

“RESET INQUIRY!”

P3G – Le Petit Groupe du Grand-Gagnage^[1]

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TO HOLD INQUIRIES THAT HOLD US

WHY CARE ABOUT “inquiry”? And for whom might it matter? We are a small group of young researchers from Belgium from different disciplinary backgrounds in the arts, social and political sciences, philosophy, and architecture. Through this diversity, we share a common interest in science studies and a passion for empiricism as well as pragmatism (that is, authors who deal with practices, who look at experiences without separating them from their consequences). Pragmatism equips us with means of active thought, that is, the means of *engagement* with the situations which we explore and to which we belong as inquirers. Crafting inquiries along with questioning our crafting skills makes sense to us, insofar as it grounds our accounts in situated problems.^[2]

In our view, inquiry has been (too) often practiced as an individual’s quest, belonging to some scientific discipline, directed towards the “outer world” in order to generate knowledge for its own sake. We strive for another stance where inquiry is the collective elaboration of questions relevant to problems arising in a situation. We investigators share those

LE PETIT GROUPE DU GRAND GAGNAGE (P3G) is a team of young academic scholars from Belgium, who mix a wide range of disciplines, such as philosophy, political science, architecture, sociology, and the arts. At the intersection of usual academic structures (faculties, departments, research centers), P3G institutes “horizontal” reading seminars, where the exploration of a text progresses jointly with established learning.

problems at least to some extent. Our contribution rests with our ability to formulate them in a way relevant for those they concern – which does not necessarily imply their resolution.

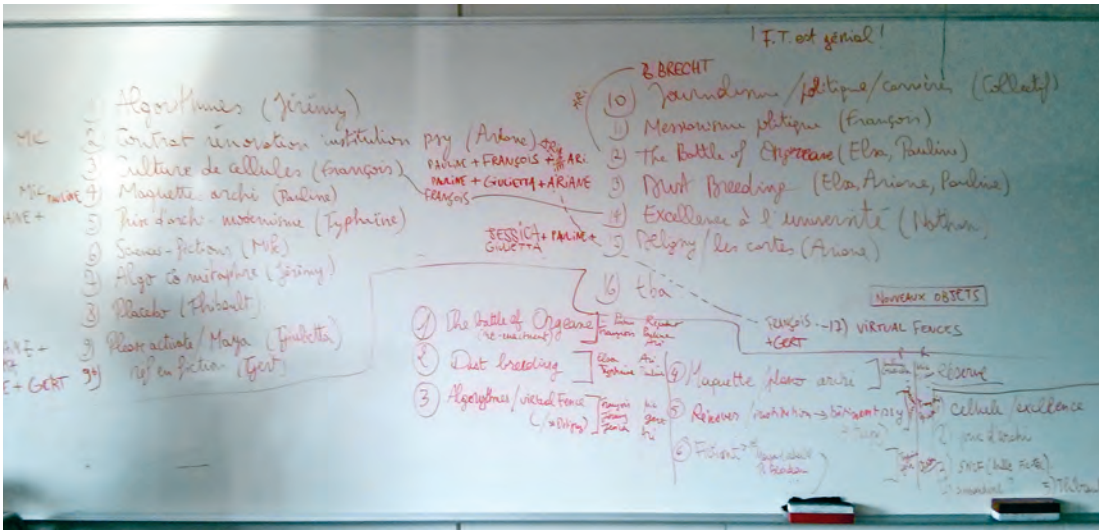
This stance that we share stemmed and resulted from a collective and extensive reading seminar (held in 2013–2014) on Bruno Latour’s *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*. In this book, Latour identifies twelve modes of existence, distinct ways of consisting ontologically. He suggests different modalities through which various beings emerge, maintain themselves, and can deploy plural ontologies all at once. He looks at the trials those beings need to overcome, in order to gain consistency legally, politically,

[1] P3G is a flexible collective that works by crossing readings and inquiries. This article comes from its first seminar, organized by François Thoreau and Ariane d’Hoop together with Amandine Amat, Jérémy Grosman, Giulietta Laki, Pauline Lefebvre, Elsa Maury, and Gert Meyers. All contributed to the writing of this text. P3G warmly thanks Benedikte Zitouni for her comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of the text.

[2] For the reader interested in learning more about the situations we briefly outline in this chapter, see D’Hoop and Thoreau.



1a The seminar presentation in Brussels.



