

Sandbox Exhibitions



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Metode



In 2023, during the first Sandbox exhibition at Le 19 in Montbéliard, France, we displayed the photographic archives of Jean-Jacques Mathieu, founder of an adventure playground in nearby Belfort between 1975 and 1985. This exhibition was the inaugural manifestation of the Sandbox exhibitions format, and focused on local history, co-construction, activation, appropriation and multidisciplinary. The Adventure Playground at the Résidences in Belfort. © Photo: Fonds Jean-Jacques Mathieu.

In 2022, I became the director of Le 19, a regional centre for contemporary art in the small city of Montbéliard in northeast France, after previously having worked as an art educator, social worker and cultural engineer. The artistic programme I was hired to implement is called *Learning From: An Ethical, Aesthetical and Political Proposal for Le 19, Regional Contemporary Art Centre of Montbéliard*. Conceived as a multidisciplinary programme, it treats the centre's entire ecosystem—every activity and micro-action—as part of the art project, including collaborations, exhibitions, residencies, tours, workshops, in-house learning events, maintenance work and even our own self-constructed furniture. My idea was to think about this art project as the basis for developing dialogue opportunities of different scales and formats, acting as “weeds” that would forge a common identity for the centre.¹

1 This concept of weeds refers to the French landscape architect Gilles Clément, who advocates the idea of a garden in motion, a space that includes weeds as a source of global cross-fertilization.

The building in which Le 19 is located was once an industrial factory, originally a Peugeot-owned car and bicycle repair workshop. It is now another kind of “factory”, producing processes of *learning*, co-learning and unlearning to become a place of individual and collective regeneration. As such, the curatorial aim of the exhibitions we produce is learning, as a continuance of my social worker and cultural mediator experience—which I have strongly based on alternative education methods. Adopting this stance of continuous learning for the curatorial led me to consider then exhibitions as a method of mediation that allows us to learn about the place, the community, and the region, and which, in turn, aims to encourage the local community to become active users of the center rather than just spectators.

Within this context, this essay will examine a specific exhibition held in 2024 in Montbéliard along with the British collective Assemble.² Titled *Blood in the Machine*, the exhibition was part of Le 19’s annual summer series, titled “Sandbox”. The Sandbox exhibition format, created in 2023, invites visitors to explore the art centre’s potential as a public space during the summer. It responds to the reality that, in a region heavily affected by the globalisation of manufactured goods, few residents can afford to leave the city in summer. These exhibitions are conceived partly as a playground for artists and audiences, presenting “sandbox” works to be activated. The term evokes both a children’s sandbox and a genre of video game. These games, also known as “sandboxes”, are essentially characterised by the absence of imposed objectives. They are designed in a non-linear way to stimulate the curiosity and creativity of the gaming community. In the same way, our *sandbox exhibitions* are open to appropriation. This appropriation involves what Stephen Wright describes as “art and art-related practices that are oriented toward usership rather than spectatorship [and] are characterized [...] by their scale of operations: [...] the 1:1 scale”.³ It also connects the art centre to cultural venues with broader activities, such as public libraries, which have always referred to *users* (rather than spectators), a term which conveys this idea of practice, of activating an audience that is itself a producer of information, meaning and value.

In this essay, I will present how exhibitions can serve as mediators among contexts, people, ideas and objects, and also how they can become situations that reveal, activate and regenerate the social and historical relationships of an institution with its environment and its users.

2 The Assemble collective has grown steadily since its inception in 2010 and now has dozens of members. For Montbéliard, the collective decided to entrust the project to a trio who frequently taught in Lausanne and who would be able to come to Montbéliard on a regular basis: James Binning, Amy Perkins and Camille Sineau.

3 Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (Van Abbemuseum, 2013).

