

# MARSEILLE VS THE MEDITERRANEAN

## Local Practices of Digital Resistance

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This article discusses the creation of a participatory web documentary in Marseille in reaction to the spatial imposition and symbolic productions of two new cultural institutions in the city. Based on observations of the web documentary's producers and participants and an analysis of the final product, it argues that the former have produced a form of resistance in their empowerment of local individuals and perspectives. These perspectives operate in opposition to those of the new institutions that depict Marseille as a "Mediterranean" city while implicitly and explicitly excluding local particularities and practices, which have paradoxically contributed to the city's identity and international renown.<sup>1</sup>

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In late fall of 2013, a group of individuals gathered in a small conference space adjacent to an art gallery in the Panier, a historic district in Marseille. Around the table sat members of a local video collective called Tabasco Video, representatives from the district town hall and the sub-regional "département" government, as well as public outreach representatives from two recently opened institutions: the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations (MuCEM) and the Villa Méditerranée.<sup>2</sup>

The meeting's subject was a "web documentary" project conceived by Tabasco Video. Tabasco's members had already successfully solicited a first round of funding from local government bodies, but this event was intended to further solidify the support network needed to produce the proposed online series, entitled "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" (And what about the Panier?). As its members described it during this initial meeting, Tabasco Video's web

documentary project would foreground the role of the eponymous neighborhood and its inhabitants in wider socio-economic changes taking place in Marseille through a series of three participatory workshops directed at distinct groups: students at a nearby secondary school, the Collège du Vieux-Port; members of a job training program for recent arrivals to France; and other Panier inhabitants of all ages who had already collaborated in previous Tabasco projects. In each of these workshops, participants were to be asked to formulate and document their own answers to the titular question regarding their position and that of their neighborhood amidst the panorama of wider change in Marseille.

Within these reflections the Panier was meant to assume a central role both as physical space and palimpsest of local concerns about identity and belonging in a transitional urban social sphere. Split into three sections corresponding to the workshops,

the web documentary's format would include online videos, still images, and sound clips, all of which could be accessed by viewers. The viewers in turn would be free to advance, replay, or select a different path in their interactive online experience. Tabasco Video's members presented the project as an extension of their prior participatory video practice, an ongoing effort to empower residents to voice their opinions about urban processes and disseminate these opinions to local and non-Marseille audiences.<sup>3</sup> Gifreu (2011) defines the web documentary as "interactive applications, on- or offline, made with the intention of representing reality with its own mechanisms that we can call modes of browsing or interaction, relative to the level of participation allowed." Interactivity and participation are thus principle elements in this genre, which frequently permits its spectator to control the speed at which the work is experienced, or even to choose the direction of one or several possible narratives. In this way the project proposed by Tabasco Video was participatory regarding both its production and the medium to which it was destined: the former is the focus of this article.

The meeting itself was relatively low-key. As mentioned, Tabasco had already obtained a degree of funding from local authorities to begin the project and it had similarly drawn on pre-existing relationships with nearby schools and other social institutions. However, this was the first official meeting between members of Tabasco and the MuCEM and Villa Méditerranée, which is remarkable in itself since while they were mutually interested in working with one another, representatives of all three were aware of the forthcoming project's potential for institutional critique, one that would directly target the latter's contribution to the creation of a new physical plant in Marseille as well as changing notions of local identity.

### **"Digital Resistance"**

In this article, I discuss Tabasco Video and its collaborators' engagement with a joint program of urban renewal and cultural development that has taken place in Marseille since 1995. With a focus on the first volume of the web documentary, I analyze

the conditions of its production and its final form. I argue that this process reveals a local practice of "digital resistance," which I define as the temporary creation of a counter-public, the perspectives and claims of which are transmitted in an accessible form whose primary limits are one's internet bandwidth. Tabasco Video's resistance model uses the means provided by the cultural institutions against themselves, in the process asserting local abilities and authority to define its own cultural prerogatives and to rightfully identify connections between economy, infrastructure, politics, and culture. In the body of this article, I situate this practice in its urban, cultural and regional contexts, all of which contribute to the project's specificity, before exploring Tabasco Video's background as an organization and the workshop in greater depth. Taken together, I contend that this example shows how a group of individuals who are not driven by strictly political goals are able to empower members of another social group to claim their right to the city through the medium of audiovisual culture.

My use of the notion of "digital resistance" builds on that of the Critical Art Ensemble collective's eponymous concept (2001), but also responds to subsequent developments in the field, reinvigorating this pre-existing concept by expanding upon its possible uses today. The Critical Art Ensemble's original notion responds to the definition of "digital" as the potentially endless reproduction of content, while mine refers specifically to online media. While Critical Art Ensemble writers, artists and activists were concerned about the possible recuperation of their "tactical media" by capitalist structures, the majority of resistance movements today are linked to or dependent on such infrastructure through the use of social media. As I explore in the body of the article, however, the type of dissent in which Tabasco is engaged resonates with definitions of political resistance and claims-making through critique, particularly in its insistence on the rights of local citizens to question and challenge the representations and discourse of those in positions of authority. It also responds to recent conversations in between media and social movement studies. However, de-

spite Downing's assertion that "social movements are variously defined, often hard to categorize, and – as a result of their 'unconstitutional' qualities – resistant to rigid theorizing" (2008: 43), I must underline the specificity of the Tabasco Video case, whose members would reject the terminology of a "movement" and who do not self-identify as activists. These members are employed individually by the collective for assignments which may include public or private commissions or those which they have developed on their own and sought out funding for, such as "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" Furthermore, while, in this article I am interested in the digital form of Tabasco Video's web documentary; I do not consider its reception to the same extent. The timeline of this research coincided primarily with the project's production phase; Tabasco members began post-production work on the web documentary after I had left Marseille and so the project's aftermath, including its impact, were not my central concern. Instead, I am interested in the element of Tabasco's process that engaged with what Milan calls "emancipatory communication practices," including "the power of participation, which refers to the *possibility* of making informed contributions to democratic decision-making and public life" (my emphasis, 2013: 2). Within this context, the unique contestatory element of Tabasco Video's project entails its collaboration and dependence on the financial support of the subjects of its critique.

