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# Nothing happened, something happened: Silence in a makerspace<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** An ever-increasing range of work activities occur in open spaces that require collective discipline, with silence emerging as a key feature of such workplace configurations. Drawing from an ethnographic examination of a makerspace in Paris, we explore the ways in which silence is incorporated into new work practices in the context of their actualization, embodiment and apprenticeship. Through its engagement with the conceptual work of Merleau-Ponty, this paper does not posit silence as the opposite of sounds or as a passive achievement. Silence is inscribed in a learning process and requires numerous efforts to be maintained (e.g. body postures to avoid staring into the eyes of someone entering into an open space, wearing headphones, etc.). It is also the envelope of numerous noisy acts that take place in the phenomenological body and in the embodied practices of workers. We argue that ‘silencing’ is an event ordering and giving directions to what ‘happens’ in collective work activities and central to the process of embodied learning in collaborative spaces.

**Keywords:** Silence; Learning; Embodiment; Visibility; Merleau-Ponty; Makerspace; Work Practices; Time.

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## **Introduction: Nothing happened, something happened...**

*Paris, 10 a.m.*

*I have been in this coworking space for an hour now. Sitting here with my laptop, looking for the right position. Still not sure how to sit in order to feel comfortable. Everyone is working in the main room where I've been offered to work on my laptop. The atmosphere is friendly and relaxed. Close to me is a big sofa where a girl is cutting several pictures. Not far from me is a telephone booth in which one can isolate oneself. Much work has been done to ensure everyone can create their own bubble! My phone suddenly rings. The ringtone is my favourite song by Sinatra. But where is my phone? Is it in my jacket? I cannot find it. Some coworkers start looking at me. It seems that I'm breaking something. Where is my phone? I decide to leave the room, desperately looking for a way out... Not that easy as the main room is really large. The minute I'm out, I find my phone...*

This short extract from our field notes draws our attention onto the importance of silence in collaborative spaces (i.e. coworking spaces, makerspaces, fab labs and hackerspaces). These spaces, which have been blossoming since the early 2000s (de Vaujany et al., 2018a; Hatch, 2014; Lallement, 2015), are expected to favour both horizontal (i.e. between those working in that place) and open collaborations (i.e. beyond the immediate involvement in an open space). Work, in general, is seen to become increasingly more collaborative in the context of the rise of the sharing economy (Bouncken and Reuschl, 2018; Sundararajan, 2017). Collaborative spaces are aligned with the logic of greater work flexibility and autonomy (Felstead et al., 2005) and can be seen as the material manifestation of 'new ways of working' (Bohas et al., 2018). These spaces are similar to third places

(Oldenburg, 1989) and their location between home and traditional workplaces contributes to the blurring of the boundary between private and work life (Golden and Geisler, 2007; Gregg, 2011; Sayah, 2013; Tietze and Musson, 2002). In these new work configurations, workers are in a quiet environment and expected to often remain silent, to use silent tools and to produce entities that are invisible for those just crossing the space and experiencing it ‘from the outside’.

Various authors have highlighted the surprising lack of research on the notion of silence in management and organisation studies (see for instance Bigo, 2018; Blackman and Sadler-Smith, 2009; Kirrane et al., 2017; Morrison and Milliken, 2003). A significant proportion of the existing literature has investigated the coercive dimension of silence (i.e. ‘being silenced’) (see Brown and Coupland, 2005 or Costas and Grey, 2014), with some papers, for instance, exploring how race or gender are silenced in organisations (e.g. Macalpine and Marsh, 2005). Van Dyne et al. (2003) distinguish between three types of silence in organisations: acquiescent, defensive and prosocial. While problematic in that it sets to establish discrete types of silence (Fletcher and Watson, 2007), this approach extends beyond the conceptualization of silence as the opposite of voice, noise or speech in a coercive context. Closer to our concerns are researchers who have argued that being silent or silenced in organizational settings is not only a power-invested process, but is linked to various organizational practices (Brinsfield, 2014; Grint, 2010) and forms of expression in organizational debates (Kirrane et al., 2017), and importantly has ramifications and implications for knowing, learning and organising (Blackman and Sadler-Smith, 2009).

This paper sets to take this last point further by engaging with the notion of silence through Merleau-Ponty’s (1945, 1964, 2010) writings, with a particular focus on the concepts of visible and invisible. The paper is concerned with the ways in which silence is incorporated into new work practices, with regards to how these are actualized, embodied and apprenticed

through everyday practice. For Merleau-Ponty (1945, 2010), silence is not a passivity, a discontinuity or an invisibility. Silence requires numerous efforts to be maintained and is also the envelope of miscellaneous noisy acts that take place in the phenomenological body and through the embodied practices of workers. For Merleau-Ponty, silence is ‘not the mere absence of sound or simply an opposite to language’, but ‘its other side’ that makes meaningful expression possible (Mazis, 2016: xiii). It constitutes both a rhythm of work and a temporal orientation for collective work.

We explored the role played by silence in new work configurations primarily through an ethnographic inquiry in a makerspace in Paris. A range of visits to various collaborative spaces (located in nine different countries) also informed our research, as they allowed us to experience different modalities of collaborative work. Collaborative spaces provide ideal settings for the study of the complex relationship between silence and new ways of working. They include quiet areas for collective work (open spaces), provide a shared space partly governed by rules of silence and elaborate particular modes of animation based on silence. Through our empirical research, we identified specific visibility-invisibility, continuity-discontinuity and passivity-activity loops. These loops prompt us to see ‘silencing’ as a major event in Merleau-Ponty’s (2010) sense, an happening inside happenings, something underlying, ordering and giving directions to what ‘happens’ in collective work activities.