Local context: Montbéliard and its environment

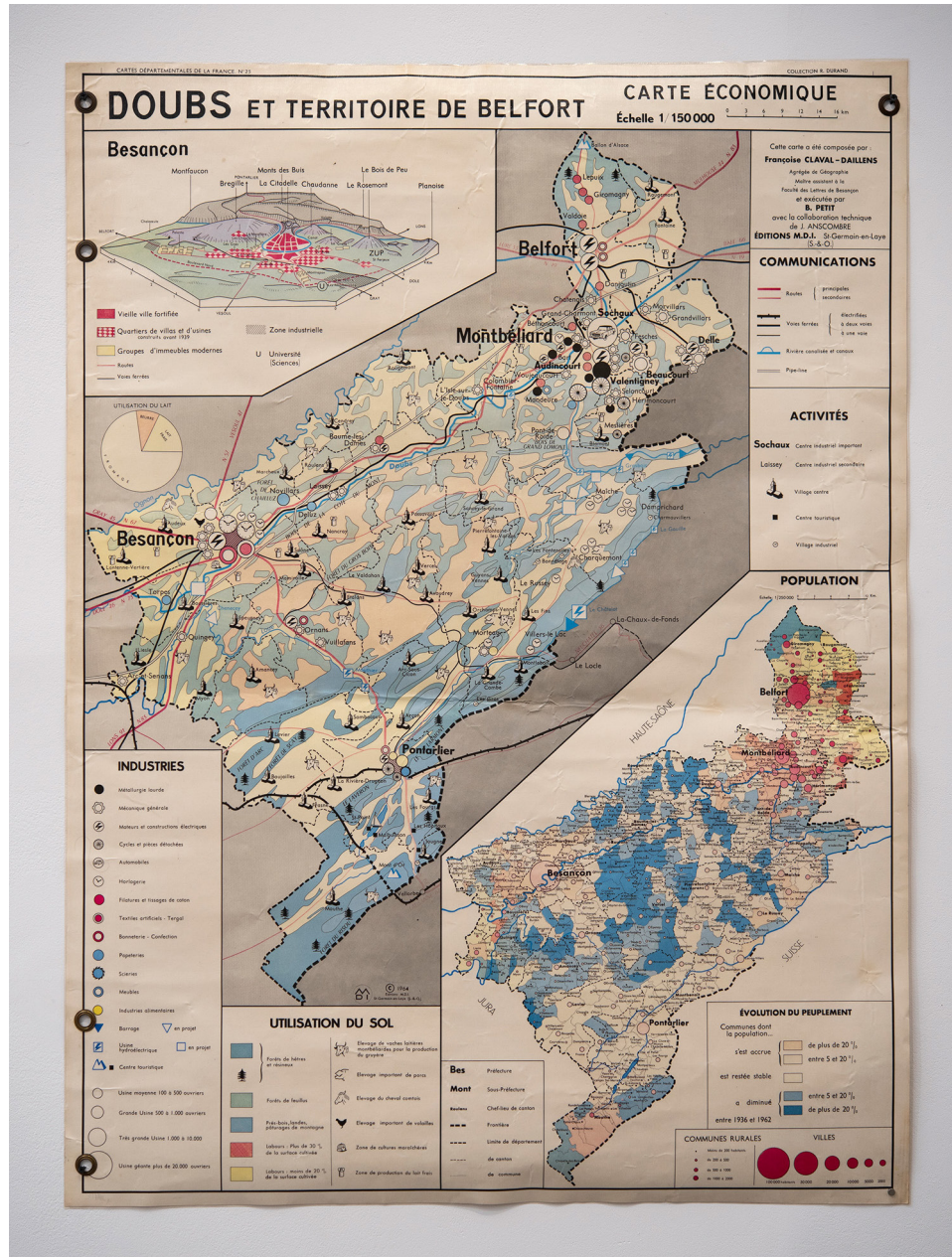


Fig. 1 Map of the bioregion exhibited at the exhibition *Blood in the Machine*. The map from 1964 shows industries and economical and agriculture activities in the region. Collection R. Durand, édition MDI, Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Collection Musée de la Paysannerie de Valentigney. © Photo: Angélique Pichon for Le 19, Crac.

Montbéliard is a small town of 25,000 inhabitants in the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region, and Le 19 is the only nationally recognised art centre within this region, which has a population of over 2.8 million people. This creates a need for prioritised and well-thought-out actions, whether for the inhabitants, artists or the local cultural and artistic ecosystem in general. On the smaller scale of the conurbation (fig. 1), the presence of Le 19 is a source of pride for those who know it, as it is undoubtedly atypical and brings together three temporalities of territorial history: the legacy of Peugeot's paternalistic cultural policy; the current status of trying to get out of this enclave situation and trying to find ways to re-dynamise and open the city in the direction of the region and more generally nationally, and, for the future, a hoped-for influence that reframes this neglected and little-known region through its own qualities especially related to its brilliant ecosystem and biodiversity. Heavily marked by a rural history, supplanted by industrial development and now by a post-industrial urban context, the local intercommunal agglomeration, the Pays de Montbéliard, is a complex social and economic environment.