A central element of Tabasco's digital resistance involves its questioning of the role of cultural institutions, where the latter can be seen as directly contributing to if not exacerbating local social and economic problems. Since their respective openings in mid-2013, the MuCEM and Villa Méditerranée's administrations had already considered the Panier as a central point of concern, directing outreach efforts to local residents. The meeting that I attended in late 2013 marked the beginning of their convergence around the "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" project, but it was only one element of a wider effort for which each institution had at least one dedicated employee and in the case of the MuCEM an entire department of public outreach. (The latter's responsibilities in-

clude the organization of group and school visits, as well as increasing access to members of social groups less likely to visit museums.) The proposed collaboration with Tabasco Video was thus precisely the type of mediated program that both institutions had already demonstrated interest in supporting.<sup>4</sup> However, the project that Tabasco Video produced was a de facto challenge to the very fabric of the MuCEM and Villa Méditerranée's existence, the notion that Marseillan and Mediterranean culture and society are one and the same.

As a contrast to a representation regime that positions Marseille and its inhabitants as a living diorama of Mediterranean identity, "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" went beyond mere questioning to challenge the root of these representations. It did so directly in its empowerment of minority and working-class perspectives on the changes being wrought in downtown Marseille of which the new cultural institutions are part. But it also did so in its refusal to accept the terms of a model of collaboration between powerful public culture institutions and smaller, locally-oriented associations. Even when they benefited from material and in-kind support from institutional collaborators, Tabasco's workshop directors, editors and general team refused to shy away from asking uncomfortable questions or depicting the dichotomies between the discourse and practice or effects of cultural institutions. In this regard, they both allowed other voices to participate in the construction of counter-discourse and expressed their own sensitivity regarding the spatial reorganization of downtown Marseille.

### **The Neo-Mediterranean City**

Marseille's twenty-six century-long history as a port city makes it a both real and symbolic center in Mediterranean commercial and cultural exchange, in turn binding its fortunes to the sea. In the years since the Algerian War of Independence and the economic downturn sparked by the oil crisis, in the 1960s and 1970s respectively, the city's prior significance as a key Mediterranean and French port diminished, while, conversely, its Mediterranean associations increased. These associations are char-

acterized as an idealistic celebration of the city's "Mediterranean" history and its ethnically diverse residents, many of whom trace their backgrounds to former French colonies and protectorates in North Africa (principally Algeria and Tunisia). The recent uses of its Mediterranean identifications in turn have tended toward commercial purposes, entailing a rebranding of this former working-class city with a large unemployed underclass as both a cultural melting pot and a tourist destination with major potential for economic investment as Maisetti (2014) discusses. However, as De Moriamé (2012) notes, the colonial past frequently permeates so-called "Euro-mediterranean" relations, making local uses of Mediterranean terminology anything but anodyne.

While Marseille's historic role as a vital lynchpin between France and the Mediterranean had an initial commercial basis, a political dimension was also attributed to it in later years. The city's significance as a major colonial port established it as the site for exchange between France and its colonies or overseas territories and eventually as a point of contact for former colonial subjects and colonists (*pièdes noirs*) after the mid-twentieth century independence of the former. It is in the post-independence period that both Marseille and the Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur (PACA) region of which it forms a part began to develop more durable contact with entities in former colonies, which have laid the groundwork for current political cooperation, of which the Villa Méditerranée was conceived as one element (Carrière 2013). According to Visier (2005), Michel Vauzelle, the former president of PACA and the intellectual architect of the Villa Méditerranée, was convinced that a repositioning of European attention and investment toward the Mediterranean area would reap benefits for his constituents. In this regard, his thinking parallels that of the French officials behind the more high-profile Barcelona Process and ensuing Union for the Mediterranean. However, this type of internationalist approach has not always been universally popular in Marseille. Despite a bipartisan interest in developing such relationships in the past, today, notions of Mediterranean unity see politicians divided along party lines. One sign of this

is the vigorous partisan contestation of the socialist party member Vauzelle's Villa Méditerranée project. Since 2015, when Vauzelle was replaced at the PACA presidency by a member of the right-wing Les Républicains party the institution's future has been cast into doubt.

The colonial period was a particularly rich period for the inclusion of Marseille in French cultural imaginaries of the Mediterranean, whether concerning the Saint-Simonian utopian industrialists who used the city as a transit point and site for major infrastructure projects, or the artists and writers associated with the locally edited journal *Cahiers du Sud* (Temime 2002). The atrocities of the Algerian War of Independence and its aftermath dashed these dreams, but some were resurrected beginning in the 1980s by an unlikely union of figures from across the political spectrum, including the former mayor of Marseille, Gaston Defferre. Another one of these figures was Thierry Fabre, who had left the Institut du monde arabe in Paris in the early 1990s to set up an annual festival of Mediterranean culture and ideas in Marseille called Les Rencontres d'Averroës, named after the Andalusian philosopher. Several years later, Fabre was asked to participate in the organization of the new MuCEM project, within which he became one of its major intellectual backers, developing a project that would celebrate both the Mediterranean as a diverse yet complementary geographic area and Marseille's incontrovertible place in that space. While Fabre left his administrative post at the MuCEM a few years after its opening, the institution still bears his imprint in its orientation and idealism.

