

O Friends, There Is No Friends

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The collective project of Quartier de l'Etang

This text discusses the mandatory collective project in the master TRANS- program, wherein I was part of the Quartier de l'Etang collective. This project, mentored by microsillons, focuses on a newly-developed Vernier neighborhood. According to an email announcement, the project revolves around a new neighborhood in the commune of Vernier. It is premised on the collective exploring and "critically reflecting on urban project proposals and then formulating an artistic proposal involving neighborhood residents in collaboration with Vernier's social cohesion and culture department."
(microsillons, 2021)

1) Motivation

My experience with gentrification started in Seoul during the New Town Project in the late 2000s, leading me to support resistance groups through various activities, thus influencing my understanding of socially engaged art (Shin, 2009; Shin, 2011). Unlike Seoul's contentious nature, Geneva's gentrification aligns more with Breviglieri's critique of the "guaranteed city," emphasizing qualitative and quantitative assessments in urban development (Breviglieri, 2018). Addressing this through socially engaged art, mainly through participatory, community-centric methods suitable for Switzerland's socio-political landscape, presented unique challenges and led me to the l'Etang project.

2) The theoretical background

Certeau's perspective of appreciating everyday activities provides valuable insights into individual experience. However, it is worth considering how these perspectives can be expanded to include more interactive and social aspects.

Among the acts of daily life, communion holds a unique layer as it is both a deeply personal and social act. Approaching the collective as a group of friends was partly a way to push the idea of community beyond individuality. Still, it also served as a strategic concept for disrupting gentrification. The tool used here is Greimas' semantic square (Greimas, 1987).

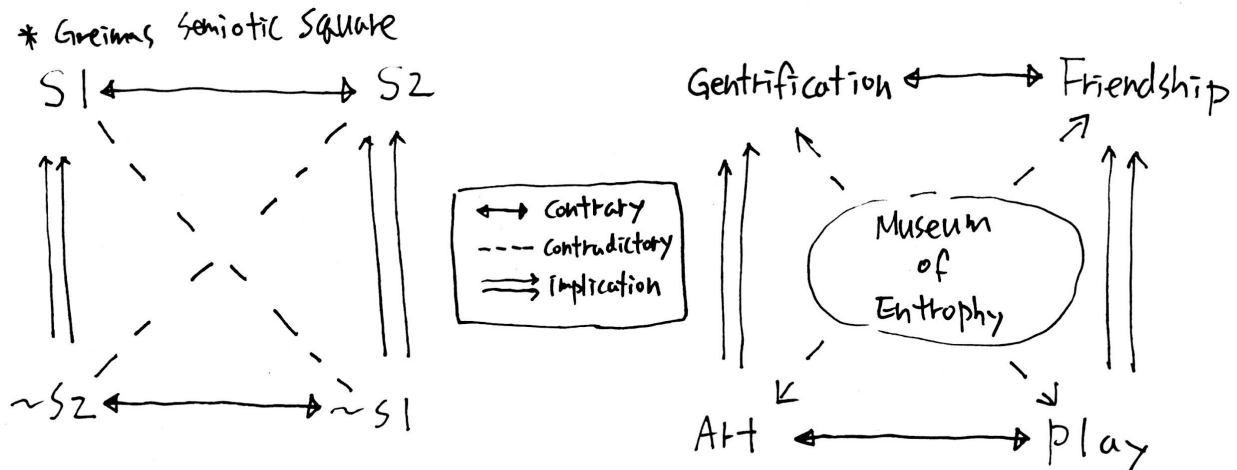


Figure 1. Greimas' semantic rectangle and its applications.
 Original Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiotic_square
 Revised by B.Yoo.

Gentrification entails reinventing spaces devoid of historical essence, often necessitating defining monuments like large-scale sculptures. As Ley (2003) emphasizes, artists' presence is critical in gentrification, establishing a 'new cultural economy' (p. 2527). Zukin (1995) concurs, asserting art's crucial role in forming new identities in these history-deprived locations (p. 2). Therefore, art becomes an instrument in gentrification, particularly in public monumental works involving considerable capital. Thus, I categorize art as a gentrification component, with 'friendship' as its counterpoint and 'play' as a subset of friendship, as evidenced in Graeme's Square.