In France, an art centre designated to be national interest primarily serves as a laboratory for artists, offering production opportunities and temporary exhibitions. Given this ephemerality, its activities must rest on a solid foundation to create a sustainable context that integrates working methods and a curatorial project with a public-service vocation. One basis for a coherent programme is attentive engagement with the institution's environment. Supporting the community, the artists and regional growth at the same time is a challenge, but at Le 19 this has spurred the ambition to create exhibitions that respond to—and engage directly with—the local context.

Exhibition context: The art centre

The building of Le 19 is located opposite the train station, an important landmark in Montbéliard lying at the entrance to the city centre (fig. 2). It is therefore situated between several neighbourhoods and ultimately in a sort of non-space, which also allows it to serve as a buffer zone, an urban mediation between several realities. The art centre is open to the public mainly during exhibition periods. However, not everyone who walks through its doors necessarily comes to visit these exhibitions; sometimes they want to take a photocopy, buy a book, hang out with friends, use the restrooms or merely wait for a train. Some feel welcome enough to share their worries with us and comment on the city, the neighbourhood or even the state of the world. The art centre is an independent, non-profit organisation, but positions itself by choice as a local public service provider.



Fig. 2 Entrance of the Peugeot workshop for bicycles at the 19 Avenue des Alliés in Montbéliard in 1946. The portal was dismantled in 2009. The building behind has housed Le 19 since 1995. © Photo: Archives Peugeot. Image rights have been transferred to Le 19, Crac for documentation and non-commercial publications.

When developing the art centre project, I felt the need to reflect on its foundations by looking at its history, economy, partners, urban setting and building, but also its human potential and specific characteristics. My main questions were, Why an art centre in this context? And which kind of role can it play here?

In 2022, it seemed to me that my learning-based approach to discovering the place could be explored in greater depth by making it permeate all levels of institution, from the very beginning of each project. The main aim then would be to produce a reciprocal relationship, with both users and the centre learning from each another.

People from outside: Assemble



Fig. 3 Some participants of the 2024 Summer School in front of Le 19 during *Blood in the Machine*, joining with Assemble to activate Laurent Lacotte's artwork *CORRESPONDANCE* by collectively spelling out the French word for “movement”. © Photo: Laurent Lacotte.

This ongoing dialogue with context can be carried out through the artists' own projects and art processes. The Sandbox exhibition format is one of the methods we have experimented with to deepen the relationships between the Le 19 context and its artists. One such Sandbox exhibition is *Blood in the Machine* by Assemble⁴, who began their exhibition project by engaging directly with the bioregion.⁵

Assemble is a British multidisciplinary collective working in the fields of architecture, design and visual arts. They promote a democratic and cooperative process that allows them to produce co-constructed and socially engaged artistic projects based on the exploration of a place, territory or situation. As skilled

4 The title is taken from the book of Brian Merchant, *Blood in the Machine: The Origins of the Rebellion against Big Tech* (Hachette, 2023). This book questions the effects of the automation that has continuously transformed our world.

5 As defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, a bioregion is “a region that has a particular type of natural environment and natural features. It is sometimes defined as smaller than an ecozone but larger than an ecoregion” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bioregion>).

surveyors and cartographers, the collective chose to draw inspiration from the industrial history of the location when conceiving the exhibition. “Location” here refers equally to the art centre building, the town of Montbéliard and the wider context of the Pays de Montbéliard, which today constitutes an administrative conurbation. The mapping for *Blood in the Machine* was a long preliminary process which consisted of investigating soil resources, technologies, economy, architecture, relationships between people, social fabric, technologies and current urban policies in order to get a broader sense of the environment and the ways of living in it. The first part of the survey was done in the frame of my curatorial work at the public library, the municipal archives, in discussion with the conurbation agents.



Fig. 4 Exhibition view from *Blood in the Machine*. The resources and metal work section. © Photo: Angélique Pichon for Le 19, Crac.

During their first trip to Montbéliard, Assemble visited the art centre, the city and a few surrounding areas and spoke with local partners. As the community plays an important role in their work, it was essential for them to fully understand the context in order to develop a project that combines a sense of history, functionality, process, and outcome. Although the collective had initially suggested that the exhibition be held elsewhere in the city, or perhaps even that

no exhibition be held at all, their visit to the site changed their perspective. The architecture of the building, its link to industrial history and its original purpose convinced the artists that the project should indeed be embodied within Le 19, thus becoming a place for mediating the region's past, present and future. Hence, the art centre became both an experimental space/laboratory and a base for carrying out this project.