Since 1995, the primary framework for these interlinked efforts has been the aptly named Euro-méditerranée urban renewal project, currently the largest of its kind under way in Europe. As Bullen describes it, Euro-méditerranée "has the explicit ambition to influence the symbolic, material and spatial reorganization of Marseille" (2012: 168). Both the MuCEM and Villa Méditerranée fall within the perimeter and purview of Euro-méditerranée and, while their aims are avowedly cultural (or in the case of the Villa Méditerranée combined with a

complementary political focus), they both directly and indirectly contribute to the city's identity as a Mediterranean destination, whose novelty derives in part from the concurrent arrival of more commercial venues. My dissertation research in Marseille (Cartelli 2016), initially concerned with social politics of access and use to the Euroméditerranée zone, gradually adapted to the additional cultural and commercial context of this urban development project. This entailed an investigation of the creation, dissemination, and effects of the associated Mediterranean discourse at the level of those who generate it and among the city's inhabitants. During my research period, which came several years after the start of the global financial crisis, many of these inhabitants were still suffering from a downturn in employment and investment – not to mention their exclusion from earlier economic development – despite Euroméditerranée's intended counterweight to these effects. In addition to ethnographic fieldwork with the inhabitants and users of neighborhoods and public spaces, I pursued my research through interviews and interactions with political officials as well as institutional administrators and employees. I also regularly attended cultural programs and events at both institutions and visited their permanent and temporary exhibitions on my own and in guided tours. While I aimed to balance the perspectives of a variety of interlocutors, including those spatial users and those responsible for designing and administering redeveloped public spaces and their new institutions, this was not always so easy. Although I took care to consider the latter perspectives, the increased time that I spent with local residents and habitual users of the spaces in question meant that I tended to side with their perspectives, especially since my access concerned their daily existence and not solely their professional activities.

One of my primary observations in my larger research holds that the provenance and use of the Mediterranean concept in Marseille is largely confined to those who have tasked themselves with its dissemination. These include the new MuCEM and Villa Méditerranée's intellectual architects and administrators, who insist that their emphasis on

Marseille's Mediterraneanism is a reflection of local perspectives and realities. By participating in the "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" project, they hope to create a more durable relationship between the institutions and their surrounding community, but they also hope that such a process will simultaneously prove their foundational assumptions regarding locals' identification as "Mediterraneans".

In one conversation, the director of the MuCEM's department of public outreach expounded on such an assumption, citing a 1999 study undertaken by the Mediterranean Laboratory of Sociology (LAMES) research center in nearby Aix-en-Provence. Led by sociologist Pierre Vergès, the study's research team attempted to ascertain the self-identifications of Marseillais (Vergès, Hajek & Jacquemoud 1999). In my interlocutor's summary of the project,

When asked to specify their principal identity, they [Marseillais] respond 'Mediterranean' [instead of 'French' or 'European']... So at the MuCEM, we're in a mirror effect, because when they come here they discover a part of themselves... [In this sense,] we're operating as the opposite of exoticism, we're in the 'near' instead [of the far]. This phenomenon of recognition really changes the [visitor's] experience... It permits a form of appropriation. (February 25, 2014)

This observation resonates with an idealized projection of the MuCEM's mission and its intended reception among a Marseillais public, but it fails to reflect frequent discrepancies between the Mediterranean label and local senses of belonging. It also neglects to consider the reality that, while the MuCEM's admission numbers during its first year wildly exceeded expectations, those of its visitors from Marseille, and more specifically from ethnically diverse and working-class neighborhoods such as the Panier consistently lag behind expectations.

As the subsequent discussion reveals, many locals do not conform to or agree with institutional visions. Marseille has a proud local identity, based on its port's past glories as a major shipping center and a fractious relationship with the rest of France (with

a particular enmity reserved for Paris), frequently oriented around outsized support for the city's football team, Olympique de Marseille. As much as locals may relate themselves and their identities to the sea at their doorsteps or the influence of the wider geographic and cultural basin, they are cognizant of local particularities that preclude comparisons with Valencia, Istanbul, or Naples. In turn, the members of Tabasco Video, with their combined several decades of experience spent in the Panier, strongly believe that this small working-class neighborhood demonstrates its own unique traits, in part linked to its successive hosting of immigrants from Italy, Corsica, and Algeria, but also the Comoros Islands in the southern Pacific Ocean, which the label "Mediterranean" is far too reductive to accurately describe.

Tabasco Video's web documentary project constitutes one element of my research into the changing uses of public space in Marseille and the role of Mediterranean discourse within these processes. When approached by members of Tabasco Video, I was enthusiastic about the opportunity to share my ongoing research with local residents and involve them as independent agents and interlocutors. As a filmmaker myself, I was also occasionally able to assist members of the workshop with technical issues.<sup>5</sup> This experience ultimately provided an opportunity to observe an intermediary zone between local residents and cultural administrators, contributing to my eventual assertion that the Mediterranean depictions and discourse of Marseille's new cultural institutions operated at a significant remove from local inhabitants' perceptions of their city's cultural identity as well as their own priorities for the present and the future during a time of economic instability. At the same time, I observed that members of Tabasco Video responsible for the web documentary had developed similar conclusions.