It is also interesting to note that friendship has been explored in a limited way in the context of art and philosophy. One of the most in-depth friendship studies is Derrida's "The Politics of Friendship" (1997). He explores the connections between friendship, hostility, and otherness, arguing that "the political is always also the politics of friendship" (p. 12).

Friendship significantly influences visual arts through artist collaborations and networks. Bromfield (2018) underlines the role of artist friendships in developing independent art festivals and the local contemporary art scene in Chiang Mai, Thailand, from 1992 to 1998 (p. 90). Farr's anthology "Memory" (2012) further explores the impact of friendship and shared experiences on visual art creation. Thus, relationships are crucial in shaping artistic practices and movements in the visual arts.

Furthermore, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of "critical intimacy" offers another perspective on friendship, specifically concerning the role of critique and collaboration in intellectual and artistic circles (Spivak, 2012). Spivak's critical intimacy is about engaging in a dialogue that challenges and supports, fostering growth and understanding through a productive exchange of ideas.

Under Spivak's Critical Intimacy lens, Sophie Hope's 'Critical Friends' project (2016) exemplifies this concept by fostering a supportive environment for artists to dialogue and provide feedback on each other's work, promoting community and collective learning (p. 58). The project encourages open participation and fosters supportive, challenging conversations, echoing Spivak's critical intimacy ethos to facilitate growth and understanding.

The idea of a "guaranteed city" is the opposite of the concept, which made me think about Anna Tsing's concept of a "disturbed ecology" (Tsing, 2015). Tsing's position emphasizes the idea of a 'disturbed ecology' independent of Marx's notion of progress. Instead of seeing nature as anti-modern or seeking salvation that will end capitalism and bring about a new world, Tsing focuses on the possibility of Hope amidst the ruins and chaos of the current system.

In this perspective, people somehow help each other amidst the mess, and it is within these interactions that hope can be found. Thus, when examining gentrified spaces, it is essential to look at them not as a 'guaranteed city' but rather as a 'disturbed ecosystem' akin to what Tsing describes. This approach emphasizes the importance of recognizing these spaces' complex relationships and dynamics and the potential for Hope and positive change that emerges from the interactions between individuals and communities.

To theorize people's spontaneous sharing and cooperation within this 'disturbed ecosystem,' I turned to Derrida's concept of hospitality as a tool. Derrida posits that moving from 'conditional hospitality' to 'unconditional hospitality' can be seen as a form of democracy (Derrida, 2000). He argues that democracy involves "negotiation, compromise, and transaction" (Derrida, 2000, p. 39). This understanding of hospitality as a dimension of friendship provided me with a theoretical framework for my project in a collective project.

Drawing on Derrida's concept of hospitality, I derived a concrete methodology for the collective project. Interpreting hospitality as an element of friendship became an

invaluable tool for analyzing the relationships and interactions within the 'disturbed ecosystem' that Tsing (2015) describes.

3) The implementation

In the l'Etang collective, where members had no personal relationships, familiar tastes, age, culture, or language in common, we adopted the approach of forming temporary "friendships" to carry out the joint project required by the master TRANS- program. Instead of pursuing a single goal, we would meet at designated times to propose our activities and participate in each other's initiatives.

However, this approach faced a challenge: the project was an institution-to-institution collaboration between the city of Vernier and HEAD. Nevertheless, the actions of the l'Etang Collective could easily be misinterpreted as a friendly game between middle-class art students by outsiders who were unaware of the context of the initiative.