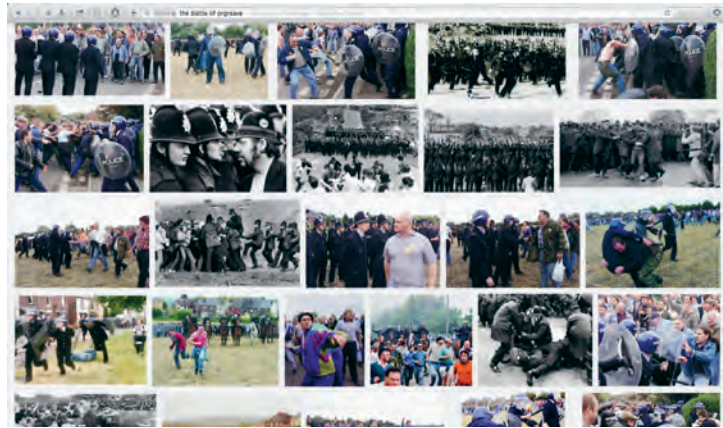
1b Collection of inquiries after a year of the seminar.

religiously – to name but a few of those modes of existence. Chapter after chapter, we inquired into the specificities of each with regard to problematic situations borrowed from our respective fieldwork (see figs. 1a and b).

Our aim was to experiment with the book and put it on trial in our own accounts of situations we cared about. Conversely, we wondered how this

would affect the modes themselves. We wanted to avoid exemplifying the book’s theories by juxtaposing or applying these theories to our fieldwork – a trap into which we were at risk of falling as soon as we were tempted to understand Inquiry as a closed system of thought. Hence, we hereby challenged both Inquiry and our fieldwork in their fragile encounter. No exegesis, only pragmatism!

2 A Google Image search for the “The Battle of Orgreave.” The reenactment pictures are featured as much as the images of the original battle. Google Image, 3 July 2015. Screenshot.



RESISTING THE ENCLOSURE OF THINKING

EACH OF US CARRIES out fieldwork in a broad diversity of situations. Throughout our collective experimentation, we encountered a legal battlefield that opposed experts and an alleged “war criminal,” all of them fighting to use images as evidence to make their case, but not only. We also encountered French winegrowers making interesting experiences while dealing with global warming consequences; architects striving to establish their own stories and who face so many constraints in doing so; a performer who set the reenactment of a historic strike and an epic battle between minors and policemen in 2001; a psychiatric institution moving out of its old premises and considering whether spaces had to be maintained or reinvented; ambiguous uses of scientific texts entangled with fictional narratives and, conversely, scientific references meshed into the plots of novels or theater plays; a European research project, where we witnessed engineers designing the architecture of highly protected perimeters and dramatizing algorithm’s agency: how far could we take them seriously? And so on.

Such problematic situations demand adjusted thinking and cannot easily be reduced to some rough generalizations. Yet, at the end of the *Inquiry*,

the reader finds a table summarizing the different modes of existence. Does that make it a systematic approach to pluralist ontologies? This hypothesis was tested in a recent interview (Latour and Marinda) in which Latour is put on trial by a skeptical student. The latter wonders about the surprisingly round number of identified modes of existence: twelve. What a coincidence! So the *Inquiry* is a system of thought after all. The question matters because the history of ideas is full of such totalizing systems, which reduce the worlds we encounter into a handful of categories, and therefore sterilize the inquiry. All there is left to do is to pile up examples that illustrate the enclosed theory. Systems put the investigator at risk of getting detached from what is at stake – which incidentally often proves to be a fruitful way of getting academic recognition.

We have tried to resist this temptation by putting the book to work. Can a system of thought put the investigator at risk of being wrong with respect to the situation she or he cares for? This question calls for careful attention: to what extent can a “system” be considered as a set of tools which might actually be confronted with objects? The trial rests on its adjustability to the situations at stake. In our view,

there are no ready-made tools fit for everything. Each tool must tend towards adequacy; that is, it must adjust itself so as to fit into the situation, and not the other way round. The use of such tools requires constant reshaping. For instance, Latour characterizes the mode of the political [POL]^[3] with a diagram of drawing “circles” of inclusion and exclusion. It so happened that, in one of our situations, we witnessed powerful dynamics that, in our view, would considerably distort the very figure of a circle. When apprehending the re-enactment of the battle of Orgreave, which set minors against the police back in 1984 in the UK, a collective strength was spreading out that would impoverish, for a short while, any possible form of representation, which the very figure of a circle partly implies (see fig. 2).