During preliminary mediation and mapping, we made a striking discovery: around 1810, spinning mills emerged in the region using machines imported from England by Charles-Christophe and Jean-Jacques Peugeot. This shared history with Great Britain gave Assemble an immediate affinity with the local history, people and context, as well as an ethical point of departure. The historic British Luddite movement—an English workers' revolt at the dawn of industrialisation (1811–1816), especially among spinning-mill workers after the introduction of automated, labour-saving machines—then served as a philosophical thread throughout the project, linking it to Montbéliard and its environment.⁶

People from the ground: Collaborators

When designing the exhibition, Assemble and Le 19's mediation, technical and communication team conducted extensive research and collaborated with regional partners. We consulted local amateur historians, the municipal archives, the Peugeot archives, a census of historical know-how linked to eco-museums, a group of residents engaged in a participatory democratic collective, and even a detailed cartographic study of industrial wastelands with urban planners. These inquiries were organised alternately at the art centre and at partner venues in the local area. This dual movement from the inside to the outside and vice versa helped forge a new relationship with people and the environment.

Many of our interlocutors told us that they had never been to the art centre before. Most were struck by the realisation that Le 19, beyond its mission to promote contemporary art, also had a heritage mission directly linked to the local industrial history, thanks to its building. All the people we met during this process shared their concerns about the future of the region, which has been deeply affected both by the economic decline following the relocation of

6 The Luddite movement was repopularised in the 1980s in the United Kingdom during the workers' revolts, and it crops up even today in connection with new technologies. As the *Nottingham Review* wrote in 1811: "Machines, or trades [...] are not destroyed out of hostility to all innovation [...] but because they [...] contain the seeds of its destruction."



Fig. 5 Exhibition view from *Blood in the Machine* by Assemble at Le 19. From there we can see a Peugeot sewing machine, as well as people discussing and working in the workshop space, which is also the main room of the art centre. On the top of the picture, we can also see the roof of the place considered as an industrial architecture heritage of the region. © Photo: Angélique Pichon for Le 19, Crac.

industrial production and by the ecological crisis that is brewing, particularly in relation to the soil and rivers, which have been heavily exploited and polluted, making it difficult to envisage a transition to new activities. All the people we met expressed that they are attached to the surrounding nature, which is the region's principal leisure resource, and they believe that this area, with its rich and unusual history, has untapped potential.

From those conversations and questions which were raised, Assemble's project for *Blood in the Machine* was conceived as a way of thinking about the art centre as playing "a dual role of material and social infrastructure, helping to integrate the project into the community".⁷ Assemble's project was to assert "a radically different approach, one that can offer not only a diversity of objects but also contextualise a social field in which and from which the objects are produced

7 Quote from Assemble while describing the project for Le 19.

and draw their meaning”.⁸ This led Assemble and the team to consider the art centre as what Charlotte Malterre-Barthes calls a “space for agency”,⁹ which helped to highlight existing uses and the role played by the venue in its context and reinforced the idea that exhibitions can be methods to reveal, activate and transform the social and historical relationships of an institution with its environment and the communities around.

Ideas: The mediation effect



Fig. 6 The Outsiders, *Agora*, 2023. The art piece had been realised after a “walkshop” in the city organised by the collective The Outsiders with the Montbéliard inhabitants. It engaged the public as mediators who presented their town to the artists. The experience concluded that there was a specific public space to meet within Montbéliard. The mobile agora is an attempt to create this space within the art centre. © Photo: Angélique Pichon for Le 19, Crac.

8 Yvonne Rainer in her preface to *DEMOCRACY: A Project by Group Material*, edited by Brian Wallis for the Dia Art Foundation, *Discussion in Contemporary Culture* series, no. 5 (Bay Press, 1990). In it, the artist discusses the effects of Group Material's and Martha Rosler's exhibitions at the Dia Art Foundation between 1988 and 1989, which, in her view, brought together a new format of non-alienated exhibitions in which “the value of art as a social force” was affirmed.

9 “I use the term ‘space for agency’ to discuss these physical spaces in which a group or an entity (e.g., the State) either tolerates or had granted a certain amount of freedom to another group (e.g., the public)—and in which activities empowering that group are practiced”. Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, in conversation with Markus Miessen and Anne Davidian, in “New Sites for Assembly”, from *What Makes an Assembly? Stories, Experiments, and Inquiries*, edited by Anne Davidian and Laurent Jeanpierre (Evens Foundation, 2022).