### **Local and Regional Contexts**

Contestations over the changing uses of urban space are not specific to Marseille or the Mediterranean. Indeed, Marseille's progressive "Mediterraneanization" is in many respects similar to the cases of other former industrial port towns elsewhere in the world.

The revitalization of the North American cities of Baltimore in the 1950s and 60s and Boston in the 1990s served as templates for the redevelopment of Western European urban waterfronts, such as the famous docks of Liverpool and London in England and Bilbao and Barcelona in Spain. Cultural-driven development models have shown a particular durability in a number of these cases. Liverpool, in particular, was European Capital of Culture in 2008, while Lille, another French city with a revitalized city center, owes much of its recent facelift to its 2004 tenure in the same program. In 2013, the year that also saw the openings of the MuCEM and the Villa Méditerranée, Marseille assumed the European Capital of Culture title along with its surrounding region of Provence.

The uneven development and gentrification that are part and parcel of urban renewal projects makes them frequent targets for critique on the part of those who perceive within them threats to socio-cultural diversity as well as local lives and livelihoods (Smith 1996). In Marseille, the prevalence of such contestations is inconsistent when compared with the cases of other Mediterranean cities in recent years. One major example of urban contestation that stands out in the city's recent history is the activity of a local collective called Un Centre Ville Pour Tous (A Downtown for All). Founded in 2000, Un Centre Ville Pour Tous was initially comprised of concerned locals and those directly affected by mass evictions on the Rue de la République, a major thoroughfare bordering the Panier, which had been targeted for upmarket renovation by a conglomerate of private operators (Borja, Derain & Manry 2010). While the Rue de la République renovations ultimately took place (although the majority of its new apartments remain empty as of this writing), Un Centre Ville Pour Tous remains active, primarily as a source of information and support for residents of other neighborhoods and local housing advocates. More recently, a group of concerned residents organized protests to campaign against the town hall's efforts to "cleanse" the historically working-class weekly market in a different downtown neighborhood. In addition, local artists drove a number

of contestations before, during and after Marseille's Capital of Culture period, frustrated by their exclusion from the yearlong programming. However, a general characteristic of all of these contestations is that, aside from a relatively small cohort of experts (lawyers, architects) and activists, those who participated in these movements did so because they were directly affected by the actions being contested.

In Marseille, while locals may share concerns about rising rents, municipal, regional and national political mismanagement, social segregation, and a perceived lack of attention paid to long-time residents, engagement with these issues tends to remain at the level of everyday discourse, aside from the examples of space-specific resistance mentioned previously. Such subtlety belies residents' awareness of what Rancière has called the "distribution of the sensible", defined as a "system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (2000: 12). With regard to the context of a changing public sphere (and accompanying spaces) in Marseille, such a system further determines "who can take part in the 'common' with regard to what one does, [and] to the time and the space within which one practices their activity" (ibid.: 13). In this conceptual framework, a critical consciousness is approved and engendered from a sensitive political awareness. Such is the case of Tabasco Video's web documentary, when it encourages local citizens to voice their own perspectives and challenge others' opinions regarding the transformation of a site that they have previously used as a common space and its reconversion for cultural purposes.

As I explore in the following two sections, the precise form of Tabasco Video's collaborations with area residents revolve around empowerment rather than education. By this, I mean that Tabasco Video's projects have not solely sought to teach their collaborators *how* to make their own videos, films, or web-based media; rather they have given them the necessary psychological and material tools to consider themselves as capable interlocutors whose opinions on a given subject are not only valid but also nec-

essary. The workshop at the Collège du Vieux-Port provides a recent example of this evolving formula that is characterized by an investment in the perspectives and claims of city inhabitants, but that in this case places them side-by-side and head-to-head with those in positions of institutional and political power.

### **Documenting a Changing Urban Public Sphere**

Like many local non-profit organizations in France, Tabasco Video is an "Association Loi de 1901", a legal status that allows it to receive government subsidies while paying salaries to its members, who are considered as contractual employees. Marseille has a relatively large number of associations and is as such reputed in France as a "ville associative", a status that is frequently identified as a sign of the city's vibrancy in spite of its widespread unemployment and poverty. Marseille's associations, of which Tabasco Video can be considered a representative example, tend to be concentrated in downtown areas that have seen the arrival of artists and other members of a "creative class" from elsewhere in France over the past two decades (Donzel 2014). Tabasco's members, in turn, are for the most part representative of this social class. They are also largely from outside of Marseille, although they were drawn to the city for a variety of reasons and its members are composed of French citizens and one Moroccan.

Tabasco Video's unique resistance practice in turn emerges from the group's goal to create and disseminate ideas through the medium of moving images and voices. Founded in 1999 by its current director, Benoît Ferrier, Tabasco Video initially existed to provide a legal and economic structure for its members' activities, namely the creation of documentary films. As Ferrier recalls, "Documentary film interested me... [and] I liked the idea of working with non-professionals to write and make unconventional films" (October 13, 2014). Unlike the larger part of their local working-class and minority collaborators, the majority of the members of Tabasco Video come from middle-class backgrounds, many of them from outside the city or its immediate region. Ferrier had



arrived in Marseille in the 1990s and settled in the Panier, bordered on its southern side by the Vieux-Port, to the west by the city's foundering commercial port, to the east by the town hall and to the north by the third arrondissement. This placed the district directly between one of the poorest urban zones in Europe and the former Joliette dock areas, then in the process of being converted into a mixed-use office complex under Euroméditerranée's purview. As a primarily working-class neighborhood that had historically served as a point of arrival for generations of immigrants to Marseille, Ferrier found the Panier in the final years of the twentieth century to be a charged and contested urban environment, but also an attractive one in which to live, distinguished as it was by centuries of arriving and departing ethnic groups from around the Mediterranean basin.

