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**« An Art-Based, Collective and Dialogic Ethnographic method –  
Unveiling corporate restructuring practices »**

*by ABRIR<sup>1</sup>*

**Introduction: Restructuring practices, a complex phenomenon requiring innovative research designs**

Restructuring<sup>2</sup> practices belong to today's organizational life. Even if the phenomenon is not new (Didry, Jobert, 2010), it significantly evolved over time, both in terms of motives and in terms of expressions, from major events to permanent practices, from crisis to competitiveness restructurings, from reactive to more proactive decisions, from highly visible to more silent decisions. The current context of economic crisis has strengthened the frequency, magnitude and stakes —social, political, economic — of restructuring practices. Those practices are now considered as being common and quite universal, even if, in some aspects, they still depend on the context where they take place. At the same time, they appear to be very complex and painful for organizations and territories, for those who suffer their consequences, for those who take decisions, for those who implement them, and even for those who « survive » (Beaujolin, Schmidt, 2012). Much debated in popular medias, restructuring issues have been also inspiring scholars from various fields (sociology, economics, management, law...) for now three decades. But at the same time, academic literature, especially in management, has hardly contributed in understanding the deep complexity and the multiple hidden dimensions of restructuring situations. Most of the empirical studies focused on trying to typify the causes (or motives) and the effects of restructuring decisions. In a recent article, Datta et al. (2010) suggest, in an integrative framework, a synoptic view and critical review of 91 published studies devoted to employee downsizing: on the one hand, they distinguish environmental and organizational factors as possible causes of downsizing and, on the other hand, they distinguish individual and organizational outcomes. Based on this literature review, mostly made of quantitative

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<sup>2</sup> Our definition of restructuring: any re-organizing process which affects activities, work organization, methods, capital, skills and which has an impact on (or poses a threat to) employment, on a quantitative or qualitative level.

empirical studies, the authors conclude that restructuring research would critically need more sophisticated research designs: less static, more longitudinal, more real-time, looking for nonlinear effects, incorporating multiple dimensions and an international frame (Datta et al., 2010). We suggest ethnographic studies could open the « black box » of restructuring issues, thus complementing the inevitably over-simplified models testing the explanatory relationships between a set of variables or constructs. Such studies could help grasping hidden but major aspects of restructurings such as emotions, identities, temporal dimensions and lived experiences. Traditional ethnographic method is scarcely chosen by scholars analyzing restructuring issues, mainly for reasons related to practical access to fieldwork: restructuring is a hot issue, and it remains difficult to access information and informants in a restructuring organization. In order to overcome these issues, we developed a specific research method that we experimented during year 2011. This method is based on three main features.

*First*, we suggest investigate restructuring issues through artworks. As Becker argues, « there is no best way to tell a story [about society] » (Becker, 2007), and art pieces, among others, constitute a precious source of information about restructuring issues. Arts have since long been considered in organizational science (Bakhtin, 1981; Strati, 2000, Barry, Meiseik, 2010; Hatch, 2002; Guillet de Monthoux, 2000, 2004; Clegg, 2005), for introducing expression, polyphony and non-verbal representations in the field. After a first phase where arts counterbalanced scientific rationality with emotions and aesthetic experience, the present period sees the dialogue with arts, creativity and expression as a central tool for investigating the social (Foreman, Thatchenkery, 1996; Sliwa, Cairns, 2007). The use of artworks for research has proved to be useful in terms of ethnographic investigation (Harris, 2008), presentational knowing (Seeley, 2011) or the value of emotions in management (Keremane McKay, 2011). An artwork, by nature, preserves the living side of situations: through art as a mediating artifact, the researcher can thus have access to the « hot side » of restructuring situations. Furthermore, as usually admitted (Berthoin-Antal *et al.*, 2011; Strati, 2000), art enables to keep tracks of invisible, subtle, ephemeral signals, giving the researcher access to more complex and hidden dimensions of phenomena. Besides, researchers face a paradoxical issue when analyzing restructuring: it seems to be a universal phenomenon but each case remains a unique lived experience. By dealing with the uniqueness of situations in a universal language, art allows the researcher to identify both recurrences and contingencies. Furthermore, the interest of artists for contemporary social issues is an expanding field of artwork production: numerous movies and documentaries — but also theater plays, novels, poems, songs, photographs, comics strips...— have been inspired by corporate restructuring

issues. For all those reasons, it seems interesting to complement the study of real cases by the study of artworks telling the cases in their own way (Barone, Eisner, 2012; Geiger, Antonacopoulou, 2009; Vicker, 2010; Phillips, 1995; Patient, Lawrence, Maitlis, 2003).

*Second*, as restructurings are multi-actor situations and multi-dimensional phenomena, research on restructurings could benefit from a heterogeneous and multi-disciplinary group of actors as a community of inquirers (Pierce, 1955), confronting their points of view and reflecting together about the complexity and the heterogeneity of restructuring phenomena in a dialogical process of investigation.

*Third*, combining in the same research design a heterogeneous group of actors and a series of artworks about restructurings can lead to innovative research methods: collective comments about artworks and indirect analysis of restructuring, reflexive analysis of actors' involvement, comments and discussions used as data, what we propose here as a new form of organizational ethnographic research.

The ethnographic dimension of our research will rely on the fact that artworks can be considered as ethnographic narratives of the field they depict (Becker, 2007). Art helps the researcher entering the deep meaning of ethnographic approach, defined by Mills and Ratcliffe (2012) as “a commitment to an open-ended, iterative, non-prescriptive vision for social research, where the researcher is encouraged to acknowledge the complexity and unpredictability of the research encounter”. Furthermore, art brings the reflective effect of interpretation into the observation process itself, what intensifies and makes visible the subjective dimension of ethnographic approach. This has been qualified a “room with a view” – a ‘subjective take’ on the subject to study (Cunliffe 2010), meaning that the researcher inevitably brings in his or her assumptions, cultural backgrounds and community traditions, producing “forms of inquiry and writing that produce descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about” (Denzin, 1997, quoted by Cunliffe 2010). This is precisely what we strive at introducing into the field of management research: taking into account not only the restructuring processes and experiences, but also and simultaneously the researchers' experience, because they belong to the same common grounds which nurture and justify restructuring. In so doing, we should unveil some of the most hidden aspects and mindsets underlying the phenomena. We will tell our investigation on how we as researchers proceeded in order to grasp our object – restructuring – through the investigation and commenting of artworks. By doing this, we personally came across conflicting arguments and complex interconnected analysis and emotions, discovering within our own process of inquiry

key aspects of the mindsets and taken-for-granted sub-grounds of the restructuring phenomena. To account for this research method, we draw on the pragmatist-inspired concept of situation (Follett, 1924; Dewey, 1938), on the Dialogical Mediated Inquiry framework (Lorino et al, 2011) and on arts as a way to introduce expression, polyphony and non-verbal representations in the field (Dewey, 1934; Strati, 1996; Guillet de Monthoux, 2000, Höpfl et Linstead 2000). This paper is based on three main different types of materials: artworks that were displayed and discussed during the project; the fully-recorded (sound and video) content of five 2-day workshops gathering all the participants of the project; and 22 interviews that were performed after the final event of the project with participants.

In the following sections, we develop what we call an **Art-Based, Collective and Dialogic Ethnographic** method (1.), both in its deliberate choices (1.1.) and its emergent dimensions (1.2.). Then we describe the outputs of the method (2.), in terms of creating new knowledge about restructuring issues (2.1.), but also in terms of fostering new ways of teaching, thinking or practicing restructurings (2.2.). In the final section, we discuss the basic principles of the method as well as its outcomes, especially in terms of creating “vicarious experiential knowledge” (3.).