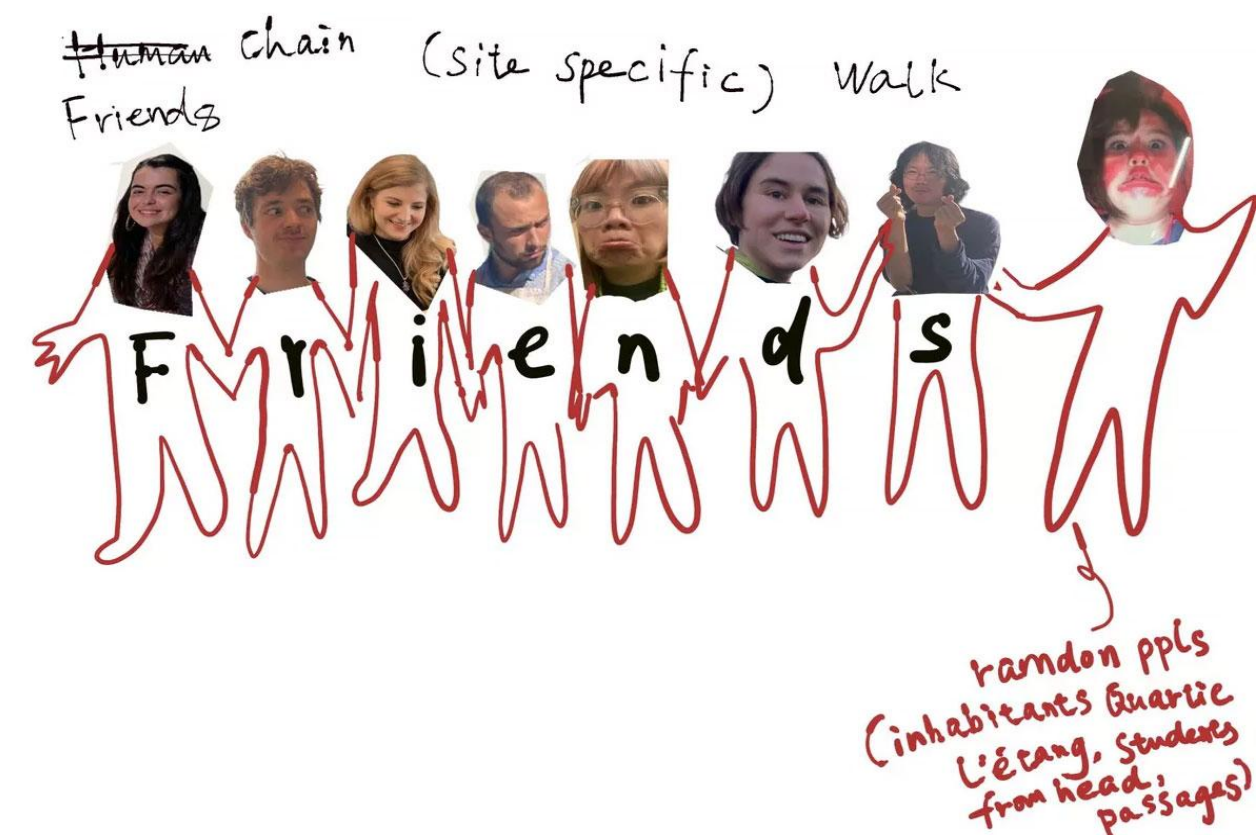


Figure 2. Paddlet post from the l'etang group. By V. Tinarrage.
Source: https://padlet.com/Virgile_Tnrg/l-tang-s9y9npd3fzcqz73k/wish/1945382762

Another problem became apparent during the first field workshop at the Quartier de l'Etang. The primary function of Cafe des Possible, which served as an on-site department for master TRANS-`s collective projects, was to provide care for children with nowhere else to go while their parents were engrossed in work. Reconciling the site's needs with the organization's goals, which included critically examining gentrification and exploring the political possibilities of "friends," was a challenge.

Due to this tension, cultural workers on the site sometimes asked some of l'Etang Collective's members to engage in "(creative) care" on an individual-to-individual favor alike rather than an institution-to-institution basis. Those who complied with this request and those who did not create a certain tension within the collective, which in one way or another, affected the quality of collaboration and the atmosphere of the group. The imbalance between those who responded to this request and those who still needed to set the stage for various conflicts in the future.