Several years later, the Panier has already lived through its first stages of gentrification and growing attention as a tourist attraction. Its once cramped, dirty, and ominous alleyways and narrow streets have been largely cleaned of garbage and malingerers. Local bars have transformed into upscale restaurants, a motorized tourist train plies the cobblestoned alleys with international visitors on board snapping pictures of street scenes, and the popular annual Fête du Panier has had its funding removed by the regional government, in part due to complaints from newer residents that the event attracts undesirable elements who are noisy and leave trash behind. Most recently, with the opening of the MuCEM and the Villa Méditerranée, the Panier has seen its popularity with day-trippers grow, many combining a visit to the area's new institutions with a leisurely afternoon meal at one of the restaurants in the district's central Place de Lenche.

These recent factors have led to Tabasco Video's return to its original concern for the Panier as what Ferrier terms "a small village in the middle of a city." Ferrier explains the contemporary interest of "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" in the following terms: "[The Panier] is an attractive neighborhood, there's history there... And it's true that we've seen it change a lot in eight years. But Marseille has also been transformed" (October 13, 2014). Ferrier goes on to detail

the ideological background to Tabasco's focus on local inhabitants and their perspectives:

Their words should be taken into account. Theirs are perspectives that we don't hear and that are just as legitimate as others'. And that means that they deserve their place in society. I think that this is the political project ... in a sense it belongs to what we call participatory democracy. To help a local territory is to increase one's perspective on the world, which can help advance the debate. (Ibid.)

Tabasco's engagement in the Panier neighborhood began with Ferrier's work on a documentary film about a first wave of gentrification in the mid-1990s and expanded through further activities driven by collaborators, notably Tabasco's series of short documentaries hosted on their "Web TV". What began its life in 2004 on Tabasco Video's website as part of a project entitled "100 Paroles" (100 Words) eventually consisted of a compendium of all of Tabasco's short-form video projects on a freely accessible platform. These range from informational videos to impromptu cooking demonstrations to the type of critical perspectives on the changing neighborhood that would form the basis for "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" several years later.

The culmination of Tabasco's experiment with its "Web TV" was the mini-series "C'est Pas Joli Joli", a spoof of the popular French soap opera "Plus Belle la Vie", which, while based in Marseille, notoriously casts actors from elsewhere in France (remarkable by their accents) and is considered by locals to be a catalogue of Marseillan stereotypes. In Tabasco's series, scripted by members and local residents, inhabitants of the Panier play themselves, sometimes to a tee, through a sequence of vignettes that play off the soap opera's themes while relating them to local realities, including unemployment and gentrification.

The final episodes of "C'est Pas Joli Joli" were completed in 2013, leaving Tabasco Video in search of a new project. With several of its members having participated in a web documentary workshop



earlier that year, this interactive form seemed to be a formally innovative way for the association to prolong their collaborations, while permitting them to remain within a similar critical framework. Another key impetus for the new project was implied in its title. While Tabasco Video's prior work tended to focus on the Panier as a singularly colorful neighborhood to the exclusion of the rest of the city, in "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" they consciously took a step back to consider the place of the neighborhood and its residents in the context of their wider urban context. In the first volume of the web documentary, which will be subsequently described in greater depth, the precise context was the neighboring J4 Esplanade, a former port quay recently transformed into a public space, and both the symbolic and physical center of wider changes afoot in Marseille.

The J4 was originally built in between 1949 and 1951 at the southern extremity of the Port of Marseille, but the era when it came into being was already one of transition. In the 1970s, much of Marseille's port infrastructure was shifted some fifty kilometers west of the city to the town of Fos-sur-Mer, where it remains to this day. The J4 subsequently became one of several embarkation points for ferries plying the Mediterranean Sea between Marseille and ports in Corsica as well as Tunisia and Algeria, which have continued to operate beyond the colonial period. During a time when Marseille enjoyed international notoriety as an overly porous city, a den of organized crime, and the "French Connection" in an international opiates trade, it was possible for locals to easily access the J4, along with the port's other principal quays, for licit or illicit purposes. Since it was no longer extensively used by shipping lines and its storage hangar had been demolished a few years earlier, it came as an inevitability when the J4 was decommissioned in the late 1990s, ceded by the Port to the City of Marseille under the authority of Euroméditerranée, which subsequently decided to participate in the space's redesign in tandem with the construction of the MuCEM and Villa Méditerranée.

Similarly, what ensued was not a clear-cut process of redevelopment, since the decommissioned J4 was an accessible space whose uses were yet to be deter-

mined. In this state, it quickly became home to an itinerant community composed of local residents and those from more distant neighborhoods. Many of the space's new users were remarkable for their illicit practices (smoking hashish, drinking alcohol, drug selling),<sup>6</sup> while others were simply attracted by the presence of an accessible swath of empty space along the sea in an overpopulated city center. During this period the J4 also attracted seasonal swimmers who dove into the sea from its pier, solitary city residents who came there to stroll or sit by themselves, and fishermen, groups of whom arrived before dawn while others preferred the period just after dusk.