## **1. The ABCDE method: basic principles and characteristics**

The ABCDE method was developed within a European research project that took place between January 2011 and April 2012. The project was entitled “Art & Restructuring” and aimed at providing new insights on restructuring issues, promoting discussions and reflections among experts based on artworks. The organizing team initially designed the project as a series of experts’ seminars debating about restructuring issues through art works. Some aspects of the design were deliberately pre-established, including but not limited to the use of arts, the palette of actors, the topics to be explored and the conversational form. By only fixing these parameters, they rendered the design flexible. Such flexibility enabled for improvisation, randomness, new conversational forms and novel cooperative research practices to emerge through this collective ethnographic process. In this section we will provide an insight into this research method. First, we will describe the pre-established, deliberate aspects: a flexible research design, the building of a heterogeneous group of inquirers, investigation of the research object through arts, and the diversity of conversational devices. Second, we will describe what aspects of this research method were emergent, in terms of construction of a collective and sensemaking, based on reflexivity and dialogism.

## 1.1. Deliberate aspects of the research design: implementing the ABCDE method

• *Some fixed methodological parameters for a flexible research design* — In the pre-design of the project, some parameters were fixed by the organizing team as landmarks to allow a minimal joint agreement and permit the spatial and temporal organization of the project. The milestones of the project were defined around three main points:

1. A general purpose: to enrich the knowledge about restructurings by mobilizing and questioning artworks in three ways: art as a material about restructurings; art as a representation of restructurings; art as a device in restructurings processes.
2. Two more precise and operational objectives: the organization of a final event, open to a large and eclectic public, and aiming at communicating and exchanging around the purpose and the results of the project; the development of an educational tool based on the productions of the project (artworks and their analysis, academic references about art and restructurings, etc.);
3. A thematic framework: the project was structured into five two-days seminars. Each seminar was devoted to one specific topic on restructuring. The first seminar took place in Paris in January 2011 and addressed the theme of decision, context and reactions of restructurings. The second seminar, also in Paris in May 2011, addressed the questions of negotiation and details of implementation. The third seminar took place in London in September 2011 and dealt with diversity issues (age factors, gender, nationality). The fourth seminar, again in Paris in October 2011, treated restructuring over time (temporalities, long term effects). Finally, the fifth seminar took place in Liège in December 2011 and dealt with space and territorial dimensions of restructurings.

Although the topics were predefined in advance, the type of artworks to be presented and the way to lead the discussions turned out to be very open and completely free. The organizing team had initially identified some relevant artistic works before starting the first seminar, but we did not limited to this material or intended to be exhaustive in the collection. In contrast, prior to the seminars, the research teams hosting the event met an average of four times to discuss about the content and the relevance of the material, and the ways to lead the discussions. We thus privileged and encouraged collective choice, discussions between the research teams, network relationships and opportunities.

• ***A heterogeneous community of inquirers*** — A first choice was made to form a community of inquiry displaying a high degree of heterogeneity (Bakhtin, 1981) in both the actors and the topics to be explored. The collaboration between artists, researchers and practitioners is likely to support the co-construction of a wider range of issues and visions, making more room to social polyphony and heterogeneity, giving voice to groups, mental perceptions or feelings that are not heard, and sometimes motivating researchers to address these in the perspective of building a better sustainable society (Berthoin-Anthal *et al.*, 2011). We planned to have three comparable teams per country: Great Britain, France, and Belgium. The teams were made up of nine people in average, including two general managers or HR directors, two union leaders, two researchers, one expert and two artists. We focused on recruiting heterogeneous actors from different countries, without really knowing or defining the expected traits, experience, age, gender and competences of the participants.

Each participant had their own view on artworks/organizational restructuring and spoke the specific language of their professional and cultural background. In addition, no one had ever worked within such a community, even if we were aware that some of the members belong to the same network and have already worked together. Everyone needed to confront to everyone's otherness, since each participant was a type of partial "terra incognita" to each other. As a result, the original situation faced by this group of actors is indeterminate, puzzling and unpredictable since it disturbs the habitual course of action and thought of each participant. At first, the idea was that all the participants per country had to be involved in every seminar during the total project implementation time of 18 months. However, due to unavailability mostly from managers and union leaders, and due to the fact that some participants and artistic work were more pertinent (depending on the theme of the seminar), an approach core-guest participant was taken. Therefore, we only asked for core participants to attend during the whole duration of the project and for the guests to intervene in the relevant seminar. Thus, for each seminar we gathered in average 30 participants from whom sixty percents were core and the remaining were guest participants.

• ***Artworks as mediating artifacts to grasp our research topic*** — The main purpose of our project was to study restructuring through artworks telling the story of restructuring cases, either real or fictitious. This choice was based on different reasons: art can provide a renewed access to data; art can also help to deal with methodological questions like generalizing from particular cases, building a transversal community of researchers, or opening a dialogical research process. As already mentioned, the selection of artworks we discussed during the seminars was opened to suggestions and improved throughout the project. The general idea

was to consider different art forms as soon as they were dealing with restructuring situation in a way or another. The whole range, from realism to fiction and metaphor, was explored. Some of the artworks were describing real cases; some were documented fictions about the issue; others were fables dealing with the theme in a metaphorical way. Some artists investigated how restructuring situation in the industry can provide material for an artwork or how they could intervene within a restructuring process. We also studied artwork produced with and for the workers losing their jobs. Last but not least, we ourselves created artwork (photographs, comics, poems), expressing our feelings and understanding while investigating the issue. We focused mainly on movies, but we also encountered photography, theatre, music and songs, poetry, installations, conceptual art, drawings, comics. All the artworks included in our project are listed in *Appendix 1*.

We experienced artworks in various formats: from full-length projections and/or discussions around excerpts, to interactive experiences with actors (a fake SDF hailing the group, a fake consultant explaining his methods for chasing fallacious work). We also went through creative moments where the group became the author of photographs, re-structuring concepts, poems or performances. During a “comic-strip” workshop, all the inquirers in small groups were asked to produce a one-page metaphorical comic about restructuring, and to present and discuss it with others.

• ***A diversity of conversational devices*** — One of the objectives of the research project was to produce new knowledge about restructuring based on the exchanges that took place during the seminars. Therefore, the seminars were entirely recorded with tape and video cameras. These records were then transcribed into text. This full-length choice was made since there was not assumption about when things would happen. The matter was not only to collect data about individual representations and knowledge, but also to record the making of the group of inquirers, their representations, dialogues, and exchanges. Thus, particular attention was given to the conversational devices in place along the research project. The variety of forms in the conversational devices implemented for each seminar and experienced by the community of inquirers was the result of a dual approach. On the one hand, different objectives were assigned to both the exchanges as well as to each seminar: as a result, it was necessary to align the conversational devices with those objectives. On the other hand, the conversational devices evolved over time. New forms of interaction were incorporated progressively, taking into account the lessons learned from each seminar and the feedback of the participants who were asked to complete a quality survey at the end of each seminar.