Positioning silence as a meaningful phenomenon pregnant with possibilities (Bigo, 2018), these loops also allow us to reflect on how silence redefines how learning can be conceptualised (Blackman and Sadler-Smith, 2009) in the context of collaborative spaces such as coworking spaces and makerspaces. We argue that silence can be seen to create the conditions of ‘co-created situated learning’ (Butcher, 2018). Silence gives visibility to the learning process of the workers: they will be able to feel both the past and the future of their skills in the present. Paradoxically, silence is a discontinuity that makes visible what is at

stake or should be at stake in everyday activities. It re-centres expression around gestures as well as focused and spared conversations, and is sometimes extended by digital silence (disconnection), which makes obvious the fact that a silence ‘immediately felt’ in a physical space is not necessarily an absence of conversation. We contend that Merleau-Ponty’s work offers a fascinating angle through which to explore the complex relation between silence and learning in the context of the embodied practices of workers engaged in new work configurations.

The paper is structured as follows. Following on from the introduction, the second section examines Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. An overview of the methodology underlying this paper forms the basis of the third section. The fourth section discusses the empirical findings in the light of the conceptual framework developed in the literature review. Finally, the conclusion is an opportunity to come back to the status of silence in new work practices.

## **Key aspects of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology**

### *Embodiment and expression*

Merleau-Ponty’s work, concerned primarily with the notions of body, corporeity and embodiment (Bonan, 2015; Dale, 2005; Küpers, 2014), has received a growing attention in the field of organization studies (see for instance Dale, 2005; de Vaujany et al., 2018a, b; Küpers, 2014; Valtonen et al., 2017; Willems, 2018; Yakhlef, 2010). His phenomenology questions the obviousness of perceptions and the instantaneity of our experiences in order to show the essential mediation of embodiment, flesh and inter-corporeity underlying ideas of naturality<sup>i</sup> and taken-for-grantedness. The body is understood as the condition of our

experience to the world and its continuity. For Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1948, 1960, 1964), we live in and through a phenomenological body in the sense that we are a continuous flow of sensations and perceptions for ourselves. In turn, we feel mainly in the past: we do not know, we do not perceive, but we mainly re-cognize and re-perceive forms, shapes, structures, gestures and practices that we have ‘already’ felt (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, 1960). Furthermore, according to Merleau-Ponty (1964: 162):

‘there is an experience of the visible thing as pre-existing my vision, but this experience is not a fusion, a coincidence: because my eyes which see, my hands which touch, can also be seen and touched, because, therefore, in that sense they see and touch the visible, the tangible from within, because our flesh covers and even envelops all the visible and tangible things that nonetheless surrounds it, the world and I are within one another, and from the *perciperer* to the *percipi*, there is no anteriority, there is simultaneity and even delay’.

This movement is neither purely internal nor external (these are categories that Merleau-Ponty invites us to overcome); it is fully reversible. Drawing from the Husserlian example of the two hands that touch each other, Merleau-Ponty (1960) stresses the fact that these two hands are constitutive of a feeling of both touched and touching or the experience of feeling and felt. In other words, while we think we are on one side or the other (touched or touching), we actually are phenomenologically always in the middle (i.e. in what is expressed). This phenomenon is at the heart of many reversibilities and chiasms (e.g. inside/outside, others/I, ego/alter ego, past/present, etc.). We feel ourselves as individuals only through an experience of alterity: the community is the place and mode of expression of these reversible ‘I’, ‘You’ and ‘We’. Bodily movements, encounters and everyday activities lie at the heart of reversible experiences. The content of expression is also essential. Expression is

more than the emergence of meaning (something ‘happens’); it is also and primarily a temporality. This happening was, is or will be meaningful (an embodied perception can become or re-become visible and perceptible later). From a phenomenological perspective, in order to apprehend an expression or a mode of expression, one needs to be immersed in it, to share it and to live it.

For Merleau-Ponty (1945, 1948, 1964), visibilities and invisibilities are key dimensions of our everyday activities and their chiasms. In order to perceive and act, we need to transform a lot of invisibilities. As we cannot simultaneously face the innumerable sensations conveyed through our embodied experience of the world, we need to put many other things aside. For instance, to write these lines, we put aside the noise of the street, a pain somewhere in our body, email and phone notifications, etc.<sup>ii</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty (1964), visibilities and invisibilities are thus not the opposite of each other; invisibilities are the scaffolding of visibilities and also often what could extend them. Time, which is seen by Merleau-Ponty (2010) as the epitome of an institution, is the process through which visibilities and invisibilities can be balanced out. In order to write, one needs to put aside both nostalgia (a disturbing past) and anxiety (an impeding future) without remaining trapped in the present. These temporal and sensorial invisibilities will then reinforce the visibility of one’s activities for oneself. The same relation connects the concepts of continuity & discontinuity (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) and activity & passivity (Merleau-Ponty, 2010); far from being oppositional, they interpenetrate each other.