Shortly thereafter the J4 was targeted by a landscaping project that sought to smooth some of its rougher edges, while keeping the space open and accessible. This provisional project saw the space attract even more visitors, including school students from the Panier, whose teachers brought them to use the J4 as a playground or football field, conveniently situated near to their cramped neighborhood streets. While the J4's initial redevelopment did not correspond with the imposition of new rules and regulations, this regime of open access changed when the space was gradually closed to the public beginning in late 2011. When it reopened in early 2013, its raked-gravel surface had been denuded of any structures, trees or protective spaces, aside from the edifices around which it was now to be oriented: the MuCEM, the Villa Méditerranée, and above-ground entrances to a five hundred-place underground parking garage.

While the presence of fishermen is generally tolerated on the redeveloped J4, theirs and other former practices such as swimming remain restricted and they report being hassled by security guards and police officers more than in the past. Among other things, an increased security apparatus has meant that those who used the J4 for illicit practices are not as welcome there. Many former users, from fishermen and swimmers to idle drinkers and hashish smokers, have confessed that the increased attention focused on their presence and activities has led them to stay away. Other members of the same categories of users continue to frequent the J4, although their

presence is generally less remarkable among crowds of the site's new tourist users. In choosing the J4 as principal site for the first section of their web documentary, members of Tabasco Video were aware of its significance for Panier residents, but were simultaneously interested in refocusing local attention toward a contested site that has received less attention than other such spaces in downtown Marseille.

### **Producing Local Perspectives**

The first volume of "Et le Panier dans tout ça?," entitled "The J4, the Panier, and Us," consisted of the results of workshops carried out with students in a single class at the Collège du Vieux-Port, located roughly between the Panier's central Place de Lenche and the J4 Esplanade. The workshops took place three times a week over twelve weeks from March through June 2014, excluding school holidays. In an explanatory note provided to school administrators and institutional collaborators (including those at the MuCEM and the Villa Méditerranée), Nicolas Dupont and Rémi Laurichesse, Tabasco's coordinators for the school project described it in the following terms:

This part of the web documentary "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" will be presented in the form of successive video sequences through which the viewer will navigate to follow the students in their journey. We will ask them about their links to the J4 (public space and cultural places), and through the video medium, bring them to reflect on this environment in order to discover their neighborhood in other terms.

The primary method used in this process was video-recorded interviews, carried out by the middle-school students, in large part using questionnaires prepared by them along with Dupont and Laurichesse. The responses to these questionnaires, and the students' observations of parallel dynamics on the J4, provided an illuminating response to their initial perceptions regarding the J4's change for the worse. Students met a range of visitors, both inside and outside the MuCEM and the Villa Méditerranée.

Many of these people corresponded to pre-existent categories that they had expected to encounter: tourists with little interest in the J4's pre-transformation uses or embittered locals with nothing nice to say about the new buildings or renovated space. Others challenged preconceptions: for example, a woman living elsewhere in Marseille who regularly comes to the MuCEM to sit and relax in freely accessible areas on its roof terrace. Still others whom they encountered confirmed some of their own consistent challenges to the space's new rules for appropriate uses: a number of the boys in the class had frequented the J4 during warmer months to go swimming for years, and while they had altered their behavior slightly in the aftermath of the space's transformation, they did still continue to swim there whenever possible as they had in the past. Many of the interactions confirmed the students' particular perspective as members of working-class, ethnic minority communities struggling to make sense of their new social roles in a rapidly changing urban context.

In one of the sections of the first part of "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" two students restaged an encounter where one informs the other that he had been swimming near the MuCEM when he observed a number of police coming toward him. The student describes how he began to climb up the MuCEM's latticed concrete façade, but the policemen allegedly caught him, brought him to the MuCEM security director's office, from which he escaped and ran away, meeting back up with his friends at some distance from the J4. This certainly exaggerated story concluded with his interlocutor responding, "Hey, c'mon, let's just go back to the J4." The first student shrugs his shoulders, dismissing his own vow to stay away, and says: "OK, if you want." This exchange both reveals how he began to climb up the MuCEM's latticed concrete façade, but the policemen allegedly caught him, brought him to the MuCEM security director's office, from which he escaped and ran away, meeting back up with his friends at some distance from the J4. This certainly exaggerated story concluded with his interlocutor responding, "Hey, c'mon, let's just go back to the J4." The first student shrugs his shoulders, dismissing his own vow to stay away, and says: "OK, if you want." This exchange both reveals the students' ongoing engagement with the J4 and exposes their shared perspective that the MuCEM and Villa Méditerranée are primarily viewed as buildings (and either playthings or obstacles) rather than institutions. When they are considered as institutions, their cultural programming is considered secondarily (or not at all) to the increased security regime that accompany their presence on the J4.

While "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" did not appear

to alter students' practices on the J4, it provided a form for them to express their disagreement with the changes that had taken place there, contributing to the development of their critical and political perspectives. In some cases it became obvious to Dupont, Laurichesse, and myself, that students were voicing critiques that they had heard from their family members or older neighborhood residents, but in others (as in the questions of access regarding swimming off the J4) they had developed their own criticisms based on limits increasingly placed on their own experiences. However, during the making of the web documentary, the students were also confronted with social and professional categories they had not previously encountered – the tourists of whom they tended to speak with such disdain, but also professional representatives of the MuCEM and Villa Méditerranée, including architects and curators. While these interactions did not necessarily alter their pre-existing perspectives, in some cases they provided students with an increased context for their criticisms as well as allowing them a forum to express these.