A first objective was to put in place conversational forms and means that facilitated the dialogue of the community of inquirers. To do so, special attention was given to the organization of the physical space, the facilities and the equipment. Regarding the physical space, the seminars took place in comfortable and spacious places that allowed discussions in large groups. We used cinema and theaters for the display of movies and theater productions, we rented a boat to explore the territory, etc. We also took care of creating more intimate spaces to work in small groups, breaks in the agenda, leaving “spaces” to foster informal interactions and interpersonal connections. Microphones and interpreting services (French-English) were available to all the participants. Moreover, we paid attention to diversify the type of artistic work to be analyzed during the seminars, as well as to keep a loose frame when leading the discussions. Hence, a variety of films, photos and performances were presented in each seminar, often without an interpretative grid, giving freedom to participants to express their own opinion, analysis and representations. This way of working we thought from the start was necessary to avoid a narrow frame, or too a directive an interaction was also identified as insufficient to feed certain dimensions of the project. But the risk was that some participants could feel it destabilizing and unsettling when they did not really see “*where it would lead*”.

As a result, a second objective aiming at directing, (re) framing slightly the debates and exchanges around the original project objectives was integrated. The second seminar was an opportunity to experience a conversational device to achieve this goal. In this seminar, we offered to each participant a set of three cards. The set of cards was introduced as a reminder and as an object of intervention in the exchanges. Each of the three cards represented one of the three dimensions of the project (Art as material, Art as representation, Art as device).



***Fig 1. The set of cards aiming at reframing the discussions***

After the display of the artistic work, we encouraged participants to « play the game » and to use these cards as framing of their interventions during the debates and round tables. This card set was also designed as a souvenir for the participants (plastic cards, sophisticated design and original), and constituted the first material production that invited members to work on the production of shared representations. Even if those cards were not systematically used during the following seminars, we found that their introduction allowed us to evolve in both the way of conceiving and experiencing the exchanges.

Over time, a third objective was gradually formalized. We moved one step further by designing conversational devices that involved and engaged participants more strongly. We sought for more active participation of group members in order to give rise to exchange emerging from the collective work. During the second seminar, the “conversational simulation table” was introduced and used in an afternoon session. The device enables group discussion based on the principle: one can choose whom to listen to, one cannot choose whom to address.



*Fig. 2. The conversational simulation table*

The fourth seminar was an opportunity to propose a workshop about "comic strip" in which participants were invited to speak metaphorically as individual and as a group around their representation of restructuring by completing and illustrating the words: "Restructuring is like...".



**Fig. 3. Two comics realized by the participants (the first redesigned by young illustrators) and a picture the comic strip workshop (seminar 4)**

Another example is the fifth seminar in Liège, which was designed specifically around this type of engaging conversational devices putting participants in the role of "actors in a situation". These opportunities for collective production (experiencing a virtual restructuring, a photo album....) or experimenting situations such as the hailing of the group by a homeless man who turned out to be an actor during the visit of Liège, engaged participants through provocation, and helped to stimulate the discussion and the exchanges focusing on a shared experience.



**Fig. 4. Seminar 5 in Liège: an actor, playing the role of a homeless, is hailing the group**

The dimensions of the methodological conversational devices, both in terms of variety and of evolution throughout the project, are essential to analyze the emergent phenomena that can be identified at the conclusion of this project.

### **1.2 Emergent design: the induced effects of the method**

• *Gradually building a community* — The main challenge to such a heterogeneous group of inquirers, placed in a loosely framed situation, facing ambiguous and unusual objects, lied in the ability of its members to interact easily in order to collectively create and share new knowledge about restructuring. Because the same object situated within distinct interpretative frames is just not the “same” anymore (Esquenazi, 2009), the risk was to have several individuals or sub-groups unable (or unwilling) to talk to each other. However, what we observed is that our method, based on artworks, heterogeneity, loosely framed seminars and multiple conversational devices gradually succeeded in transforming a collection of individualities into a community of inquirers. It could be hypothesized that our methodological device enabled to convert a plurality of “interpretative communities” (Becker, 2007), based on several personal experiences, but also professional and cultural frames of interpretation (HR managers, scholars in sociology or in management, artists, trade unionists), into a single interpretative community.

During the first two seminars, the difficulty to share one’s analysis with the other members of the team was more than obvious. First, the novelty and uneasiness of the task (to express oneself in front of an artwork, and especially a fictional one) tended to limit discussions both quantitatively and qualitatively, despite the first conversational devices that had been set up. Second, the main tendency observed then was to judge the “truth” or “wrongness” of the artistic representation, according to one’s past experience and frame of interpretation. This common tendency to try and read social phenomenon through a seemingly transparent artwork revealed the difficulty encountered by all participants to position themselves between two impasses: the naïve gaze (forgetting the transformative nature of artworks), or the pure esthetic gaze (leaving aside that art was mobilized as a tool to question restructuring). Third, some members also felt uncomfortable during these first moments because of the difficulty to situate participants’ backgrounds and understand social positions from which they expressed themselves:

*“Was there any discussion on the point of view from which everyone looks at restructuring, especially in ideological terms? This is necessary to identify wherefrom each of us is talking around the table...”* (NH, artist)



***Fig. 5. Seminar 4 in Paris... gradually building a community***

These three limitations to easy and constructive conversation were gradually avoided. Progressively transformed by the words and gazes of others, stimulated by more and more involving conversational devices, we observed in the next seminars a growing ability of the team members to interact around the artworks on a unified basis. This evolution translated into the progressive development of a common language, both on restructuring and art, into the setting up of a shared way of approaching artworks (openness to its ambiguous, plural and sometimes paradoxical meanings, detachment of the sole question of their “realism”, growing attention to esthetic questions), into more and more intertextuality (references to other artworks previously presented) within debates, etc. Finally, if interpretations were varied and sometimes even conflicting, the multiple interpretative communities facing difficulties to talk to each other gave birth to a (more or less) unified single interpretative community of inquirers able to grasp a same object with a same approach and create meanings out of their differences.

Another symptom of the gradual building of such a unified community of inquirers was the increasing active role members played during seminars. This tendency is both reflected in the risks taken in the organization of seminars, and in the more and more deliberate way participants seized artworks, situations and conversations. Whereas the first seminar cautiously placed everyone into a rather passive stand (film projection, then analysis), the next ones were more and more designed in order to make everyone participate actively. At the same time, we also observed more and more individual creative initiatives inspired by, or in response to, the works, people or situations encountered: poetry writing and reading in the course of action, theatrical improvisation in response to an actor’s monologue, re-

appropriation of creative instructions during role playing... This evolution towards a more active role required of, and played by, team members, both cause and consequence of community building, reached its peak during the last seminar in which we documented the restructured region of Liege with our own photographic work, wandering in an area where fiction and reality constantly flirted with each other.

Globally, classical one-to-one interactions with artworks and artists gave rapidly way to a more direct, open and shared experience of the art-restructuring theme. This experiential and collective turn not only allowed to build a unified community of inquirers, but also progressively created a kind of “learning by doing” ethos. As several participants mentioned, the methodological device allowed them to experience what they were only supposed to observe. For instance, a participant explained that the richness of discussions during coffee breaks and informal interactions between presentations made her realize how much work is done, in the restructuring process, outside official meetings and official watchwords. Another example is that of a participant who experienced exclusion for the first time during the “conversational simulation table” device, and so became aware of this however current feeling of being rejected out of a collective discussion or negotiation.