*From expression to institution: In and beyond silence as an event*

How do we ‘order’ and organize continuities & discontinuities, visibilities & invisibilities, and activities & passivities in our lives? In one of his key lectures at the Collège



de France, Merleau-Ponty (2010) returns to the notion of institution. He specifies that ‘by institution, we were intending those events in an experience which endow the experience with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense, will form a thinkable sequel or a history – or again the events which deposit a sense in me, not just something as surviving or a residue, but as the call to follow, the demand of a future’ (foreword of Lefort, 2010, in Merleau-Ponty, 2010: ix)<sup>iii</sup>. An institution is thus something happening steadily behind a set of events, a happening in the happenings. It is neither an archetypal or modal duration nor the repeated aspects of all events; it is what happens in the multiplicity of what happen(ed)(s).

The link is also clear with the three classical Merleau-Pontian chiasms aforementioned, namely visibility-invisibility, continuity-discontinuity and activity-passivity. Visibility & invisibility and continuity & discontinuity are not the opposite of each other in our everyday activities or institutions, and the same goes for activity & passivity. Passivity-activity chiasms pervade most ‘happenings’ and institutions. Merleau-Ponty (2010) draws a very interesting parallel between this chiasm and the action of sleeping. One does not ‘decide’ to sleep; one goes to sleep and tries to meet the phenomenon. Once ‘in’ (i.e. asleep), sleeping is not the opposite of activity. Once asleep, we dream and can sometimes remember our dreams. At some point, I will also wake up without ‘deciding’ it<sup>iv</sup>. As such, inside sleep, a kind of activity different to the daily ones emerges, one that enables and makes even more visible the activities of the day. Passivity is just the other face of activity. Clearly, the institutional layer of our lives lies on the side of passivity (as defined here). Institutions make it possible to ‘act’; they lie at the heart of what happens and what can happen, in the flow of our everyday activities. An institution is thus a trans-temporal regime of activities-passivities, continuities-discontinuities and visibilities-invisibilities.

## **Research method: The study of collaborative spaces**

### *Introducing our empirical sites*

MS<sup>v</sup> is a makerspace that opened in 2005 in the east of Paris in a former factory. It was established following a riot in front of an artistic squat. Following growing pressure from the local residents, the mayor decided to take measures to clean up the area by experimenting with ‘new places’ subsidized by the city. MS accepts both professional and non-professional artists and provides them with several floors to practice their art. The ground floor is devoted to fashion designers, actors and co-workers. The second floor is open to painters and sculptors. The third floor is reserved for painters, photographers and hosts a silver jewellery workshop. Finally, the fourth floor is dedicated to novelists. Makerspaces are Do It Yourself (DIY)-oriented communities and spaces; they rely on a principle of mutual help (i.e. *quid pro quo*). People share both a common place and a few tools, and help each other in different ways (see Anderson, 2009; Lallement, 2015). Makers can be entrepreneurs, employees or just occasional DIY enthusiasts.

Our research also involved visiting other types of collaborative spaces, including hackerspaces, fab labs and coworking spaces. Hackerspaces are very close to makerspaces; one difference (albeit not systematic) is the political orientation of hackerspaces. Hackers follow a particular ethics (e.g. open knowledge) and as such, hackerspaces can host particularly engaged activists<sup>vi</sup>. Fab labs are part of a global network and operate under The

Fab Charter. Fab labs are makerspaces relying on a logic of open knowledge, which involves continuously documenting creative and productive processes for the broader community. Finally, coworking spaces, which are geared towards entrepreneurs, innovators, project managers and employees, consist of shared spaces focused on mutual help and community building (Gandini, 2015; Merkel, 2015; Garrett et al., 2017). The emergence of collaborative entrepreneurship is highly visible in coworking spaces: mobile workers, remote workers and entrepreneurs often join coworking spaces, incubators and accelerators to both manage their loneliness and form part of an emotional community (see Spinuzzi, 2012).

### *Contextualising the research: Ethnographic style of investigation*

Our research started with a series of visits and short stays (between half an hour and half a day, either preceding or following each visit) in 87 collaborative spaces (68 visits in coworking spaces and 19 in makerspaces, hackerspaces and fab labs) located in ten different countries (Australia, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Japan, Portugal Singapore, Spain, United Kingdom) (see the Appendix). These visits were an opportunity to meet freelancers, entrepreneurs and project managers, to develop our understanding of new work practices (i.e. collaborative entrepreneurship, mobility, freelancing, telework, etc.) and to experience different modalities of collaborative work (as a growing phenomenon). These visits were very important in providing a contextual understanding of the ways in which collaborative workspaces operate. They also allowed us to appreciate some of the key differences between makerspaces and other types of collaborative spaces. Furthermore, developing a basic understanding of the logic of makerspaces (through visits and on-site discussions) made the start of our ethnographic research smoother. Finally, through these visits, silence emerged as a key aspect of these new ways of working and as such, informed our ethnographic inquiry.

During our visits, we found that silence was much more than a ‘rule’, a non-event or non-activity; it quickly appeared as a paradox.

