists, curators, cultural workers, educators, sociologists, geographers and local residents who have authored the projects or the texts included in the book. It is a temporary network made up of many other collaborative local networks that pre-existed or formed through it, at the same time as being sites of local creativity and sites of life. In these times of crisis and uncertainty, in which cultural and artistic production, social science and humanities research in Europe is under threat by the serious cuts in funding decided at national and European levels, we hope that this network will continue to make its way, by connecting and disconnecting within and across, like a rhizome.