• ***Enabling reflexivity and dialogism*** — *Reflexivity* was obviously stated in the method by the permanent filming of the debates. There was no turn taking, nor « slots » given to registered speakers. The conversations went on spontaneously and were all filmed and archived. This situation installed a discreet but real feeling of reflexivity as a core part of the method. The confrontation with artwork produced another kind of reflexivity:

*« Viewing films acts as a mirroring effect, it is not exactly the same feeling as when viewing a documentary since it is a lot more emotional ».* (AL, artist)

This mirroring effect based on emotional experience fostered the participants’ reflection, so that the project had reflective effects of the participants’ lives and practices. As one of them states:

*“Researchers have changed, have reinstated a position, ... they have made their deep conviction and their own autonomy grow. For example, F. has not modified his ideas but the open-minded spirit has strengthened his intuition. He both managed to gain and lose confidence. Autonomy, discovery, freedom, self-challenging attitude ... All moved towards themselves.”* (JPB, unionist)

The method is in itself a reflection on how to organize a research project. As no pattern of such a heterogeneous research group confronting their object through artworks was available, we had to turn to ourselves and our expectations and intuitions. By doing so, we very soon discovered we all had different agendas in the project. Each of us had to consequently

investigate his own definition of what “another” research could be and how to implement it. In order to take into account the other’s conception of research, each member had to shift his conceptions and reflect on his practice as a researcher, an expert or an artist.

*“It is a kind of weird objet: at the beginning we wonder what interest there is in this newness, we wonder where we are...”* (HD, HR manager)

The preparation of the seminars was also reflexive: deciding how to build the program, what artwork to study, what framing of the discussion and even what time schedule to choose were not decided in advance or relying on clear principles. These decisions were taken collectively by reflecting on the relevance of our previous decisions. For example, the decision of designing a set of cards expressing the three questions about the role of art was made after the first seminar, to try to refocus the rather disordered discussions we experienced. By doing so, we had to re-write the questions themselves in a shorter and clearer manner.

Reflecting on how to better focus the debates led to better defining the issues and hence the research itself: the method stemmed a reflection about general research issues. We identified three steps in this reflection. First, the emotional impact of the artworks revealed the importance of the subjective involvement of the researchers, not from a theoretical perspective, but from a personal perspective:

*« It is the first time that I can see with my own eyes and that I can feel what I have been studying for more than 10 years”.* (DA, artist)

It triggered the wish to change the research methods in order to better reach complex and ambiguous dimensions:

*“Thanks to artworks, it should be possible to do more when analyzing this ambivalence between pain and its disastrous effects and, at the same time, life that goes on.»* (GS, researcher)

Second, the fictional nature of artwork, added to the reflexive methodology, resulted into a critical approach:

*“ Viewing [a film] together brings the same pleasure as in a movie theater and, at the same time, the research environment leads me to take also a critical perspective as I know we will be discussing the film later on ». « That was the most interesting part since it led to discussions and thinking about the method, about the tension between reality and fiction ».* (AL, artist)

The experience of the actors playing a homeless person during the visiting tour in the devastated area of Liège was revealing. It triggered a strange feeling of “de-realization” where everything could be fictional – including the issues. The power of fiction and its efficacy was clear when encountering Thérèse, one of the actors in the play ‘501 Blues’, and a former worker at Levi’s. In the play, which was created after the story of the plant’s closure: How

can an individual free herself from her previous professional identity by re-acting her previous life *on stage*, as a fiction? This kind of loop is typical of art and fiction, and shed light on invisible aspects of restructuring and the re-organization of lives fiction allows. Third, some of the artworks were deliberately playing on the double positioning of the participants: as practitioners, they have to install and manage restructuring processes in their professional activity; as participants to a research project on restructurings, they have to reflexively and critically think about their actions. For example, one HR director compared how he was himself reporting to his hierarchy about not having reached the downsizing objectives, with how the unionist had to cope with their troops when they had to compromise during the negotiation. The role-playing game in the fifth seminar was another reflexive moment, and the opportunity for the group to reflect on its own ability to sustain or refrain the use of exclusion in a simulated restructuring process.

Another emergent element was *the dialogical quality* of the research process: reflexivity and heterogeneity of the group, combined with the multiple conversational devices, produced a dialogical climate that proved to be central to the method. Confronting different points of view is a key issue for understanding restructuring. This is a key feature of the phenomenon itself pointed at by many of the artworks showing confrontations between different and opposed characters. Confronting our points of views was also a core element of our method. The idea was not to judge, choose or compare the legitimacy of the different perspectives on the subject, in the same manner it was not the point to decide which perspective on restructuring is right or wrong in real life. Gathering such a heterogeneous bunch of people did not intend to result in unity: the different logics at work had to co-exist, and one major role of the organizers was to install a reliable dialogical climate so as everybody could feel free to express his own position. All participants pointed at the importance and the quality of this dialogical setting. The discussions with and between the guests also proved to be highly dialogical: even people having worked together in a same crisis situation were not giving the same account and interpreting of the case. It appeared that it was highly necessary to fully consider the multiplicity, heterogeneity and complexity of the inter-relations, both within our own seminars and within the observed restructuring cases. Here again, dialogism has not been a theoretical concept for analyzing the cases, but a real setting and experience of the method itself.

## **2. Outputs of the ABCDE method: creation of situated knowledge through abductive shocks**

Our ABCDE method being described in details, we would now like to exemplify its outputs. The temporal dimension of the ongoing research situation is not linear or sequential, but is punctuated by moments of creation of new knowledge about restructurings, mediated by artworks. Artworks make it possible to import, in the present situation, experiences lived or imagined by others in a restructuring context, triggering what we call “abductive shocks”. Those shocks allow knowledge creation, but also significant transformations of representations and ways of looking at the world of the participants: both are two sides of the same coin, and are indivisible. Yet, for didactic purpose, they will be analytically separated in the following sections.

### **2.1. Artwork as a way to create new knowledge about restructuring**

In this section, we will focus on three specific artworks which were discussed during our seminars: the photographic approach by François Daniel who has been a witness of the conflict between Chaffoteaux workers and their employers in Saint-Brieuc; the theater play « 501 Blues » written and directed by Bruno Lajara featuring former workers of a Levi’s plant in La Bassée; and the novel and the film “The heartbeat detector” respectively written by François Emmanuel and directed by Nicolas Klotz. We chose these three artworks because they are both different in their format (photography, theater play, novel and film) and in their relationships with reality: the two first are based on real restructuring cases<sup>3</sup>, but for Chaffoteaux the artistic intervention takes place in real time, while for “501 Blues”, it takes place several months after the restructuring process and the play is performed by former workers; on the contrary, the third one — “The Heartbeat Detector” — does not refer to any precise real case of restructuring, but is rather a metaphorical narrative. Based on interviews with the main protagonists (artists, union representatives, workers), and on the debates that took place during the seminars, we explore art viewed as a material about restructuring process, enabling to unveil complex and hidden dimensions of this process.

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<sup>3</sup> Those two pieces of art could be considered as semi-fictional as defined by Whiteman and Philips (2008) : « they combine the standard format of both non-fiction and fiction in order to provoke readers to re-examine their beliefs and assumptions about research and about the world ». (p. 297)

• « *Support to Chaffoteaux* », or *the everyday life of a conflict* — On June the 18th, 2009, the French management of Chaffoteaux heralds the closing down of the plant in Saint-Brieuc. 204 employees are threatened. The conflict lasted more than 6 months, and ends with the signing of an agreement including an extra-conventional severance pay worth 25000 Euros for each worker, specific pre-retirement measures and a job center. Shortly after the beginning of the conflict, a representative from the local cultural authority, gets in touch with union representatives and suggests to hire a photographer to document the conflict and its daily round of activities. François Daniel, the photographer, sets in the plant and takes some pictures. As he puts it, « *the first idea was to describe what was happening in order to witness; to portray these lived experiences* ». At night, he prints his photographs and displays them in the hall of the trade unions the next day. He also posts the pictures to a blog in a chronological way. And he decides to print some postcards, entitled « Any summer project? Getting laid off » and « Any project after holidays? Getting laid-off », that have been sent across Europe.