These visits were followed by an ethnographic research in a makerspace in Paris (with a coworking space on the ground floor) called MS. Ethnographic research has a long history in organisation and management studies, dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Zickar and Carter, 2010). By adopting an ethnographic style of investigation, one can explore the complex, messy and contested realities of organizations (Law, 2004) and thus produce rich accounts of organizational realities. This research was an opportunity to explore further some of the ideas and themes that emerged through our visits to collaborative spaces, notably the role of silence in collaborative spaces. All the empirical data discussed in this paper come from the ethnographic research conducted in MS. Before detailing our research process, it is important to note that truthful to their ethos, all the collaborative spaces we visited were keen to welcome us as researchers and as such, access has been particularly smooth.

The data collected during the ethnographic inquiry mainly consist of observations and semi-structured interviews (See table 1). Most of the phases of observation took place on the ground floor of MS. The first author of this paper was seated in the coworking area of the place, and right in the perspective of the (only) entry point into MS. This was an opportunity to see all the people coming in and out, how people negotiated their entry and also to socialize. There were also several opportunities to move to the upper floors for coffee, lunch or other breaks. Observations amount to nine half days within the makerspace (in particular on the first floor), supplemented by three half days of observation of the vicinity of MS (cafés, neighbourhood associations, etc.). The first author of this paper took notes of what happened around him and ordered his notes at the end of each day.

Seven semi-structured interviews have complemented the phases of observation. The topics covered concerned the daily life of MS. These interviews allowed us to gain a deeper

insight into the ways in which silence is articulated and understood by people interacting with MS at different levels and to further explore the relation between silence and learning. Beyond that, the first author of this paper had the opportunity to converse with members of the space; this was also an opportunity to ‘feel’ when it was appropriate or not to break the silence (i.e. to phenomenologically experience silence). Finally, photographs, archives and online resources have been used in the early stages of the research in order to develop a better understanding of some of the key issues connected to new collaborative spaces.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

### **Nothing happens, something happens in a makerspace in Paris**

#### *Contextualising noises and silence at MS*

Artistic squats are both a model and a counter-model for MS, a source of inspiration about what should be (and should not be) done. Prior to setting up MS, its founder spent a considerable amount of time observing artistic squats. The majority of MS members, who are visual artists, have experienced squats. With this in mind, the founder of MS explained that MS is designed in such a way that it physically constrains and seeks to avoid ‘squat practices’: *“Visual artists are natural squatters. Every bit of space that can be squatted will be squatted. We have to avoid doors. We need large plateaus”*. Yet, MS reproduces the structure of squats, notably visible through the presence of a doorman at the entrance of the place. The doorman is here to both monitor who gets in and help visitors. One of the worst fears of the doormen and the manager is to see the place become a squat again. As a result, each resident has been issued a plastic member card that must be left by the doorman when

entering MS. When MS closes for the day, there should be no card left on the doorman's desk (made visible to everyone). Nobody is allowed to stay overnight at MS. Given that roughly 60% of the residents are on benefits, there is little doubt that, without this system, it would happen. On one occasion, we heard a phone conversation during which a member explained that he did not know where he would spend the coming night. Structurally, MS is not nicely decorated like some fancy coworking spaces, or even makerspaces, we visited; there is no table football, table tennis or a lounge in MS. While MS is primarily geared toward creative work, it also organizes training in management skills (e.g. sessions about business models, accounting, etc.).

Having experienced the culture of squats creates a particular relationship to the noise of the street and to noises alien to creative activities in general. It produces a very specific phenomenological body (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), extremely sensitized to unusual noises. For former squatters, much brouhaha coming from the street or brutal noises within MS would connote ideas of danger (either the police violently storming into the squat to evict its occupants or dealers fighting for the territory of the squat and its market), perhaps reminiscing certain lived experiences. In that sense, loud noises can thus be traumatic for some people 'inside'. The founder explained that *"any noise can be frightening. One day, the rumor had it that the place would be transformed into an art centre. They would be evicted. Most of these people are in precarious situations. More than ever, any unusual noise frightens them"*. Unusual noises can be seen as a disruption in the daily flow of activities that give directions and meaning to the work of the residents of MS. This particular relation to noises is not only very informative of the historicity of the place and its occupants, but also of the conditions under which creation and learning may happen at MS.

*Rhythms, visibilities, silence and events at MS*

Silence was expected in the vast majority of the places we visited and MS was no exception. For the managers of these various places, silence was a requirement for collective work. In an open or flexible space, phone calls, meetings and discussions need to be avoided and confined to some specific times (e.g. tours and visits, collective events, FuckUp nights, hold ups, networking sessions, workshops, etc.) and spaces (e.g. fabrication area, acoustic booth, event room, meeting room, machine area, etc.). Maintaining silence was enacted as a way to optimize both time and space. If users follow these rules, then there is no need for individual offices or compartmentalisation, and therefore less room is required for the coworking space, the makerspace, the hackerspace or the fab lab to operate. Some spaces thus offered time periods without Wi-Fi to make it possible for people to disconnect electronically. Yoga, sophrology, mindfulness or Tai Chi classes were also often silent or quiet times (beyond the open space) available by several spaces we visited. Interestingly, silence was also presented as a service offered by the manager of MS, an opportunity to disconnect; to be alone (yet surrounded) and to take time to focus on a project or even oneself.