So we see no point in resolving this question of the system’s relevance “in general.” To ascertain whether the *Inquiry* is a system of thought or not doesn’t help much. In itself, such a question launches a quest for its essence and henceforth leads to reification of its propositions. Instead, our experiment with the *Inquiry* led us to reformulate the question: from within an empirical situation and its related problems, do the modes help us to better describe the contrasts that are at stake? Does it help us to see which mode of existence takes the upper hand, and at what point it does so? And which ones could be useful in providing better accounts of the situation, in opening up alternatives? We do not know if systems are good or bad, but we do know that words can make a difference.

Let’s think of this architect who is fascinated with the contour lines of a map and who undertakes the modeling of the building-to-be based on them. This has consequences for the ground itself and for the actual execution of the work, but all of that rests on the inner consistency of this architect’s vision – its ability to convince clients and win competitions. When architects construct

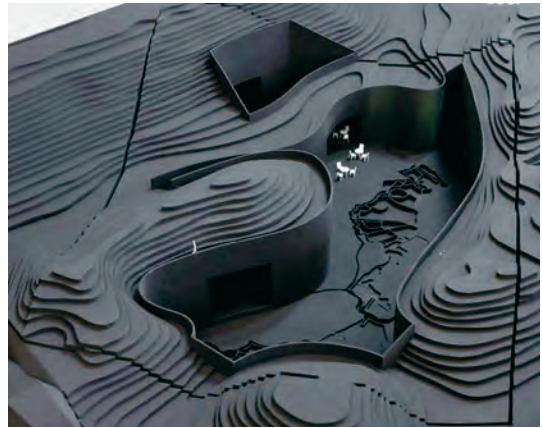
stories about their projects, are they planning an organizational script as in the [ORG] mode or are they taking the exercise of carrying forth a fiction [FIC] seriously? The question is problematic in itself and makes us hesitate. The choice between modes is not entrenched, and choosing to qualify the situation using one mode over another *does matter*. The contour lines themselves are different when deciding on the carving of the soil or when seducing aesthetically up to the point of enabling a decision (see figs. 3a–c).

In other words, we call for a pragmatic use of the modes of existence, answering William James’s question: If it’s true, why should it matter? The modes of existence are not so much about dealing with the truthfulness or falsity of a situation, but instead about trying to qualify it as accurately, as cautiously as possible, which sometimes implies distorting the conceptual tools we use to do so.

SITUATED PRAGMATISMS ALL THE WAY THROUGH...

HENCE, PRAGMATISM is far from being only a philosophical notion. It also refers to a politics of inquiry. Surely, “following the actors” has been a long-standing commitment for Actor-Network Theory up to becoming some sort of caricature (Latour, *On the Modern Cult*). But “actors” experiment all the time with varied gestures or discourses in a situation which is also constantly evolving. In this way, situations themselves hold on to their own experimentations. Attention to significant experiences pervades the concrete pieces of worlds we have investigated. Empirical situations are not given as such. Instead, they show *attempts*: attempts to convince a judge, to design a building, to ecologize the grape-growing processes, etc. Through these attempts, hesitations about and attention to consequences lie foremost in the hands of practitioners.

[3] For a brief explanation of these abbreviations, which refer to the modes explored in the AIME project, see the glossary in this volume (r·M!543–47).



3a-c The trajectory of the curves during the design process: from contour lines on the plan given to the architect to poured concrete walls on the construction site.



Let us take another building as an example, a domestic townhouse that was organized as a small-scale psychiatric institution. Two years ago, this center moved to a brand new building, designed by architects for this therapeutic purpose. One of the problems of this transition was “conviviality”: how to sustain it within the spatial arrangements of the new building? Pragmatism would involve a constant process of taking over the duplication of some everyday care practice (such as daily team debriefings and community meetings), which we could term “retakes,” but also some forms of “relays.” Relays would occur when caregivers bring back their previous lived experience so as to convey, in this new setting, their sense of their own practice to all concerned third parties, such as building workers. Conviviality fails or succeeds through the interplay of such retakes and relays dynamics. Throughout this experimental process, some features were secured, adapted, challenged, or radically transformed. But all raised the deployment of sensitive relations between people and things, and their importance in the pursuit of care through its material configurations. In here, the therapeutic practice [MET] seems to rely on the attachment mode [ATT] (see figs. 4a–f).