**Fig. 6. Pictures of Chaffoteaux conflict, by François Daniel**

At the end, François Daniel stayed several months among the workers, getting more and more familiar with their daily life. Far from focusing on extraordinary moments having an intense press coverage of the fight, his work tells the common story and mundane realities of a conflict: activities to kill time, organizing activities, afternoons spent basking in the sun, waiting for buses to arrive, private discussions during demonstrations, a bailiff reporting the facility occupation... The pictures also show the backstage of bits and pieces of the negotiation process on site and the backstage of the organization of a conflict: employees

preparing posters, preparing meals, giant picnics in front of the main plant's entrance, playing darts with managers' pictures, having a nap in the middle of a field full of crosses symbolizing employees layoffs...

During the seminars, many discussions dealt with how those pictures provide a non conventional view of a social conflict, unveiling quite delicate dimensions in a sense that they remain difficult to admit by people: the joy, the cheerfulness, the conviviality of a dramatic situation felt at times by the workers, as if those merry moments were necessary to endure the pain and to help maintaining the community. All these unexpected feelings expressed through the artistic work triggers a disturbance, a shock, a cognitive dissonance, paradoxical emotions, showing us how a fight can transform and regenerate a community. Such an unusual change of tone, provoked by dance, music, laughs, feelings of relief, etc. turns out to be extremely inspiring, since it creates for the « user » of artwork a feeling of mismatch, of unease, liable to stimulate his reflexivity.

• **« 501 Blues » and Levi's plant closure: breakdowns between work and non-work moments** — In march 1999, the last French manufacturing Levi's plant is closed: 541 employees are laid off, out of which 86 % are women. The decision is not only a shock for the employees but also for the whole geographical area. Bruno Lajara undertakes an innovative approach named « documentary theater » and launches a broad research on the economic and sociological dimensions of this restructuring, along with researchers and experts. He first sets up a general meeting where all the workers are invited: he presents his project of creating a writing workshop with all the voluntary workers. 25 of them enroll, under the guidance of a writer, Christophe Martin, and with the financial support from the National Employment Service. « *The blue hands* », a small collection of short texts, is published in 2011. Bruno Lajara then offers to create a theater play with former workers and his theater company « Viesàvies ». Five of the ex-workers are eventually selected. The play « 501 Blues » is performed for the first time in March 2001, and many other performances will take place till 2005, largely relayed by press coverage.

The dramaturgy revolves around two key moments: work at the factory before closure announcement, and the plant after closure. During the seminar, one issue emerged as central: the notion of « disruption ». In academic literature, as well as in mainstream discourses, restructurings are associated with disruptions: breach of contract, in its technical and legal aspects, but also breach of the psychological contract for those who go as well as for those who stay. In the play, the emphasis on the trauma felt by the workers following the plant closure announcement also symbolizes this idea of violent and total disruption. Besides, the

play exemplifies the ability of theater to account for identity (loss of meaning, loss of values, loss of reference points) and physical or material dimensions of disruptions (especially a radical change in body rhythms).

In particular, two moments in the play evoke the identity-related disruptions concerning all the laid-off workers. The first scene portrays Linda who fell sick and engages in a monologue talk, in a place that seems neither to be the factory, nor her home. Behind her, two other women moving in slow gestures can be seen, contrasting with the usual frenetic rhythms of their work. Using the monologue as a form of talk symbolizes the isolation experienced by Linda since she lost her job. Sickness and loss of job are both conceived as a disruption that leads to isolation. Disruption is not only professional, but touches on all the other social, family, friendly and intimate spheres: she refers to her husband, her kids, her parents, her parents, or her cousins. The monologue can be summed up by one of the sentence wrapped out by Linda « Nobody needs me anymore », as if what was at stake was not only the loss of moments of pleasure or joy, but also the loss of her social and family usefulness. Linda keeps diving in herself and resumes the monologue in her mother tongue, Portuguese. It seems that she frees herself from the need to be understood by the audience and, by so doing, she expresses the need for hanging on to her roots as a way to preserve a decaying identity.



*Fig. 7. Linda's monologue in the play "501 Blues"*

The second moment is also a monologue, introduced by the English song « Kiss me ». Some images are displayed on a background screen, displaying youth, the joy of life, cowboys. Suddenly, the actress stops singing and starts laughing hysterically. She then enters a monologue talk referring to the various and dramatic events she has gone through. The layoff is one among a set of catastrophic events which are weighted equally: her husband cheating on her, the kids giving no news, the dog ran over, hand surgery, the 5 pounds overweight, etc. The leitmotiv « *No one tells me a thing anymore* » suggests to conceive of disruption as a form of freedom which goes hand in hand with loss of references and social norms.

The play is also interesting in its way to account for material and physical disruptions in a restructuring context. It emphasizes many rhythm disruptions: rhythm of the choreography at the beginning of the play, increasingly frenetic body and gestures rhythms when working on an assembly-line, slow motions gestures of disenchanted workers sweeping the empty factory floor. Bruno Lajara explains why he was astonished, when recording the factory noises, by the synchronization of all workers:

*« They all were following the same rhythm in their body. These gestures, this factory, are inside of them. Hence the violence... You cannot disentangle the factory or work with the rest, because they are deeply anchored in their personality... At the factory, you have no education, you are just a vibrato, you are a rhythm. You are just a body without a thought ».* (BL, artist)

Hence the physical violence of the layoff and of the plant closure which is a radical change in life rhythms.



*Fig. 8. Body and gestures rhythms at work in the play “501 Blues”*

Usually, restructurings are valued in an abstract and numeric way at a distance: numbers of job losses, financial impact on the local area, cost of severance pays, impact on shareholder value, etc. Behind these quantitative measures, men and women are suffering in their body and in their identity. The « *501 Blues* » play brings to the fore human dimensions which are most of the time played down, neglected or even hidden, and theater actors are particularly challenged by this lack of consideration for physical and emotional matters.

• **«*The Heartbeat Detector*»: technical language and reification of human beings** — François Emmanuel was trained as a psychotherapist and is a Belgium artist who first took an active interest in poetry and theater plays before engaging in novel writing. His book *La Question Humaine (The Quartet)* was published in 2000 and translated into ten languages. Nicolas Klotz adapted it for the cinema in 2006 (*The Heartbeat Detector*). The fictional narrative takes place in a French subsidiary of a German multinational company, which has just gone through a significant restructuring. Simon, a psychologist working in the Human Resources department, was involved in the process. In particular, he determined the criteria used to select the laid off workers. Karl Rose, the deputy director, sends him on a delicate

mission consisting in investigating the chairman’s behavior, Mathias Jüst. His research activities and various encounters led him to explore the past of those two senior managers and to discover their long-lasting relationship, dating back to the time of Nazi Germany. The narrative revolves around the slow awareness process of Simon: he received a letter that troubles him, as its content suggests the selection practices he recommended echo those used during Nazi Germany. This historical perspective was vividly debated when the novel was published: some considered this analogy as far too excessive and ideological, others viewed it as having a metaphoric dimension triggering a resonance where history usefully shakes up and questions in a different way our contemporary world. The same kind of heated debate took place among the participants. During the seminar, we focused on two excerpts that illustrate the central role played by language permeating the novel and the film. François Emmanuel explains how he discovered in 1987 a « technical memo » dated June the 5th 1942, a document Holocaust historians know very well. He decided to refer to this technical letter in his novel and to make it glow in the narration:

*“Shouldn’t we read again today this technical letter to become aware of the extraordinary erasing power – affecting our language and our thinking – that goes with the process through which every domain where humanity has a central place gets reduced to a technical stuff?”*

The writer uses some typographical tricks, bolding some words, italicizing others to bring a touch of nuance. Language is at the center of this historical perspective, bringing the managerial and Nazi worlds together: a technical, administrative, cold, reducing, full of understatements and euphemisms language which makes it possible to never really name what it is we want to talk about. It conveys a kind of dehumanization of people, a reification of human beings, with its ideological - nay propagandist - rationale. During discussions, some participants bring together the frightening euphemism of “final solution” with that of “job protection scheme”. Others reflect on the way “the evaluation and the selection of individuals” are being talked about and justified, whether they will have to board the next redundancy cart or the next train heading toward extermination camps.