In one exchange with an architect affiliated with the Villa Méditerranée, a structure that has been widely denigrated by locals and outside observers for its odd shape, high cost, and minimal floor-space, one student explained that, to him, the building resembles a giant whistle. The architect initially laughed it off as a child's joke, but was eventually forced to acknowledge that many other locals have failed to grasp the Villa's subtle formal symbolism.

Through the use of footage such as this, the Tabasco Video team, in this case principally Dupont and Laurichesse, were able to use the form of a free and widely-accessible web documentary for which they had received support from local governance structures and the J4's institutions, to transmit a critique by a relatively precarious group of local residents that in many cases was directed toward those same institutions. In this way, Tabasco Video provided the form and means for a determined critique faithful to the perspectives of those who had made their opinions known. At the same time, however, Tabasco Video members made sure to link the questions of

urban spatial transformation to the culture concept, a connection that their collaborators may not have made on their own.

One item on the students' questionnaires wondered whether the changes on the J4 could be considered "cultural or touristic," a distinction that seemed relatively unclear to a number of the students as well as those whom they interrogated. Dupont and Laurichesse's editing made a point by resolving this sequence with the following transparent exchange:

Man: It's both.

Student: Why?

Man: Because culture attracts tourists.

Through the form of the questionnaires, "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" emphasizes the concerns of those posing the questions, by leading students to reflect upon their own attitudes as much as the responses provided to them, including their own occasional genuine confusion at the use of certain concepts or qualifiers. Among these was the meaning of the word "Mediterranean", which many students proved incapable of defining.

One sequence in the web documentary involved a number of students reflecting on a rhetorical question that had been posed to them by a fisher on the J4 in an earlier interview: "What's the point of talking about the 'Mediterranean' in Marseille?"

"We see it every day," the students claimed, alluding to the eponymous Sea. "Do we really need special museums for that?" In the subsequent video, student-interviewers stared off into space, bemused or confused, while their adult interlocutors no less awkwardly attempted to formulate answers equating a "mixing of culture", "port cities", and other standard yet stereotypical characterizations of Mediterranean identity. The last institutional representative to appear on screen in this sequence goes so far as to claim that "Marseille is the cradle of the Mediterranean," a hyperbolic statement at best. Tabasco Video linked these statements to students' own bemused attempts to reflect on the Mediterranean question, revealing that this terminology is to a large extent an

external imposition and not a descriptor that they themselves readily use.

In the final sequence of their section of the web documentary, the students wonder about the repercussions of the J4's transformation on the neighborhood where the majority of them live. Back in the Panier, they meet a variety of interlocutors, some newcomers who claim that the neighborhood's superficial improvement has made them more comfortable there and helped attract tourist euros, while others complain about the unfortunate effects of an increasingly visible gentrification. But this reflection on their neighborhood assumes secondary status to the effects of changes on the J4, which in turn appear as an integral part of the Panier's common space. In this way, the first volume of "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" compares changes in access to the J4 to the effects of similar changes in spatial qualification and control in the Panier, but makes a particular point in linking these to the presence and effects of the MuCEM and Villa Méditerranée.

In an exchange following the completion of the first volume, Nicolas Dupont, one of the conveners of the Collège du Vieux-Port workshop, explained the relation of "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" to increasingly widespread Mediterranean discourse in Marseille:

It's like that everywhere when they try to make a label or a brand... For everything that you make, there needs to be a precise entity, so that's what they're doing in Marseille with Euroméditerranée, making a label for what Marseille is today. But it's oversimplified and the approach of local participatory work is to be closer to the individual, particularities, and singularities. Of course it's different. (October 13, 2014)

With this statement, Dupont directly opposes what he terms the "label" or "brand" that is increasingly applied to Marseille, that of a "Mediterranean" city, with the more localized and less marketable realities closer to the "individual" level, which are less easy to generalize or simplify. This corresponds with Tabasco leader Ferrier's stated interest in "participatory

democracy" and more specifically the opinions of a multitude of local residents, rather than the sound bite version of what he refers to with near-revulsion as the mainstream "media". However, if the Tabasco Video team may appear to be motivated by specific political convictions, they tend to deny that these are their own. Long-time member Élodie Sylvain explains,

I don't let my own political perspectives in the project. What interests me when I interview a neighborhood resident is what he thinks. I can put my perspectives in, but that's just to start a debate. Regarding the changes in the neighborhood, I don't put my perspectives into the work that I do with residents. What interests me is what they have to say. (Ibid.)

Despite Sylvain's insistence on her objectivity, there clearly exists an imperative in considering the opinions of a certain population that in the context of their specific spatial contestations contributes toward the creation of a counter-discourse.

In a subsequent exchange, Ferrier and Dupont explain that they have no particular disagreement with the use of the Mediterranean label in general terms, but feel that Tabasco's project allows for the questioning of the effects of this type of terminology. Their project – both "Et le Panier dans tout ça?" and the works they have created over the years – have the benefit of emphasizing local specificities in the naming of identities and the corresponding granting of spatial access and authority in Marseille, as the following exchange reveals.

Ferrier: Marseille is part of the Mediterranean's history. It belonged to this history... and it still does.

Dupont: But you need to define what Mediterranean culture is.