While there is a kind of pragmatism at play that belongs to the situation, we can still make a difference through our inquiry without crushing it. It all starts with intuitions. At first, there is this sense that *something matters here*, without being sure what exactly. The modes of existence allow one to embrace a broad diversity of *ways of mattering*. The *Inquiry* throws us investigators into the necessary speculative question of “what if...?” What if this algorithm was *something more* than just technical? What if climate change actually overreached the scientific methods of our societies (along [REF] mode, that of scientific reference)? What if...? Departing from the initial troubles of the situation, the modes allow us to widen the scope, to wonder whether it could be characterized as this or that. They enable us to identify a “plurifold” ontological register of what



4a–f The center for psychiatry, in the original house and in the new building. Important features that have been taken over are the big living room that finds its counterpart in a small one (a–b, c–d), and the kitchen still opens on the dining room (e–f).



could count and how, and, *in the same move*, to operate differences – because we learned with Donna J. Haraway that choosing one viewpoint instead of another can never be a free exercise.

While exploring varied dimensions inherent to a specific situation, some of these appear to be more consistent than others. If *Inquiry* equips us to deploy varieties of intuitions regarding a situation, it also obliges us to *discern* which of them hold to that situation. After a situation has been qualified in a manner or another, it must still be put on trial. Latour sets up a vocabulary to test just that. In order to gain consistency, each being goes through a series of small discontinuities – “hiatuses” – that alter its seemingly continuous trajectory into existence. Along this trajectory emerges an entity which passes through a certain mode of existence when it is qualified by its own specific relation to truth and falsity – its own “conditions of felicity”.^[4]

But each situation carries its own specificities. If entities gain ontological weight through the modes of existence, the modes themselves also gain consistency through adjusting to situated specifications. This actually turns their allusiveness into an interesting feature. However, it implies that a trial must occur in order to use a particular mode, under the tremendous penalty for it to remain an immutable abstraction. Conversely, only through a trial does this mode fit adequately to the situation at stake. Choosing one mode over another does not go without saying; it necessarily results from a process of explicitness. One needs good reasons to assert that what is going on there could be qualified under this or that mode. Only on that condition can some of the modes, those relevant to the situation, emerge through a series of active frictions, problematic encounters. When psychiatric care is at stake, is it a problem of tastes and interests [ATT], or is it about scripting a well-refined organization [ORG]?

[4] Drawing on Austin’s pass/fail test for performative utterances, see Austin.

Starting from situated differences, an inquiry consists in following and intensifying some of them through the relevant modes so as to render them significantly different, which always depends on the problem at hand. For instance, one of our inquiries dealt with a sophisticated surveillance system called “virtual fences.” Ideally, this system consists of cameras, radar, thermal and acoustic sensors, but also of wires, material hardware and software, data fluxes and algorithms. At first we wanted to use the script of technology [ORG] to make a problem out of its conflicting encounter with another script, namely, that of imprisoning felons. Prisons were one of the scenes of application envisioned for this technology. However, the ensuing discussion convinced us that using [ORG] in this sense would be premature because this problematic encounter was not actual enough yet. But above all, using [ORG] would not allow us to account for the singularity of the algorithm, even at the stage of a mere projection. We then focused on the way algorithms classify the images they receive to detect whether they are threatening or not. They incrementally perform a pattern of what a “threat” is or could be. Hence, we tentatively raised the idea that algorithms take “habits” [HAB] while discerning and classifying threatening and innocuous occurrences. But the argument matters because using [HAB] implies that, little by little, algorithms have the ability to secrete their own environment. All of a sudden, algorithms do not appear to be well-refined scripts anymore, but rather overflows engineer’s vision by its own technical capabilities (as enacted in fig. 5).

The way of crossing different modes also matters for the inquiry. For instance, there is a very porous boundary between what belongs to the realm of scientific knowledge (reference) [REF] and what belongs to the realm of fiction [FIC]. In their incessant intertwining, the beings of the reference and

those of the fiction never cease to find new ways of interacting, new modalities of encountering. In doing so, it may even turn out that their respective boundaries actually become barely distinguishable from one another. This is what we witnessed, for example, when inscriptions about knowledge in novels or in theater plays interrupt or intensify the vibrant attention of the reader. On the contrary, in scientific texts, one could wonder what space is devoted to touching sentences that might move the reader (see fig. 6).

The very configuration of how one mode of existence gets to bump into others affects our grasp on it.