On the workers' side, silence was described in our conversations as a way not to be disturbed by other people (almost acting like an invisible protection) while also feeling other members around (as opposed to feeling lonely at home<sup>vii</sup>). Clearly, they wanted to feel alone together (Spinuzzi, 2012) and silence was a paradoxical infrastructure that could materialize this possibility. Some people described silence as something shared, one member said "*I can share a long conversation, but I can also simply share silences*", thus hinting at the peculiar expressivity of silence. Indeed, silence appeared as the locus of collective undertaking and invisible attempts and trials to produce artistic visibilities. In his book *Signes*, Merleau-Ponty (1960) observed (by means of a slow-motion picture) that Matisse would often move his hands without touching his painting, and that paintbrushes would often move in extremely

quick virtual drawings before actually touching a canvas and drawing; only a part of the movement actually touched the canvas. Most artists in MS were in the process of producing these invisibilities wrapped by silence. They sat in front of their piece without ‘doing’ something, feeling what has been or could be done, making gestures around their piece, or experimenting a gesture on a smaller piece, all this producing a fascinating silence wrapping all the invisible activities necessary for the production of visible activities (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

On some other occasions, silence was described as something boring or hard to cope with, especially when one receives great or very bad news to share, or simply feels bad. In this case, silence was perceived as disciplining the space of MS and limiting possibilities (in the sense of constraining actions). We sometimes saw people leaving their work desk to go to the kitchen, around the coffee machine, or to the informal smoking area (i.e. in some liminal spaces) and spend time there just to have an opportunity to break the silence and start a discussion.

More generally, we found four key events bounding and underlying silence at the heart of the life of MS. These events are based on the observation of the main flow of activities happening within the makerspace. These key events constitute happenings, references and specific expressions (Hernes, 2014; Merleau-Ponty, 1945, 2010; Schatzki, 2010). They are (1) individual artistic projects, (2) floor collaborations, (3) training sessions and (4) lunch breaks. They all serve very different purposes, both in the life of MS and in that of its residents. In addition, each of these four main collective events is connected to one particular form of learning.

Individuals are focused on their work project, its space and its temporality. The space and the temporality of a given project can occasionally overflow the boundaries of MS. In this context, silence prevails and workers may engage in ‘co-created situated learning’ (see



Butcher, 2018); they share a silence that provides the conditions for them to apprentice their craftsmanship (through both reflexive phases and silent observations of fellow residents). Floor collaborations are episodic and more or less improvised; they happen through random encounters or when someone asks a question and then a conversation ensues. They foster what we call ‘bilateral or interpersonal learning’: there is an exchange of ideas and practices connected to the respective projects of the interlocutors. Training sessions take place on the ground floor around circular tables. They last a couple of hours and resemble ‘academic sessions’: they are clearly bounded in time and space and mainly involve people external to the space. Their formal structure enables a form of ‘technical learning’ – learning is unidirectional and strongly formatted and regimented by the codes of training sessions. Finally, lunch breaks constitute a space and time of convergence and as such, the most communal event for the residents of MS. Lunch is also an opportunity to make visible and to remind the collective orientation of MS and its artistic life. This amounts to a form of social learning.

Altogether, this produces a continuous movement ‘inside’ MS with people constantly ‘in action’. Most of the expressivity of gestures and movements (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) is thus about activity and creativity. The place is not expected to be a bubble for disconnection in the creative process or a context for entertainment and escape. Most breaks (e.g. for discussions) we attended took place outside the creative realm of MS (e.g. in the kitchen, in the corridors, in the internal court, on the terrace or in front of the building). Clearly, these spaces play a role in the continuous flow of creativity and associated practice of learning that give directions to the actions of MS. Furthermore, they can be seen as an extension of the embodied practices of workers, a necessary moment in time in order to make visible certain invisibilities and invisible other practices.

These different events may occasionally clash. The noise and movements connected to those involved in training sessions can, for instance, disturb people in the dressmaking workshop. Noises related to collaborative activities can be distracting and break other individual and collective events. Another example is how artistic activities can bother immediate neighbours (because of the smell, the dirty traces, the noise of some tools, etc.). As such, one form of learning and creating may jeopardize the conditions of success of another. In terms of the temporal and spatial cohabitation of all human activities, multiple mediations are particularly needed in order to build a paradoxical legitimization of these punctual disharmonies. The table below (Table 2) presents these four events through their spatial and temporal relationships to noise and their connected learning processes.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

*Silence as a central institution and a meta-event: From chiasm to institution*

Within MS, we observed several key discontinuities in the continuous process of maintaining silence by coworkers, designers (on the ground floor) and painters (upstairs). For members, one key interruption is when people would enter or leave the space and simply say hello or goodbye. This was seen as a legitimate noisy practice in the open space. Surprisingly, giving or receiving a phone call was another one. We thus often observed people answering phone calls, standing up, and leaving the space while walking in the direction of a liminal area (e.g. a phone booth, the stairs, the internal court, the street, etc.). A relaxed posture, eyes not staring at the screen of the laptop or a document, a particular body signal (a simple hello) were also other contexts of (often short) conversations with desk neighbours. These were only possible if the neighbour also sent signals of openness to a conversation. Other opportunities

to break a silence included the introduction of a newcomer (with close interests, projects or skills), tours, visits or unexpected events (e.g. a printer is not working and users require some help). But surprisingly, in places where mutual help, gifts and counter-gifts are expected to be strongly present, silence (as a social process) was quite continuous at MS (and other collaborative spaces we observed) in the dominant time-spaces constituted by everyday activities (which does not mean that we did not find them elsewhere in more liminal time-spaces). Besides, collective events (e.g. a cocktail on the ground floor) and liminal times and spaces (e.g. coffee breaks, smoking breaks, etc.) were opportunities for intense and often rich conversations (practice and advice sharing, news and rumour, more extended introductions, etc.).