In the early 2010s, within discussions about the educational turn in curatorial practices,¹⁰ Swedish curator Maria Lind offered a distinctive perspective. She defines the notion of “the curatorial” in opposition to that of curating as “a more distributed presence aimed at creating friction and pushing new ideas through signification processes and relationships between objects, people, places, ideas, and so forth”.¹¹

These processes are essential elements of cultural mediation. The term “cultural mediation” appeared in the 1980s in France in connection with public relations and knowledge-sharing activities within cultural venues. Alongside the emergence of this broader concept, a concept of “cultural mediation” specific to the arts was developed in line with the institutional criticism expressed in Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel’s *L’Amour de l’art* (1966). During the 1960s, marked by decolonisation, the advent of consumer society and social movements, activists, educators, cultural actors and artists worked on breaking down the barrier between works and audiences, between art and life.¹²

In 1987, Jacques Rancière published *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, a work that would greatly influence intellectuals and practitioners of cultural mediation and popular education. In it, he analyses the experience of Joseph Jacotot (1770–1840), a French educator and teacher who created a method of intellectual emancipation. Jacotot, who had to teach students whose language he did not know, chose to encourage them to learn independently by giving them a bilingual book. By studying the text and its translation on their own, the students proved capable of understanding how French sentences worked and recounting in “French” what they had understood from the novel.

The Jacotot method emphasises the role of the teacher as someone who reveals each student’s ability to learn, an approach that many cultural mediators defend and adopt. The method is therefore not education in the sense of the transmission of knowledge, but instead contributes to the constant transformation of society, energises social relations and promotes public debate such that everyone can be an active participant in the world and its changes.

10 The term has been used since the 1990s to refer to the artistic avant-garde movements that raised the question of interactivity within exhibitions, the contribution of audiences and how knowledge is transmitted. In the curatorial field, this emphasis on education has called into question the conception of the work of art as mediation, or even education itself becoming an artistic medium.

11 Maria Lind, “Situating the Curatorial”, *E-Flux*, no. 116 (March 2021), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/116/378689/situating-the-curatorial>.

12 Among the artists, we should note Robert Filliou and his work *Teaching and Learning: Living Arts* (1967–1970), as well as Joseph Beuys, his concept of social sculpture, and his (anti)-universities, which draw on alternative teaching methods and experiments in community living.

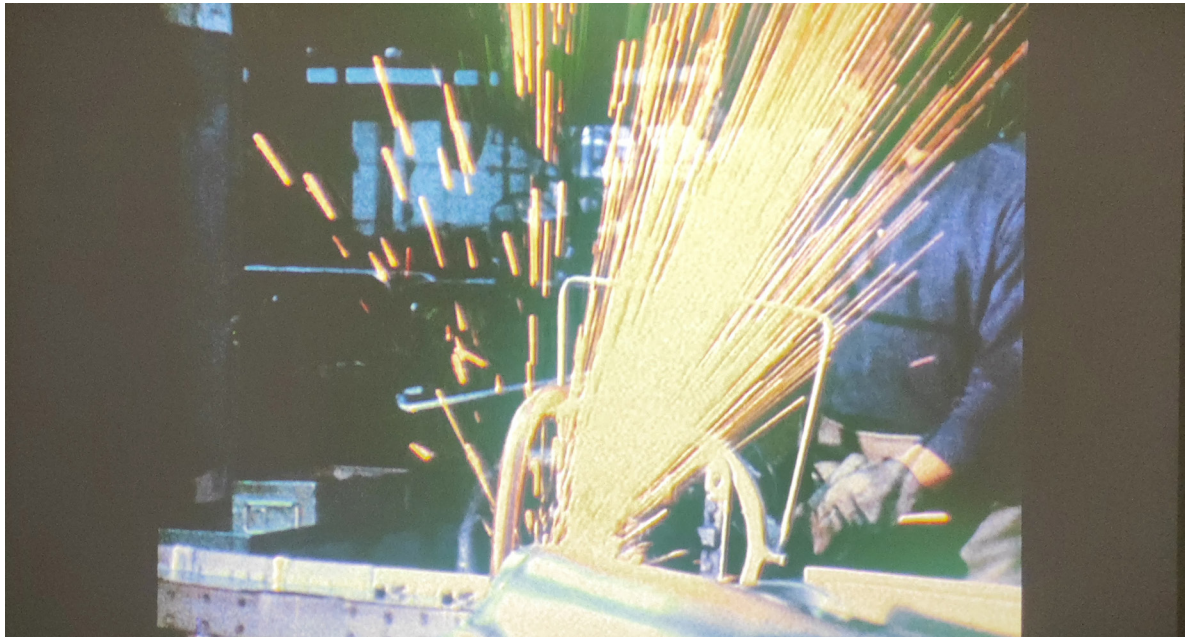


Fig. 7 Example of an “ignorant master”. Chris Marker and Bruno Muel taught the Medvedkine groups from Besançon and Sochaux to film their daily life in the factory. Here is an excerpt exhibited in *Blood in the Machine* from *Avec le sang des autres* by Muel and the Peugeot workers of Sochaux in 1974. © Photo: Adeline Lépine. The film is now distributed by Iskra.