Ferrier: There's no single culture. There're *many* cultures.

Dupont: Yeah, many cultures. And that makes sense to speak of Mediterranean cultures and to say that Marseille is a Mediterranean city. When

you hear that, you think of a mix of cultures. How does Marseille exist as a French city? It exists in a whole territory, of southern France, a Mediterranean territory. So obviously Marseille is going to be more Mediterranean than other cities... I think that it makes sense to give Marseille this specificity. But it's important not to fall into shortcuts. (Ibid.)

Here, Dupont demonstrates a tendency to resist the reduction of Marseille and Marseillais to a single identity, while accepting the utility of Mediterranean identity as a worthwhile descriptor for a diversity of cultures. This corresponds with the critique of the MuCEM and Villa Méditerranée that emerges in the web documentary. Through the inhabitants' opinions and in what Ferrier acknowledges are the political choices evident in Tabasco members' editing processes, a distinctly more critical and nuanced view of the localized use and effects of the Mediterranean label emerges, which Dupont's pronouncement serves to summarize.

### Conclusion

In its use of the internet as an online platform for the dissemination of the final work, Tabasco Video takes advantage of a form that has been used to a large degree by social movements in recent years, including those originating in a number of Mediterranean countries during anti-austerity protests and the Arab Spring. The difference is that Tabasco's use of the form is primarily designed to provide wide access to the vision of Marseillan urban realities that emerged from the production of the web documentary. It is its dual desire to empower and depict – while avoiding an easy recourse to didactic or ideological discourse – that produces Tabasco Video's digital resistance model, which, in its wide online accessibility, provides a counterpoint and a counter-discourse to Marseille's new cultural institutions' better-funded depictions of the Mediterranean as well as of the city.

The effects of this digital resistance remain unclear. A public presentation of the web documentary at the Villa Méditerranée in October 2015 was

attended by the same institutional representatives from the initial meeting in 2013. Reportedly, all of their feedback was positive, which may initially be puzzling, although Nicolas Dupont has attempted to situate these reactions in the terms of the collaboration.

[In the web documentary,] both institutions are highlighted equally in terms of the link that they create with their surroundings, which lends them an image of proximity that they seek. I also think that the children's perspective allows them to say things that adults wouldn't be able to say. Their direct mode of address is funny and destabilizing at the same time (as in the interview with the Villa's architect). (September 7, 2016)

Dupont further wonders if the first section of the web documentary ultimately served to “introduce subjects with children... [before] investigat[ing] them with adults” in the subsequent sections. However, I argue that the first volume (to which I limited this article's discussion due to my comparative proximity to its process) represents something more singular than the other two: the innovation of “The J4, The Panier and Us” comes from its serious treatment of youthful points of view as worthwhile of engagement. In this regard, whatever the outcome of the project's effects, it has achieved its principal goal in providing a forum for the expression of local views. Furthermore, in empowering local youth more specifically it both asserts the value of their views and transmits a record of their engagement in a form that is widely and permanently accessible. Ultimately, the accessibility of this assertion of local values permits future uses of this and other projects by Tabasco Video and similar organizations elsewhere, including in applications that may extend beyond their initial digital context. In the meantime, the web documentary remains widely viewable in its online form to local residents as well as to others elsewhere who may be interested in pursuing similar projects, but also as evidence of their achievement in contradicting the dominant institutional perspective on local culture.

## Notes

- 1 Thanks are due to members of Tabasco Video who generously allowed me to observe and participate in different stages of their web documentary project, which forms the basis for this article as well as a section of my dissertation: Mohamed Boubidar, Nicolas Dupont, Remi Laurichesse, Benoît Ferrier, Élodie Sylvain, Pauline Duclos, Gerard Brechler. I would also like to thank the guest editors of this issue and two anonymous reviewers, whose comments led me to clarify several important points in this article. Finally, I would like to thank Michel Peraldi for his support of my research in Marseille and Mariangela Ciccarello for the invigorating discussions and encouragement.
- 2 The latter, which at the time described itself as “a structure dedicated to cross-cultural dialogues,” has since undergone a substantial reorganization in its mission and goals that has reoriented its focus away from cultural programming and toward cooperation between regional political entities and civil society representatives.
- 3 A sometimes incomplete English-language version of the first volume of “Et le Panier dans tout ça?” is accessible via the following link: <http://www.lepanierdanstoutca.tabascovideo.com/volume1/>.
- 4 The French notion of a “politique culturelle” (or national cultural politics) provides further background for this institutional support. As Brubaker writes, “French nationhood is constituted by political unity, [yet] it is centrally expressed in the striving for cultural unity” (1992: 1). One of the major characteristics of this French “aesthetic State” (Urfalino 2004) in the post-World War II period was its increasing encouragement of cultural democratization. Beyond the Ministry of Culture’s gradual decentralization in the form of regional cultural centers, the long-term effects of this process include increased funding for local cultural organizations and support for their activities, even if the recent economic downturn has seen a reduction in these.
- 5 My own film about the changing uses of public waterfront space in Marseille, entitled “Promenade”, had its world premiere at the FID-Marseille international film festival in July 2016.
- 6 While permitted in the majority of French municipalities, the public consumption of alcoholic beverages is currently illegal in Marseille. In practice, public drinking laws are unequally respected and enforced. The notion of “illicit” activities is meant to encompass those practices that would attract more attention from authorities if they took place in more central public spaces than the J4, in part due to the identity of their practitioners, physically identifiable by their North African descent.

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