For painters or other makers at MS, silence was less obvious since their activities and tools would create more noise than those of coworkers. That said, conversations were quite rare. While people might be interrupted by a goodbye or a hello, we noticed that people leaving took care not to interrupt or bother other painters during a key activity. We thus saw people hesitating and realizing that it was not the right time to leave, quickly changing their trajectory not to create a sense of obligation to interact. Continuities and discontinuities in gestures and movements were thus tightly related to visibility-invisibility loops and their maintenance (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Advice and sharing of tools and materials could also be another reason to interrupt silence. This was notably the case when one needed a material that was missing (e.g. paint, brush or other tools) or noticed something wrong in the practice of a younger or less experienced painter in the place. Strangely (at least for the non-painters we are), we rarely saw (maybe a longer study would have made it visible) people complimenting each other or evaluating other people's work; we did hear compliments being made in the kitchen but nothing in the main room where the main creative activities occur. Finally, phone calls and collective events were also part of major interruptions of silence for makers.

Behind the shared silence of MS, in the flow of an activity shared with other people, breaking silence could be a way to extend another continuity: feeling part of the ‘becoming of society’, getting a sense of ‘togetherness’ and community, and inscribing oneself in a flow of activities that overtakes one’s own bubble. For instance, we witnessed a case that made the presence of silence as an institution more visible. A silkscreen printer, located on the ground floor, had been going through a tough period for several months. It had become almost impossible for him to sell his cards and posters. One day, three interns from the fashion workshop (on the same floor) came close to him to cut pieces of fabric. Suddenly, he stood up, moved towards the big printers and produced a set of posters. Will he sell them? Probably not. Will he learn or test something new through this process? Probably not. But this is obviously not what was at stake. What was at stake for him was to share a legitimate movement, engaging with others (i.e. being part of this movement of activity), sharing the rhythm of the place, accompanying the sequences of other people’s work, constructing an affective relationship in the moment. It was an endogenous process, a co-construction, a shared feeling between the silkscreen printer and the three interns. It represented something they experienced together, or rather, the silkscreen printer experienced it as something that they shared together as the three interns were part of the engagement and pursued it. The three interns and the silkscreen printer did not decide to comply with each other or with a set of rules; they simply behaved collectively in a way they experienced and felt at that moment.

Interestingly, we noticed that silence was at the heart of numerous opportunities for encounters and learning (work discontinuities), or contrariwise, strategies to avoid encounters (work continuities). This was particularly true for painters. Body postures, immobility and the position of trestles were sometimes meant to create lasting bubbles of silence. Some artists were thus involved in gestures far from the eyes they could cross or stare at (those of people coming close to them). This was a way to create some focus on gesture itself, being at the

heart of reversibility (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). In contrast, other artists would put their trestles close to entry points or liminal spaces, be much more mobile and open to cross other people's gaze. For instance, we observed a writer setting up an improvised office in the kitchen and a draftsman locating his trestle in the painters' area. These two people deliberately looked for a provisional openness in their work process, probably for both emotional and work-related reasons. They were looking for discussions, encounters and advice. People involved in such spatial openness were sometimes stuck in critical processes and problems relating to their paintings and simply looking for solutions, or were close to the end of their piece and wanted to share an emotion which could be a source of learning for other people and for themselves.

Most people at MS worked on their craft and learned their art beyond the time-space of MS. These discontinuities were paradoxically a way to extend and continue the creative and learning process, enriching it with new times, new inspirations, new associations and new contexts. Continuities and discontinuities could also be seen in a more chiasmic way for those mainly working outside (e.g. in a workshop or in their apartment) and coming episodically to MS. For them, coming to MS was a way to break the silence that they may already be facing in their apartments or workshops. This was the case for some professional artists, but also for retired ladies (fondly called 'the grannies' by other residents) or for 'slashers' involved in other artistic activities than their art in order to survive. For many of them, MS was a landmark and a 'centre'. For instance, the founder explained: *"For people here, MS is an anchorage point. They come back from one year to another. The average stay is quite long. They also anchor here psychologically. This makes it possible for them to have a center in their trajectory. They disappear six months and they come back....when they have a problem."* For one person we met, we even wondered whether art was not simply a pretext to break loneliness and to create one-off conversations. He explained, *"I come here almost everyday. I'm part of the landscape. I like to talk to people here"*. Similarly, some people

moved from one floor (and universe) to another to have a chat with other people. The discontinuous noise of episodic conversations was thus the heart of a sociality, the opposite of the emptiness of their life outside made of continuous silence at home. At some point, we realized that we did not even care anymore about these whispered conversations, this discontinuous music with its melodies, which had become part of our silence.

### *Silence as embodied learning and working*

During our research at MS, our attention was captured by the complexity of silence and by the fact that silence was far from being something passive, invisible and continuous (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, 2010). First of all, the presence and maintenance of silence required a lot of activities and mediations. Some of these mediations include the use of headphones, the choice and continuous adaptation of a body posture (to avoid staring into the eyes of other people and to avoid adopting a body position that would suggest that one is open to social interactions), movements (such as the practice of walking that could also be a way to create a bubble to disconnect from the outside world), retreats in liminal spaces (such as cabin booth, stairs, street, internal courts), the paradoxical use of white noises or music (through headphone) or the choice of a location close to a machine producing a continuous noise. Producing and maintaining silence thus required a learning process that also applied to us (used to work in closed offices and more synchronic environments).