Social objects: Production workshop for co-learning

Assemble’s projects combine scales of construction to generate “learning by doing” situations.¹³ Unlike traditional architectural practice, which is generally based on the principles of commission, Assemble is interested in situations where it is possible to challenge institutional operating frameworks. As “ignorant architects”,¹⁴ the collective engaged with repeated situations of mediation between the art centre, its territory, its partners, its users and the local communities. It was through this process of collective conversation and reflection that they decided to rethink the uses of the exhibition space itself, drawing on its industrial history. The aim was to temporarily (re)transform it into a space that

13 In *Democracy and Education* (first published in 1916), John Dewey stated that “were all instructors to realize that the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth, something hardly less than a revolution in teaching would be worked”. For Dewey, enquiry-based learning should help learners to think. Problems that correspond to learners’ experiences and intellectual abilities facilitate their engagement, as they can “learn by doing”.

14 The expression is taken from Ethel Baraona Pohl and César Reyes Nájera, “Alchemy of the Classroom”, in *Volume 3: Learning* (Archis, 2015). They refer to the experience of Joseph Jacotot mentioned previously.

examines the role of production and technology in the city's social, cultural and economic life from the perspective of three-time frames: the past, the present and the future.

Blood in the Machine aimed to take over Le 19 to create a public square where people could gather, debate and eventually talk about the future. In each room of the art centre, Assemble's idea was to recount or bring to life a moment in the history of the bioregion as it had been told to them, to engage the subjectivity of their users and blend it with their own. The present was embodied by a production workshop located in the central space of the art centre.

This workshop provided free and open access to books, wood, tools and toys, allowing the public to take over the space and produce whatever they wanted. The past was brought to life through the presentation of archival objects such as hemp verquelure fabric,¹⁵ tools made by farmers to produce this fabric, and metal objects related to mining and the development of manufactured products. In this desire to recognise the work of the people and their know-how, archival items were also brought together that show the history of self-built houses, known as Castor houses,¹⁶ or films shot by Peugeot workers themselves about their working conditions.¹⁷ But having a collective workspace in the art centre's large hall opened other possibilities for exchange and use that we hadn't anticipated. Some visitors came to work, others met up with friends to chat around a table while drawing, playing with Legos, or having a snack. Some discussed historical objects with others, reminiscing about an uncle who farmed or a working-class mother. The exhibition was held during a period of intense strikes and protests in France and served as a basis for discussion with younger visitors about the conceptual link to the Luddites.

Finally, the future was also introduced into the exhibition through regular meetings planned by the artists throughout the exhibition. The first format consisted of three questionnaires available on the workshop tables, asking visitors about their relationship with the region, their professional activity and their place of residence. The second proposal took the form of wooden spoon workshops led by the artists one weekend per month, from Friday to Sunday. The third event consisted of discussions with external partners to debate specific topics: local

15 Known as *verquelée* in the region since the Middle Ages, it is hand-spun from hemp grown on damp plots close to dwellings using a typical Montbéliard spinning wheel and has also helped develop the region's textile industry.

16 Castor houses were built by workers in Audincourt through self-construction and self-determination by sharing knowledge between 1951 and 1956. "Castors" means beavers, and the term refers to self-construction movements among French workers after the Second World War.

17 The workers as a collective were named Medvedkin Group Sochaux. The initiative was triggered by the documentary filmmaker Chris Marker in both Sochaux and Besançon in the 1980s.

history with Pierre Lamard, common places with Mathilde Chénin, a poetic activation of the words of the place through Laurent Lacotte's artwork, and local industrial wastelands and their future with the urban planning agency working for the conurbation.



Fig. 8 Exhibition view from *Blood in the Machine*. The workshop section. © Photo: Angélique Pichon for Le 19, Crac.