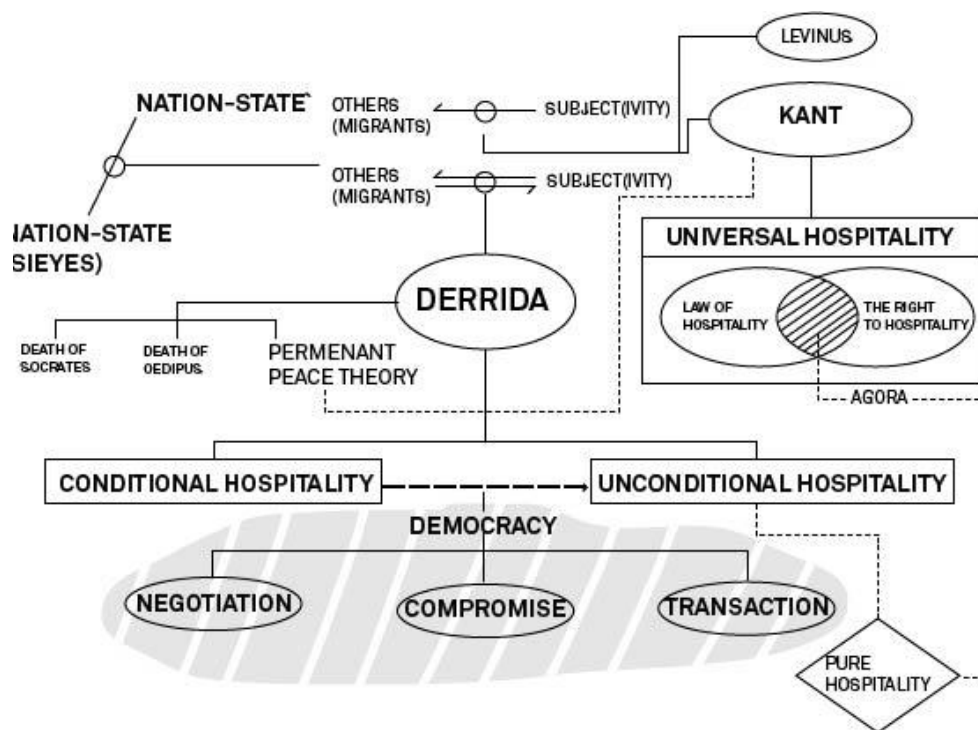


Figure 3. A Mapping of Derrida's Concept of Hospitality. Revised by B.Yoo
Original Source: Derrida, J. (2000). Of Hospitality

Despite these challenges, the collective organized a second action: a flea market. Derrida's concept of hospitality, encompassing "negotiation, compromise, and transaction," evokes the lively environment of a flea market, where various objects are

sold, and endless negotiations, compromises, and transactions occur (Derrida, 2000, p. 147). The flea market was chosen because it guarantees the autonomy of all participants and allows them to reap their rewards free from institutional economic supervision and taxes.

Inspired by Martha Rosler's use of a flea market in her MoMA retrospective to critique consumer culture and highlight art's connection to daily life, I appreciate the potential of unconventional mediums like flea markets to address societal issues. Rosler's (2013) advocacy for an 'artistic mode of revolution' against gentrification and the 'creative class' has been instrumental in guiding the collective project.

Gentrification often utilizes art as an 'artistic mode of production,' as noted by Rosler (2013). This project posits that flea markets can counteract this exploitation and nurture genuine relationships, resonating with de Certeau's (1984) concept of creating social meaning from everyday life. The flea market is seen as a miniature democracy, embodying a shift from Derrida's 'conditional hospitality' to 'unconditional hospitality' (Derrida, 2000).