Silence was thus not just a form of passivity: it was often a kind of pre-reflexive context helping an individual or even a group activity to be more focused and more active. Silence was not an invisibility: people were often aware of its existence and were searching and cultivating it to make more visible for themselves what they were doing (i.e. the noise of

their own activities). Finally, silence was not at all a continuity: silence was frequently interrupted by micro-noises and sounds in the space, contained a lot of small noises<sup>viii</sup>. Interestingly, silence was then at the heart of numerous paradoxes. Silence did not mean the absence of noises. Silence could mean more quietness, focus, embodied learning, with noises covering other noises (with music or white sounds) or noises ignored through habits (people simply get accustomed to some noises and ignore them). Strangely, a collective silence of 50 people seated and working could fill the atmosphere more than 50 people talking loudly and inter-individually in the same place.

The four events identified at MS, as well as their relationship to silence and learning, are particularly interesting with regards to the notion of ‘institution’ in Merleau-Ponty’s (2010) writings. An institution is what is likely to give meaning, direction and synchrony to a set of events. It is a durable property of events, what is happening in each happening, the enduring part of the past and future in each and between presents. Through our research, silence has emerged as a pivotal institution at the heart of many visibilities-invisibilities, continuities-discontinuities and passivities-activities that underlie new work practices (coworking, mobility, remote work, telework, etc.). Silence is always there, in the sounds, in the noise between and inside all activities, at the heart of all the quietness necessary for work activities and learning, and in the four main events we identified, far from the simple opposite of noise and much more than a discontinuity. Silence is a highly temporal ‘institution’. It gives a sense of the continuities-discontinuities of work, a sense of the duration of work (a long period of silence is expected to be a long period of work), the rhythm and typical tempo of a day of work. Silence preceding an event orders it and makes the event different than if everybody had already had the opportunity to meet and chat all day long. The event becomes more desired and more meaningful.

Aside from temporalizing new work practices, silence plays a role in a process of embodied learning (Blackman and Sadler-Smith, 2009). The realm of silence is not devoid of discoveries, apprenticeship or intuitions. By creating bubbles, silence provides the conditions of experience in which one can genuinely focus on what is being done and how it is being done. Through silence, one can not only inhabit one's gestures but also feel other people's gestures and movements. In that sense, it is a prelude to other events (other learning processes, noisy moments of collective reflexivity, etc.). Silence prepares true and deep interactions with other people, and the embodied process of learning that will ensue. It is an important aspect of the embodied experience of work (Willems, 2018), something that requires a specific learning process (coming from another work environment made us aware of it). Silence is a deep and emergent condition of possibility of learning for painters, sculptors, writers and players of the maker space. In that sense, learning is 'corporeal, pre-discursive and pre-social, stemming from the body's perpetual need to cope with tensions arising in the body-environment connections.' (Yakhlef, 2010: 409). Ultimately, silence is the very transcendence that makes learning possible in the process of artistic creation.

Through this prism of silence as an active, experiential, embodied and political accomplishment, learning emerges as a set of gestures and embodied practices that lie at the heart of a 'felt solidarity' (see Mazis, 2016). Silence makes obvious the fact that we never learn alone, as a sum of individual, bounded bodies and mediations. Alterity is at the heart of learning, it gives a depth to the process of learning, it makes it possible as a felt becoming through which we can collectively and ethically reflect upon what we do.

**Conclusion: makers and entrepreneurs in search of silence, in search through silence**



Throughout this paper, we sought to rethink the notion of silence in the context of new ways of working. Our primary concern was to investigate the relationship between silence and learning; this entailed exploring alternative ways of expressing the notion of silence, that is to say moving away from narratives that simply portray silence as an absence, a lack of or even a non-existence. By engaging with the work of the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty, we developed a more comprehensive and phenomenological conceptual framework around the notion of silence through which we can highlight both the wealth of interventions, mediations and effort required to perform silence in these new work places and the pivotal role played by silence with regards to the actualisation, temporalization embodiment and apprenticeship of new work practices. Silence is more than ever a fight, a rupture, and an escape. It is a violence covering and containing poverty. It is sometimes a cry expressing it. Most of all, silence is also and paradoxically the necessary time-space for reflexion, learning, emancipation and the emergence of various creative and entrepreneurial endeavours. It is an institution in Merleau-Ponty's (2010) sense, something generating temporality and ordering collective activity. Silence is also something entrepreneurs, mobile workers, remote workers, activists, artists and all citizens alike need more and more in the tumult of our cities.