These learning-by-doing moments, which brought together people from different backgrounds depending on the topics, constituted mediation actions in themselves, but also a *mise en abyme* of the exhibition design process which activates the exhibition as mediation itself and emphasises its open, process-oriented dimension, with the users playing an essential role as necessary pieces to complete the puzzle.

Dialogic objects: Events for exploration



Fig. 9 Last collective meeting and lunch of *Blood in the Machine*. © Photo: Adeline Lépine.

The mediation activities carried out by the art centre's team also took place in this central space, whereas they are usually held in a dedicated workshop space. Colleagues working with the public welcomed the change, noting that it enabled them to demonstrate—more concretely than usual—an artistic stance that operates both upstream and downstream of the institution's engagement with its context.

The public events were an opportunity to gather some of the region's moods, emotions and feelings through the words of its users. Attuned to their environment, these participants from all walks of life shared their sensitive awareness of the context. These collective moments also called into question the role that the art centre could play in these reflections, serving as a testing ground. The subject of the future was that of the artists, but we understood on this occasion that the past still needed to be resolved, that the contemporary presence of the

automotive industry, although greatly reduced, made it difficult to turn the page and build the future. This insight led us to plan an exhibition in fall 2025 on the working class and immigration in the region, where we approached the mediation differently through a curator committed to socially engaged practices, even as we continued the dialogue with our *Blood in the Machine* partners.¹⁸ Applying what we learned with Assemble, we recognised that revisiting the past enables us to build the future.

Thus, we can consider that although the exhibition arrived too early in this region to fully accomplish Assemble's aim of "preserving potential narratives for the future and studying new uses for local resources and the development of a bioregional economy," it nevertheless helped to create new relationships with the context in which Le 19 is located, identified more as a collective place for experimentation and expression of the cultural competence of all people in their diversity.

While *Blood in the Machine* enabled us to significantly expand our users by reaching people working or living in the area—most of whom came to participate in workshops, share their knowledge or rediscover artifacts from the region's rural and industrial history—the project further divided a more "natural" audience for contemporary art venues. Most artists and art school teachers were receptive to Assemble's proposal because it involved experimentation on the one hand and questioning the form of the exhibition and the role of an art centre on the other. But a large number of professionals were also put off by this proposal. The decision to present the state of research in historical and thematic sections and to devote the central space to a space for "doing" and "exploring" raised many questions, the first being the absence of one or more objects that could be defined as "works of art". More broadly, many visitors struggled with the very notion of an exhibition in this specific context.

These difficulties were encountered in part during the production of the project itself. Indeed, when artistic projects are based on the learning process, this leads to a common mediation approach for almost all positions within the art centre. The "quiet, laborious, unpresentable processes of education",¹⁹ as described by Nora Sternfeld, are not so easy to integrate into already busy schedules. We know that in small organisations, individuals already manage all the tasks of an entire department on their own. They are often eager to work with maximum anticipation, and most team members need clear instructions from the outset of a project. The process-oriented approach can be unsettling,

18 *Zones de (non)être*, a collective exhibition co-curated with independent curator Violeta Janeiro Alfageme.

19 Nora Sternfeld, "Unglamorous Tasks: What Can Education Learn from its Political Traditions?" in *E-Flux*, no. 14 (March 2010), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/14/61302/unglamorous-tasks-what-can-education-learn-from-its-political-traditions>.

even though the experimental nature of producing a new work of contemporary art is well known to art centres and their professionals, who are accustomed to being flexible.

For the art centre team and their peers, however, perceptions of *Blood in the Machine* may have changed when people voluntarily contributed either to preliminary meetings or to some of the public sessions. Thanks to the artists' mediation and the opportunity to contribute through action, the experience could be described as an aesthetic, artistic gesture. For the team members, being immersed in the process and getting to know the region, particularly through meetings with residents, led in some cases to a profound and fruitful transformation in their perception of *Blood in the Machine*, but more broadly of the place that the art centre occupies and could occupy within the region and what an exhibition could be.

This reflection is part of a broader question that has been raised in recent years, particularly by other curators, and which is echoed in Françoise Vergès' book *Programme de désordre absolu, décoloniser le musée* (Programme of Absolute Disorder, Decolonising the Museum). Assemble is no stranger to Vergès' notion of the post-museum and her proposal to design living spaces that welcome speech and experience as a decolonial approach, rather than fetishising objects that impose knowledge and perpetuate a posture and discourse of domination. This change process takes time, and it will be necessary to repeat it in order to reveal the potential offered by exhibitions as a method of mediation.