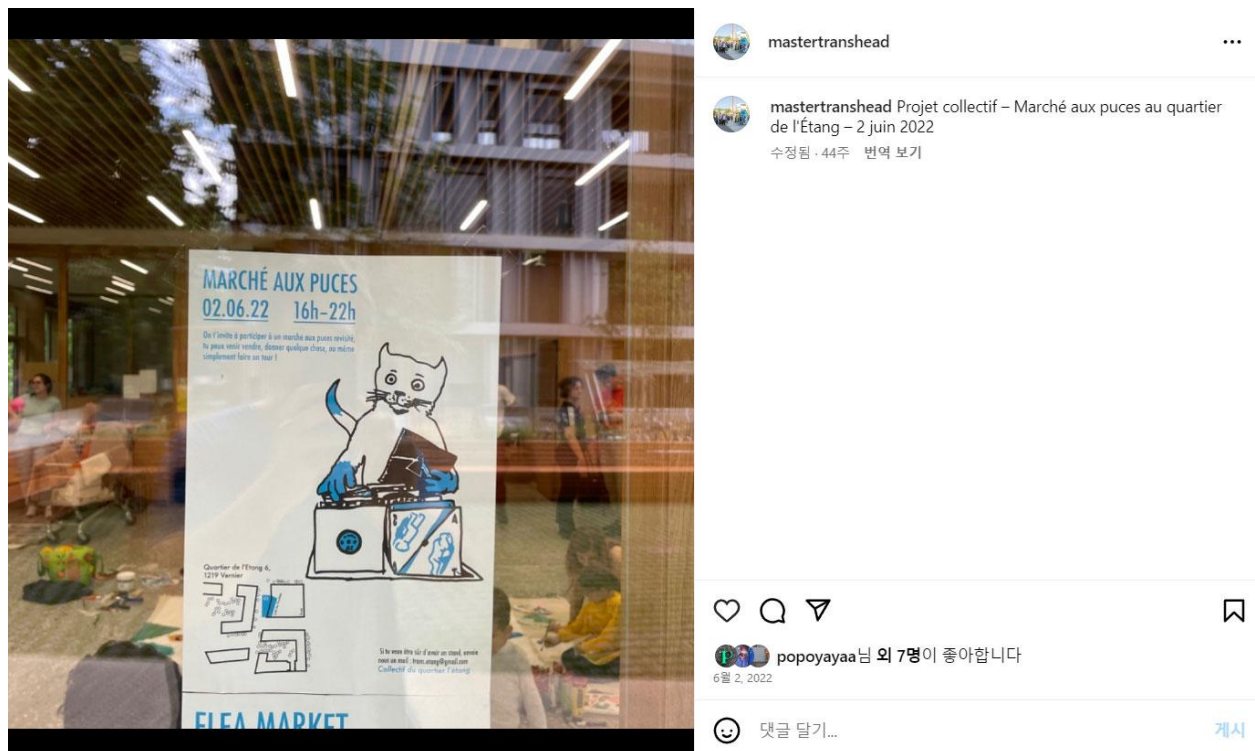


Figure 4. Flea market poster.
Poster design by Benoit Casot, photo by Master-TRANS HEAD.
SOURCE: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CeT0iX0NW91/>

My fascination with the l'Etang collective, a union of various personal projects, was driven by communal cooking and meal sharing. This interest stems from de Certeau's (1984) proposition that everyday cooking can be as meaningful as artistic creation, leading me to manifest art through cooking. Besides building community, food offers an entropy-friendly form of composition that, unlike enduring art forms like painting or sculpture, is meant to be consumed, mitigating material waste. Consequently, I prioritize meaning production over physical creation, upholding this value in my artistic endeavors.

Through several workshops with the l'Etang collective, we pursued diverse objectives—the initial cooking workshop in March 2022 aimed at collective cohesion. During the flea market event, a composting workshop with Benoit Casot showcased the ecological potential of everyday practices in Quartier de l'Etang. Lastly, a winter fermentation event inspired by the Korean 'Kimjang' ritual aimed to perpetuate our Vernier City engagement, drawing from WochenKlausur's practical propositions. In essence, the fermentation workshop underscored the political facet of wild fermentation and illuminated 'dark matter,' as conceptualized by Sholette (2010).



Figure 5. Anaerobic compost a.k.a Bokashi compost workshop at the Flea market.
Workshop run by B. Yoo & B.Casot, photo by B.Yoo



Figure 6. Fermentation Workshop Poster (Left), A participant with a jar Workshop poster and photo by B. Yoo

4) The evaluation

The heartbeat of the l'Etang project lies not in Quartier de l'Etang's physical space but in shared experiences within our circle of "friends," reflecting Foucault's assertion of friendship as a potent political possibility (Foucault, 1983). This excellent task of shaping participatory art initiatives meaningfully impacting gentrification requires tangible grounding. The challenge is not the gentrification of a neighborhood, but the gentrification of our collective's relationships, bounded by institutional structures. These relationships, nuanced and evolving, endure beyond the program, maintaining a critical distance as a protective buffer, embodying Derrida's concept of friendship—a delicate balance of intimacy and distance (Derrida, 2005).

Our collective effort against gentrification evolves, mirroring Derrida's view of friendship—an endless dance of openness and incompleteness. Traditional evaluation methodologies might fall short, prompting us to delve into friendship's depth and authenticity and the potential it uncovers.