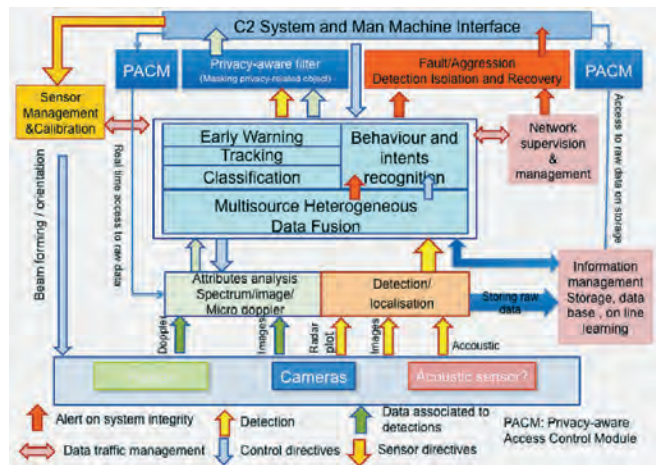
... OUR COLLECTIVE EXPERIMENTATION WITH FRAGILE BEINGS

SO PRAGMATISM IS AT STAKE. Any situation unfolds as a series of experiments and attempts. Any inquiry follows a speculative process – “what if...?” – before it may grant significance to a mode along the lines of empirical differences. But it is also crafted in a configuration that is collective and shared. *Collective* because, in our experimentation, the very use of the modes was constantly rendered problematic. *Quite* often, when we wanted to stick to a mode which we considered appropriate to speak well of a certain fieldwork, we would have to defend its (always contestable) relatedness to that situation. It was through the exchanges about our situations that the modes were tested, that their understanding was collectively fed and refined. Moreover, the configuration was also *shared*, because connecting a situation to one particular mode of existence enables connections to other inquiries that also set up, in the end, a more accurate image of this mode.^[5]

For instance, in her film *Dust Breeding*, Sarah Vanagt follows the trial of Radovan Karadžić at

[5] This emphasizes the role of collecting, sharing, and browsing through diverse inquiry experiences, as the digital counterpart of Latour’s book, even though the Internet can never afford the friendship we developed throughout the seminar.

- 5 The envisioned system architecture for P5 virtual fence system. At its heart lies the “behavior and intents recognition” algorithm, which processes “multisource heterogeneous data fusion.” Printscreen from the P5 project (Privacy Preserving Perimeter Protection Project).



To Mr. Manders, the cuffs, the stethoscope, and the Doppler with its strange sounds that shift in tune with every heartbeat are pretty impressive technologies. He observes the work of the technician as attentively as I do. If doctors need the outcomes of all this work and equipment in order to know about his disease, Mr. Manders can be proud of himself. Or so he jokes. He needs no equipment at all to have access to his leg arteries. He can feel them.

The technician, however, sees nothing special in Mr. Manders's ability to feel what she measures. Complaints simply correlate with a drop in pressure because they are both signs of a single disease, hidden deep inside the body: he feels it, she measures it. Inside the body the one causes the other. Thus, their correlation is self-evident. Or is it? Complaints and pressure drop often coincide, but not always. Here's a second scene.

vative force to the novel organization of the French health care system at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This generated the birth of the clinic. It was with the specific hospital organization that emerged at that time that it became possible and reasonable to open up corpses in order to find disease inside them. Speaking about the new hospital organization, Foucault remarks: "It so happened that it was on the basis of this tertiary spatialization that the whole of medical experience was overturned and defined for its most concrete perceptions, new dimensions, and a new foundation" (1973, 16). Medical knowledge,

medical perception itself, is as social in its origins as in its effects. And it is material as well: a discourse that structures buildings, instruments, gestures. That differentiates between normal and pathological organisms and thus mediates between the coherence of the body and the order of society.

Associations and Multiplication

The idea that medicine is not just a personal affair between a doctor and a patient has never left the literature since. It has become commonplace, something we all know, a truism: that medicine is as social

- 6 Ethnographical stories that overlay theoretical narratives: Annemarie Mol. *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2003. Print.

the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. She used video sequences of the trial, and she also recorded herself rubbing the surfaces of the furniture in the court. She made an artistic inquiry about the ways images can be used as proofs. Both the movie's and the trial's complexities are better grasped by looking at the several modes of existence. Some pictures, means of evidence [REF], must be put on trial, in the law sequence in order to become means of evidence [LAW]. Karadžić made a questioning use of fiction [DC·FIC] to demonstrate that these pictures would not prove anything. Sarah Vanagt, the artist and filmmaker, outlines how "we don't see anything" by rubbing and printing tracks from the material surfaces of the juridical institution (tables, chairs, etc.). But at the same time, she used the fiction mode [FIC] to question and disturb Karadžić's use of images (see figs. 7a–d).