**Fig. 9. François Emmanuel and Nicolas Klotz, guest participants in Seminar 4**

Modern language also refers to a fragmented conception of society or of organization, where tasks are compartmentalized, which invariably leads to individuals being freed from responsibility and echoes Eichman's claim: "I have never killed no one".

It is also interesting to analyze how these linguistic traps and effects are accounted for in the film itself, since it is about giving flesh to this language. And Nicolas Klotz artistically directs the novel's language through the staging of body movements and music. A discussion then emerges about the pseudo-neutrality of accounting language. In the novel, Mathias Jüst evokes the different restructurings implemented in this organization by this emblematic line: "We moved from 2500 down to 1200 units". And this short sentence triggers the narration: "the staff selection criteria" that Simon helped establish and which led to the departure of the sick, the alcoholic, the less-productive persons mirrors the Tiergarten 4 project (T4) – mentioned in the novel but not in the film – and whose aim was, between 1938 and 1941, to eradicate all mentally ill, delinquents, psychotic persons, and more generally, all those who, according to the doctors assigned to this program, had no longer any social or professional use. As for the organization, the point is to eliminate the deviants with regard to imposed social norms.

In other words, both novel and film in their own way draw attention on the unaccounted power of technical language, especially accounting and financial languages in restructuring situations, and they more generally question how this type of language covertly transforms our lives. The artistic work allows here to bridge, through a metaphorical literary device, two distinct space-time worlds — Nazi Germany and multinational companies, which enables to create new meanings, new understandings and new experiences of what reification of human beings could be.

## **2.2. Transformation of participants' representations and identities**

The ABCDE method as a whole, because of its dialogic, reflexive and collective dimensions, has undoubtedly led to several outputs in terms of ways of thinking, teaching or practicing restructuring processes: art, viewed as a mediating artifact, triggers some "abductive shocks": abductive shocks can be defined as a « dissonance between existing interpretive schemes and actual situations, entailing changes in interpretive models », and their succession « make visible what is invisible » (Quattrone and Hopper, 2006, quoted by Lorino, 2006), based not only on cognitive dimensions but on « a strong experience, which has important emotional and corporal dimensions » (Lorino, 2006). These successive abductive shocks enable our

heterogeneous community of participants to experiment new ways of discussing and exploring restructuring issues. The semi-structured interviews that we performed with 22 participants at the end of the project constitute an interesting material to document this point. Generally speaking, all the participants mention that the project “*changed the way [they] look at things*”. It even seems that many of them feel they have changed as individuals or professionals:

*“This is a beautiful adventure that changed me: it is truly real. There is a before-after turn. During the final event, I invited people who are not familiar with this topic and they said it changed something for them, without being able to name it and, I think, it is very positive”* (PM, artist-researcher)

One participant outlines the power of the method itself, at the crossroads of reality and art, which enables to reach the heart of the topic:

*« These moments lie at the intersection of reality and artistic production: experiences lived by persons who were physically with us along with an artistic form that told a story about these very same events and whose artists were also with us. These experiences were discussed by those who give art its legitimacy since we were the audience. In those very moments, we were at the core of the topic ».* (EBSG, expert)

It seems that there were some particularly strong moments during the project. Among those, the theater play “501 Blues” and the discussion with Bruno Lajara and Thérèse are frequently mentioned by the interviewed participants who qualify this moment as “a real moment”, “an emotional encounter”, “a key sequence”, or “a powerful story”. As this researcher points out:

*“501 Blues, is a great theatrical expression, and the testimony of this woman who became a stage actress, Thérèse. This is a strong memory, since, of course, I have been working on restructuring (...), it means something to me but there is no affect, and, precisely, when ideas can be transformed into affect, it brings something more to reality, it triggers a stronger eagerness to act than when you just do more abstract analyses. (...) There is an affect-related move that acts as a pressing call for action and touched me. That's all the strength of artistic expression”* (CS, researcher)

More precisely, most of the interviewees assert that the experience of the project will probably affect their professional practice: introducing new teaching methods for scholars, creating or using new concepts and tools for consultants, strengthening and legitimating artists in their involvement in the social field. The researchers say they will now consider differently their teaching and, more generally their work, introducing more reflexivity and sensitivity:

*“I have started considering restructuring differently. (...) Thanks to this work, I am able to speak differently, and especially to speak in a more sensitive way about restructuring”* (RB, researcher).

*“Art is like a mirror of my own ambivalences, of my own contradictions... It made me think that there may be a private reason, some intimate motivations explaining why I do research on restructuring. Being confronted to art and artists who discuss their artistic work renders a sort of reflexivity necessary. Why is it that I have been working on restructuring processes for 20 years? The way François Emmanuel discussed his work moved me and confronted me with a*

*question. It forced me to look at myself as a researcher working on restructuring processes"* (RB, researcher).

Some of the researchers also emphasize the fact that the main output of the project for them relies more on the experience itself than on acquiring new knowledge on restructuring:

*« New knowledge was not really revealed. It's more about the different way we talk about it, a more effective way that we easily manage to share. More convincing too. It is more about that than about creating new knowledge. (...) It's about a way to tell and to account for knowledge rather than about knowledge itself" (GS, researcher)*

These remarks point out the distinction between usual cognitive knowledge and a rather experience-based type of knowledge, which can unveil some unexpected aspects of restructurings, as this artist explains:

*« Restructuring is not only a negative thing. People have to face change and they become innovative. For example, in the English film, "The Full Monty", they are up against the wall but... it is a double-edged soar, it is very bad and very sad, but on the other hand, the world is constantly evolving and, you know, it has positive things, people reinvent themselves" (YD, artist)*

Meanwhile, other interviewed core-participants claim they have a better grasp on the object in their way of thinking but also practicing restructuring. As one expert argues:

*"The seminars and our collective work have emphasized the question of "process", a key-concept which summarizes quite well what has emerged from the project: a creative or artistic process "that reveals complex things"; how this creative process echoes the research process of the present researchers and, lastly, restructuring itself as a process ("how is it constructed, deconstructed, how we talk about it or we don't"). I could reap the benefits of this project if I could make crystal clear for an organization, what is invisible in the restructuring process, this dimension being what should be looked after with the greatest care. The project reinforced my conviction that what matters most is to go with the process, not to evaluate the outcome". (EBSG, expert)*

The seminars also sometimes resulted in even more concrete and significant transformations: one of the artists, who had stopped making art after a tough experience in a restructured firm (François Daniel, the photograph in the Chaffoteaux case), decided to re-start his artistic practice after participating to the seminars. As he puts it:

*"The workshop strengthened the idea that it might not be that stupid to go on with being a photographer... I told myself we had achieved something. It made me want to figure out what this work would have been if the relation to time had been different. It made me want to start again reflecting on something that germinated back then but could not be considered at that time. They indeed had other things to do than to work on my project". (FD, artist)*

The question of art and its role is also a main feature in the interviews, between the risk of instrumentalizing art as a transparent window on reality on the one hand, (the naïve gaze) and, on the other hand, the risk of art instrumentalizing restructuring for art sake without any social motives (the pure aesthetic gaze). A Belgian artist explains to what extent this type of project can contribute to an increasing social and economic legitimacy of Art:

*“My particular interest in this project lies in my belief that, currently, the artistic question will gain another legitimacy only if it improves its mastery of its economic dimensions. The world of Art is not recognized in its ability to create an analysis of economic issues. Hence, it seeks a connection to the academic world to gain legitimacy for its actions.[...]The economic and academic worlds need art. The point is to manage to influence us mutually and reciprocally, to go together beyond our own frames, to create a new language. Language has indeed a functional role in that it enables the world to reproduce itself. It is interesting when we produce new realities that trigger the need for being together to represent what is going on, that we need to discuss them with others to understand what is going on”. (AT, artist)*

Another artist more strongly expresses that he still fears that art could be easily instrumentalized, whereas his mere function is to help emancipation:

*« I am still worried when I see that some people use art as a funny and nice stuff making it possible to swallow a hard pill. It scares me when artistic expression is not used for a purpose of emancipation. I have become aware of the dreadful power instrument that art is ». (NH, artist)*

Finally, the overall reading of the interviews outlines the move that has been performed by the core-participants of the project. Two excerpts are put as an illustration of this point.

*« The first idea I learnt from this project is that these processes have of course economic, managerial, legal and sociological dimensions. But they all have the same starting point: they raise the human question. François Emmanuel’s starting point is the right one. Fundamentally, this is a process that contents in itself an extremely huge risk of reification of the human beings who are in them. (...) It’s kind of funny since I had already read François Emmanuel’s book and viewed Klotz’ film and I said things like these to myself at that time and they were just gone. Truth is it took the addition of what Moutoux, François Emmanuel and Nicolas Klotz said, of what Lajara and Thérèse said... It took all this addition to lead me to think: this has a real meaning and this very idea, that there is a danger of reification, should be put at the beginning of the corpus about operating modes. (...) The project has strengthened this first big idea, has allowed me to turn a state of intuition into something more robust, and on which I feel I am now able to write a few pages with references, saying “we observe it here, we talk about it there...” (FB, epert)*

*« I had the feeling that some researchers were maybe at a loss of touch, since the pieces of artworks brought in forced them to view them as something conveying another critical perspective ». (NH, artist)*

These two excerpts of interviews exemplify that participants feel they experimented art in a different way than usual, more transversal and more cumulative: it transformed the initial intuition into a consciousness and formulation of a specific knowledge on restructuring. They outline the specific role of artwork that has to be considered for itself, additionally to considering the object. Such a role requires that all the participants have to make a critical move, what all of them recognize in their interviews, along with their willingness to continue the “*beautiful collective adventure*” which is, according to them, still at its very first stage...

### 3. Discussion and conclusion

The research move we experienced as participants in the project is a movement toward and backward the research object, a passage through a screen and back. The ‘screen’ is the representation of the object by an artwork. Observing the object through the artwork is both observing the object as it is and the object as it is represented. This is the main feature of art: representation is about revealing both the object and its double – its representation, which can also turn out to be its opposite – beauty and ugliness, power and weakness, attraction and repulsion at the same time (Vygotski, 1925, 2005). A double polarization occurs between involvement and disinterest: on the one hand, the object is deeply experienced and understood, but on the other hand, its interest is eclipsed by the attractiveness of the art form itself. The feature is a key, and no artwork is transparent to its subject. A good artwork puts forward its own reality, while at the same time re-giving life to the represented object – or the ‘subject’. When we were confronted to artistic accounts of restructuring situations, we were facing two different realities: the reality of the phenomena and the reality of the artwork, the two being connected to one another in a distant way. This point was difficult to grasp and deal with, and debates occurred about the necessity of investigating the art form itself besides studying the described object. Observing the world through an artwork is looking *through* and *at* glasses at the same time. The forms of artworks (the editing, the colors, the music, the actors, the rhythm...) are purpose-oriented: they are chosen by the artist for revealing the object (the subject of the work) in his personal, different, new, exotic or critical fashion (Becker 2012). Observing intensively the forms we are confronted with *is* looking at the object – in a very indirect way. But at the same time it means looking at the artwork as such and in the end it means looking at our own reception of the artwork: we perceive a work of art by experiencing it. This quality of experience (Dewey, 1934) is inseparable from the specific knowledge art fosters about our own perception. This specific knowledge of how we perceive and how we are deceived by our perception is inextricably linked with the perception of the represented object: the thing, the perception of the thing and the consciousness of the limitations and potentialities of perception are entangled together in the personal, physical, aesthetic and emotional experience of the viewer. Applied to research, this capacity of art to emphasize experience could lead to what we call “experiential knowledge” through abductive shocks.

But not everyone is familiar with aesthetic experience, and our method did not only rely on artworks. The construction of a heterogeneous group, of a conversational process and a loose but precise framing were aimed at converting, emphasizing and focusing the particular effects of knowledge through art. In order to enable a group without any specific skill in reading artworks to fruitfully confront art forms, we had to design this specific and experimental method. The dialogical quality of the experience of the seminars had to go through strong moments where to confront the many logics of the participants, the guests and the depicted actors of restructuring situations. By gathering the heterogeneity of the group around a variety of artworks they experienced together, we intensively created a perception of the common though heterogeneous understanding. The unity of each artwork, experienced separately by each participant and immediately shared with the group, was revealing and fostering the unity and heterogeneity of their common knowledge about restructuring. Experiencing the difference in perceiving, evaluating and interpreting artworks telling stories on restructuring unveils how distinct logics can co-exist, confront or die within restructuring processes and situations. Such a method asks for specific skills from the researchers: be good at dealing with the uncertain, the unexpected, the surprising; be able to suffer embarrassment, deceit, affection, confusion, and so on. It places our research within the stream of situated inquiries: “inquiry (that) is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole” (Dewey, 1938/1993, p. 108). The inquiry is situated: “that term underscored the view that every course of action depends in essential ways upon its material and social circumstances (Suchman, 1987, p. 50) and it stresses the view that any production of knowledge has a social character (Journé, Raulet-Croset, 2008). The situation has also an emotional character (Follett, 1924, p. 13) as “the situation as a qualitative whole is sensed or *felt*” (Simpson, Marshall, 2010). The meaning of the situation and the resulting course of action are not generated by a subjective cognition process but by a conversational process in the broader sense of “conversation”: “a conversation with the situation” (Schön, 1991), a “conversation of gesture” (Mead, 1934). In that sense the research process is reflexive, but not in the subjective sense of reflexivity when one subject mentally assesses and redesigns his/her own activity: this is the dialogical sense of reflexivity that is meant here, i.e. reflexivity through conversational interaction (Bakhtin, 1981; Todorov, 1981; Tsoukas, 2009, Lorino & al, 2011; Lorino, Mourey, 2012). A good example can be found in the case of Chaffoteaux, a French case of restructuring which was scheduled in one of our seminars. The union representative and the photographer who

documented the whole conflict experienced a dialog with the group of inquirers on the basis of the photographs, and an emotional and reflexive process occurred, involving all the members of the group, thus producing a deeper unexpected understanding of the case.