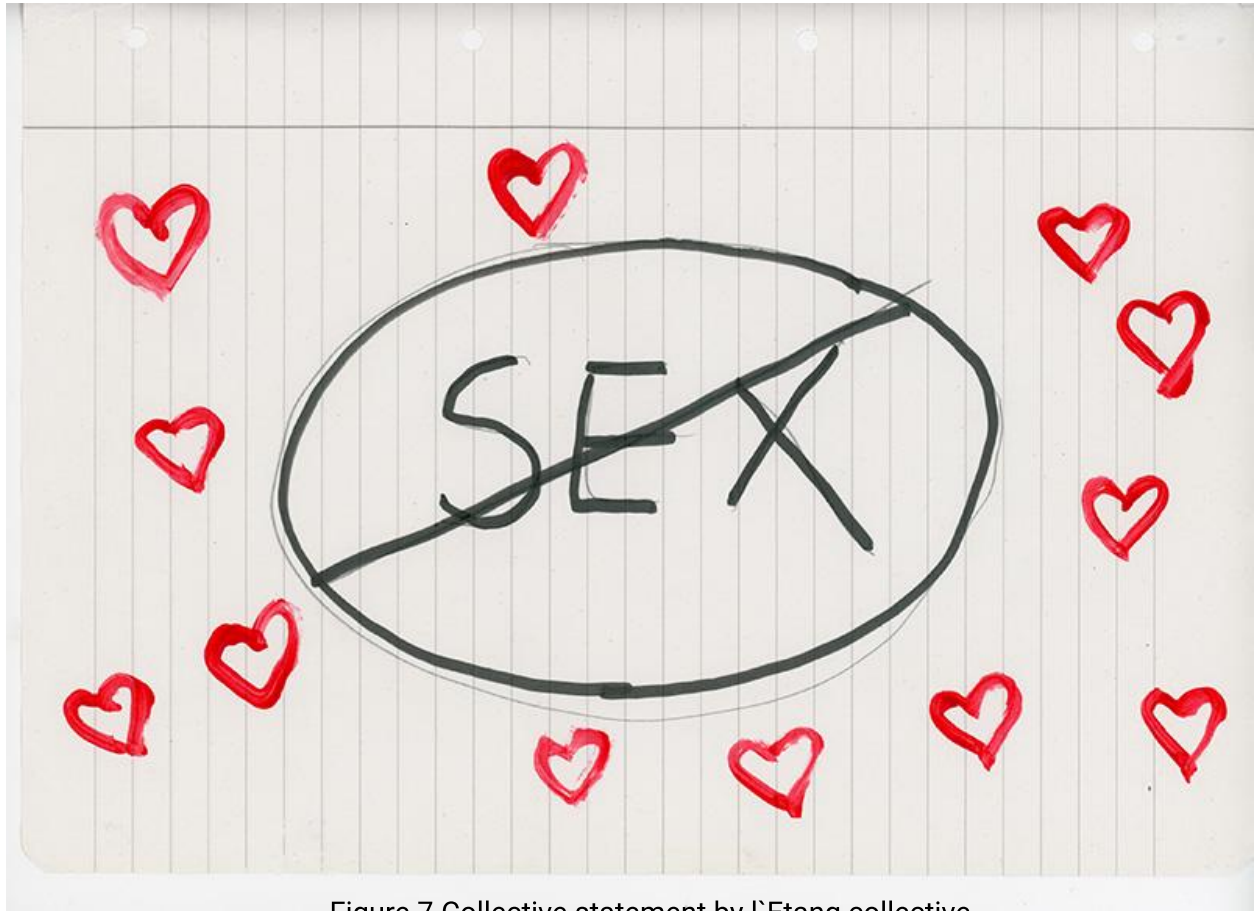


Figure 7. Collective statement by l'Etang collective

The measure of our project is not in tangible outcomes but lies in the complex, evolving network of friendships—constantly open and incomplete, as Derrida posits. In line with Foucault's 'self-care,' these friendships catalyze self-growth and comprehension, fostering emotional and intellectual wellness while building collective resilience against gentrification (Foucault, 1986). It is the ambiguous yet fascinating beauty of this project: it lives and evolves in the friendships we have formed and, in the process, fosters a shared sense of care and resilience.

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