The intelligence of this complex entanglement benefits from drawing on strains from other inquiries. The problem of pictures as proof in courts gets entangled with works on mediations in law (Claverie), on imagery and scientific objectivity (Daston and Galison), on revisionist rhetorics (Danblon and Nicolas), and even on archival movies about genocides (Didi-Huberman). All these works form knots around the modes [LAW], [FIC], or [REF], populate and ramify them.

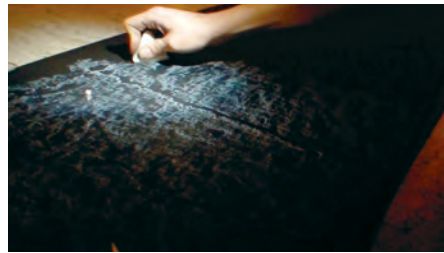
Finally, experimenting with modes not only sheds light on unsuspected dimensions of a situation; it also sharpens the particular experiences that are going on there. It is a matter of "presencing," that is, putting different beings into presence while sensing whether (and how) this presence affects the situation or not. It requires very close attention to the multiple trials that entities endure. According to a winemaker from Alsace, France, the secret of a good wine is a fine and subtle balance between sugar and acidity. In his experience, over the last years climate change has affected this balance towards too much sweetness (see figs. 8a and b). To address

this problem, the wine estate decided to change over to biodynamic viticulture. It underwent a complete transformation of wine making and tasting, engaging in a determined *commerce* with forceful yet invisible beings [MET]. This turnaround could not take any shortcuts – like ready-made "climate change" models and projections for local small businesses do – because it involves experiments, doubt, and audacity through re-learning the practice of tasting wine. As difficult as this process might have been for the winegrowers, one needs the "beings of metamorphosis" to account properly for this re-conversion (where cynical economic or marketing arguments could so easily prevail).

Putting beings into presence echoes the process which Souriau calls "instauration." His philosophical take on the fragile emergence of an artwork – here, an upcoming situation as much as an investigative account – invites one to consider each instauration of a being as a tentative trajectory. The instauration is an experience which starts from a questioning situation, calling the person involved to feel that she or he is concerned by it, involving her or him in the *oeuvre-à-faire* throughout successive existential instances on its path to emergence. It compels us to feel all the uncertainties and the risks of failure all the way through. Our inquiries do not try to deal with strong entities in isolation, but instead they touch upon fragile beings-in-the-making, beings that maintain themselves through their multiple attachments to others, to borrow Hennion's words. Souriau's instauration is a vibrant call for discerning these emergent beings, as they come into existence in concrete situations. But this fragile birth is constantly exposed to abrupt abortion if the investigator remains deaf to the sacrifices and partiality that her or his choices entail.



7a-d Rubbing and printing tracks from the material surfaces of the courtroom by the artist Sarah Vanagt in her film *Dust Breeding*. *Dust Breeding*. Dir. Sarah Vanagt. Balthasar Production, 2013. Film stills.





8a Vines in Alsace. The Vosges Mountains shape the micro-climate of this region. But with climate change the wind now tends to come from the opposite direction, and pushes clouds against the mountains. Today, the climate is more unpredictable, and the increased number of sunny days has led to wines that are too sweet.

8b Bunches of Pinot Gris grapes with noble rot. Grapes with noble rot are traditionally picked during late harvests but these are now increasingly precocious. And noble rot is getting scarcer because of lack of moisture.

RESET INQUIRIES!

HOW MIGHT all of that contribute to resetting inquiries? *Inquiry* provides us with a politics of qualifying situations. It forces us to operate differences, to enact them, while staying as close as possible to the stakes encountered in our fieldwork. While we seek to open up “plurifold” contrasts, these make the inquiry tentative, fragile, open to contestation. By rubbing modes of existence with situations through a coconstitutive trial, and doing it collectively, inquiry includes friction all along the way.

It matters because inquiry in this stance opens up a shareable space. Without the privileged positions of the nowhere or everywhere viewpoints, we need to come to terms with our situations from the middle. In this case, our perspective is by definition limited, we see what we see from where we stand, but our descriptions gain some steepness and sharpness. Using the modes of existence, all entities are not alike. Heterogeneity is not a slogan but denotes out actual ontological divergences. Equivalence or comparison may of course occur, but then it is an event that articulates entities successfully. It goes the same way with inquiry. The pieces of knowledge we produced are singular, different from the ones produced by and through the situation. Differences mark our potential relevance to the situation and its stakes. There we are, filled with the hope that inquiries open up new prospects for alliances with those who are struggling to make their world a more livable place.

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