Regeneration

Blood in the Machine constituted a radical response to the Sandbox format. It allowed us to test the hypothesis that an artistic programme based on an attitude of learning and co-learning necessarily constitutes a process that involves exploring, testing, taking risks, making mistakes, seeking understanding and sometimes finding misunderstanding.



Fig. 10 During the 2024 Summer School co-organised with Assemble, the artists, Le 19's team, partners and inhabitants walked by the river Allan with a local historian who spoke of the industry and the landscape. Behind the trees, the main factory of Montbéliard and Sochaux, a former property of Peugeot and currently owned by the multinational company Stellantis, is still operating. © Photo: Adeline Lépine.

We closed the doors of *Blood in the Machine* in August 2024, but many new ideas emerged, and the experience strengthened the place and action of the art centre within its bioregion by creating so-called contact zones with various

local groups.²⁰ Assemble's posture of "ignorant masters" led Le 19 as well to adopt a new attitude with our audiences, which "is closer to friendship, and friendship does not reduce the distance between people, [but] places that distance in life".²¹

Thus, we can draw an analogy between the way Assemble conceives architecture and how Le 19 envisions its Sandbox exhibitions:

Architecture cannot change the economy, it cannot restructure agriculture, it cannot actively make change, as it is not an industry which builds independent wealth. What it can do is mediate between others, to influence, and above all show, that another way is possible. Through architectural tools you build and show worlds—and how to make them—in a way that almost no other professions are able to do. [...] What it means in practice is that we need to build institutions which can simplify the structures of our existence. [...] To be able to see and develop ourselves in richer ways we need a new set of institutions which allow us to think differently.²²

To avoid the pitfall of an exhibition practice that only responds to local issues in a fleeting manner, the Sandbox format was created to be repeated annually to find its right form and become part of the public's habits. Repeating the format is a way of investing time to ensure its sustainability. Since cultural mediation must take into account the diversity of the temporalities to which it refers and which constitute its *raison d'être*, activating exhibitions as a method of mediation involves taking the time necessary to establish mutual trust with people, create the necessary conditions for designing and carrying out high-quality research, take into account people's time and the rhythms of the place, and build long-term partnerships and research from the outset, based on the temporality specific to each artistic process.

Blood in the Machine also taught us that this relationship with time had to extend beyond the ephemeral exhibitions to achieve the goal of "integrating the project into the community".²³ The wide variety of topics and information

20 This concept was developed by anthropologists Mary Louise Pratt and James Clifford. The term "contact zone" describes social spaces where different cultures meet and attempt to coexist, often within the context of asymmetrical power relations resulting from colonial history, slavery and their repercussions. See also Cathelijne Nuijsink, Tom Avermaete, Patricio del Real, Giovanna Borasi, Ingrid Halland, and Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen, "The Architectural Exhibition as Cross-Cultural Contact Zone: Op-Ed", *Architecture and Culture* 12, nos. 3–4 (2024): 402–15.

21 Gary Peters, "Ignorant Artists/Ignorant Teachers", in *Frontiers of Higher Education*, edited by Tom Claes and David Seth Preston (Rodopi Press, 2010), pp. 99–112.

22 Jeremy Waterfield, "Blood in the Machine", in *Le Cahier du 19* 2024/01. The text was commissioned by Assemble from the author and had been published both in English and French within the visitor booklet that can be consulted here: <https://le19c-rac.com/media/pages/expositions/blood-in-the-machine/f4f8d11315-1718106446/jeremy-waterfield-blood-in-the-machine.pdf>.

23 Quote from Assemble while describing the project for Le 19.

gathered during our research for Assemble continue to open doors to other exhibition projects, as well as residencies, meditations, collaborations and public commissions.

The Sandbox format each summer enables the integration of Le 19 into the imagination of the community, while creating deep and relevant roots in the soil of the place and receiving “the unusual and tangible communications of the thoughts and feelings of others around us”.²⁴ Exhibitions as method for mediation between context, people, ideas and objects can regenerate the art centre’s social and historical relationships with its environment, but only through patient repetition—by remaking sandcastles in the same sandbox—can these modest and searching moves build what the curator Maria Lind calls “a counterhegemony—an art-centric one”.²⁵

I would like to extend special thanks to Sol Archer for his caring help and to Ingrid Halland for her generous dedication.

24 Eileen Myles, quoted by Maggie Nelson, in *On Freedom: Four Songs of Care and Constraint* (Graywolf Press, 2021).

25 Lind, “Situating the Curatorial”.

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