In this process, the reflexive stance is permanently activated: when confronting another appreciation about an artwork, each participant experiences the relativity of her own “truth” and reflects on his arguments. The group perceives itself as a multi-mirroring faceted togetherness of varied agencies and understandings – while at the same time experiencing more and more the strong feeling of being part of ‘a’ group:

*“The more we moved forward in time, the more seminars became bubbles, wrapping skins, isolating us from the exterior world, undistracted, focused”.* (PM, artist)

Experience is a real constituent of the self, which gives us the power to understand the otherness we confront – in experience. By reflectively applying this power of gathering the heterogeneous without erasing it to the issue of restructuring, we intended to create a particular relation to research and the emergence of a specific form of knowledge interconnected with experience, which we call experiential knowledge. The purpose was to develop a relation to experience in such a way that the participants would gradually be aware of the entanglements between knowledge and experience.

Such an experiential knowledge is very different from the cognitive knowledge usually provided by traditional academic research: it relies on specific roots and tools of artistic expression. Artworks give a particular experience of the world: the world is not experienced directly, what is “lived” is a fiction, but the experience is as real as any other (Vygotski, 2005). Some have theorized art as a way of learning how to face never encountered situations (Laurence Alloway, 1958): this can be called living vicariously. By using artworks for their ethnographic quality, we ourselves practiced ethnography vicariously: not doing a direct ethnography of the field, but instead investigating an indirect relation to it through the vision of “the artist as ethnographer” (Hal Foster, 1996). The specific roots and tools we identified are three: one, mobilizing incarnation, identification and subjectivation processes; two, producing a polyphonic representation; and three, implementing mediation and transformation processes (of individuals and of collective identities). This experiential knowledge, which could be defined as a « vicarious knowledge », is a major and original contribution to management field, a field of organized action that aims at providing actionable knowledge

(Argyris, 1995). This proposition echoes the concept of ‘terceization’ suggested by Xhaufclair and Pichault (2012).

Eventually, our paper has three main contributions: first, it provides a thick description of a collective and dialogic ethnographic research, while identifying the deliberate and emergent enabling conditions of such an inquiry as well as its outputs; second, it illustrates how art-based materials can play as a mediating artifact to generate dialogic interactions; and third, it suggests that Art-Based, Collective and Dialogic Ethnographic (ABCDE) method can contribute to unveil hidden grounds of social phenomena – like corporate restructuring practices – through “abductive shocks” and what we call a “vicarious experiential knowledge”. We do believe that such an ABCDE method is potentially repeatable to other contexts and other topics in the field of organizational research.

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## APPENDIX 1: Details of the artistic content of the five seminars of the project

### Seminar 1: Decision and implementation (Paris/ France)

*Work Hard Play Hard* (2003)

**Director:** Jean-Marc Montout,

**Genre:** Dramatic comedy

**Country:** France

*Human Resources* (1999)

**Director:** Laurent Cantet and Giles Marchand

**Genre:** Drama

**Country:** France

*Riens du tout* (1992)

**Director:** Cedric Klaphisch

**Genre:** Drama

**Country:** France

*Brassed off* (1997)

**Director:** Mark Herman

**Genre:** Drama

**Country:** United Kingdom

*Côte que coûte* (1995)

**Director:** Claire Simon

**Genre:** Documentary

**Country:** France

*The Grapes of Wrath* (1940)

**Director:** John Ford

**Genre:** Drama

**Country:** United States

*Meet John Doe* (1941)

**Director:** Frank Capra

**Genre:** Dramatic Comedy

**Country:** United States

### Seminar 2: Negotiation and conflict (Paris/France)

#### • *Chaffoteaux Case*

*Artistic Intervention of François Daniel during the conflict of the Chaffoteaux's factory closure at Saint Brieuc (France) (2009)*

**Artistic Work analyzed:** Photos, Post-cards, calendar and blog

**Artist:** François Daniel

**Country:** France

#### • *Cellatex Case*

*Film : The Bitter End* (2005)

**Director:** Maurice Failevic

**Genre:** Drama

**Country:** France

*Des vivants et des morts* (2006)

**Genre :** TV film

**Director :** Gérard Mordillat

*Logbook of the conflict, "Cellatex, quand l'acide a coulé"*

**Author:** Christian Larose

*Novel : Des vivants et des morts* (2006)

**Author :** Gérard Mordillat

**Editor :** Calman-Levy

#### • *Performance Simulation Table:*

"To what extent can we reach the agreement of a restructuring plan?"

**Developed by:** Access Local, Philippe Mairesse

**Country:** France

### Seminar 3: Diversity, Gender and Minorities (London/ United Kingdom)

#### • *Photography*

*Mergers metaphors and Bloodied images*

**Researcher:** Dawn Langley

**Country:** United Kingdom

*People's Pathways to Northumberland Park, Tottenham, London*

**Artist:** Joanne O'Brien

**Country:** United Kingdom

#### • *Films*

*The Full Monty (1997)*

**Director:** Peter Cattaneo

**Genre:** Comedy Drama

**Country:** United Kingdom

*Kinky Boots (2005)*

**Director:** Julian Jarrold

**Genre:** Drama

**Country:** United Kingdom

*The Office BBC Series (2001)*

**Director:** Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant,

**Genre:** Drama, Sitcom Mockumentary

**Country:** United Kingdom

*It's a Free World (2007)*

**Director:** Ken Loach

**Genre:** Drama

**Country:** United Kingdom

#### • *Songs:*

*N.P.W.A (No Power Without Accountability)*, by Billy Bragg

*Big River*, by Jimmy Nail

### Seminar 4: Time and Restructurings (Paris/ France)

#### • *Comic Strip workshop*

« *Restructuring is like...* », animated by Delphes and Elya Szendy

#### • *La Question Humaine*

*Novel : The Quartet (La Question Humaine) (2001)*

**Author:** François Emmanuel

**Country:** Belgium

*Music Heartbeat Detector (2007)*

**By:** Syd Matters

**Country:** France

*Film Heartbeat Detector (2007)*

**Director:** Nicolas Klotz

**Genre:** Drama

**Country:** France

• **Levis 501**

*Play : "501 Blues" (2000)*

**Stage director :** Bruno Lajara

• **History taking in Art**

*Strike Objects (Objets de grève) (1999)*

**By:** Jean-Luc Moulène

*Ouest Lumière: History of the photographic fund of the electricity:1919-1931*

**By :** Yann Toma

• **Time in suspens**

*Ce vieux rêve qui bouge (2001)*

**Director :** Alain Guiraudie

**Genre :** Comedy Drama

**Country :** France

**Seminar 5: Territories and local areas (Liège/ Belgium)**

*Reconversion of the Industrial areas in Liege: Calatrava railway station, Val Benoit and Val Saint Lambert sites.*

*HF6 on the closure of the Arcelor's Mittal blast furnance 6 at Seraing (Liege, Belgium) (2011)*

**Director:** Frédéric Tihon, Yannick Bovy, Gérald Jamsin-Leclercq

**Genre:** Documentary

**Country:** Belgium

*Master plan of the city of Seraing: Presentation of the collaborative work among architects, planners and artists*

**Guest Speaker:** V.Depaye

**By:** Eriges

*Aux Arts Project: Discussion with the artist Marie Zolamian*

**By:** Cultural service of the province of Liège

*Plan of the GRE (<http://www.gre-liege.be/> Economic Redeployment Group in Liège)*