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## APPENDIX

### List of collaborative spaces visited between 2014 and 2017 by the first author

Name of space	City	Type of space
MS	Paris	Hybrid (makerspace and coworking)
Agora Collective	Berlin	Coworking
Almogavers Business Factory	Barcelona	Coworking and incubator
Anahoy	Berlin	Coworking
Atelier des Médias	Lyon	Coworking
Beeotop	Clichy	Coworking
Betahaus	Barcelona	Coworking
Betahaus	Berlin	Coworking
Blue Chili	Sydney	Coworking
Bond Collective	New York	Coworking
C-base	Berlin	Hackerspace
Canodrom	Barcelona	Coworking and incubator
Carrefour Numérique	Paris	Fab lab
Casaco	Paris	Coworking
Collective work	Singapore	Coworking
Coworking BGE	Paris	Coworking
Coworking Lille	Lille	Coworking
Coworking Republic	Paris	Coworking
Coworklisboa	Lisbon	Coworking
Coworkshop	Paris	Coworking
Craft	Paris	Coworking
Creatis	Paris	Hybrid space: Coworking, 'cultural entrepreneur residence' and incubator
DMM	Tokyo	Makerspace
Dojo Crea	Paris	Coworking
Ecoworking	Lyon	Coworking
E-garage (ESADE)	Barcelona	Coworking
Electrolab	Paris	Hackerspace and fab lab
Engine Room	Sydney	Coworking
ENSAD	Paris	University
FabCafé	Tokyo	Fab lab
Fab lab Berlin	Berlin	Fab lab
Fab lab Singapore	Singapore	Fab lab
Fontaines O Livres	Paris	Coworking

Hamelaha Workshop	Tel Aviv	Makerspace
Hangar.org	Barcelona	Artistic makerspace
Hack Manhattan	New York	Hackerspace
Ici Montreuil	Montreuil	Hybrid space (makerspace, but also coworking space)
Impact Hub London	London	Coworking
Impact Hub Singapore	Singapore	Coworking
IPSOS	Paris	Corporate innovative workplace
Kwerk	Boulogne- Billancourt	Coworking
Kwerk	Paris	Coworking
L'Archipel	Paris	Coworking (of solidarity)
L'Atelier fil rouge	Paris	Coworking
La Commune	Paris	Association
La Cordée	Lyon	Coworking
La Cordée Paris	Paris	Coworking
La Fabrique des Objets libres	Lyon	Fab lab
La Mutinerie (ville)	Paris	Coworking
La Ruche	Paris	Coworking
Labo de l'édition	Paris	Coworking, incubator and events
Le 10h10	Paris	Coworking coffee
L'Établisienne	Paris	Coworking
Le Gymnase	Paris	Coworking
Le Mixer - UNIBAIL- RODAMCO	Paris	Corporate and closed coworking
Le Tank	Paris	Coworking
Liberté Living Lab	Paris	Hybrid space (civic tech, coworking, cultural events)
LODGE	Tokyo	Coworking
LX factory	Lisbon	Makerspace and maker area
Makers of Barcelona	Barcelona	Makerspace
Marketing space	Paris	Coworking and creativity studios
Mon atelier en ville	Paris	Coworking
MyCowork	Paris	Coworking
Nexity Blue Office	Issy-Les- Moulineaux	Coworking
Nextdoor	Paris	Coworking
Nextdoor Défense	Paris	Coworking
Noisebridge	San Francisco	Hackerspace
Numa	Paris	Coworking
Old Trampery	London	Coworking
Player - (LLL prototype)	Paris	Corporate coworking
PSL-Lab	Paris	Coworking
Santz Oberholz	Berlin	Coworking
Servcorp	Singapore	Hybrid (coworking and



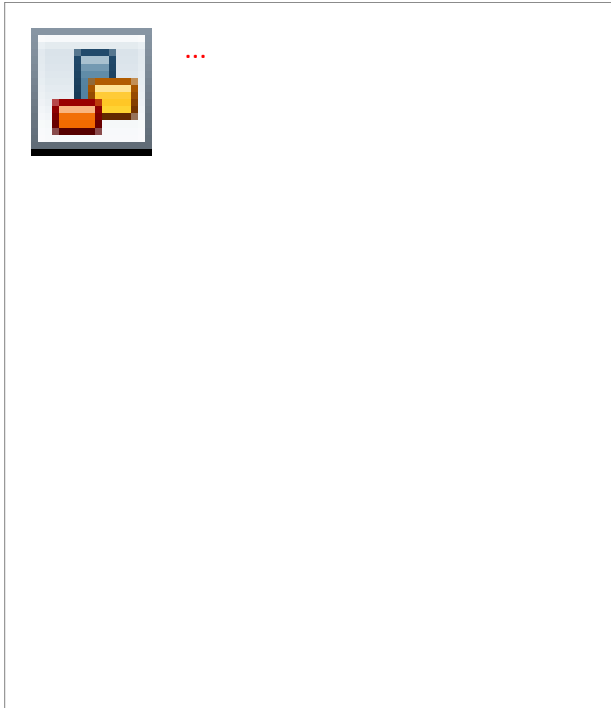
		business centre)
Soleilles	Paris	Coworking
SMU Lab	Singapore	Makerspace
Solidifier	Sydney	Makerspace
Spaces	Paris	Coworking
Stone & Chalk	Sydney	Coworking
Stone soup	Athens	Coworking
The Hoxton Mix	London	Coworking
Urban Nation	Berlin	Artistic makerspaces
Ventura	Sydney	Coworking
Villa Bonne Nouvelle - ORANGE	Paris	Corporate and semi-open coworking
Village London	London	Coworking
Volumes	Paris	Coworking
WeWork Paris	Paris	Coworking
WeWork Berlin	Berlin	Coworking
Worklab (aux Grands Voisins) LBMG	Paris	Corporate and semi-open coworking

<b>Type of data</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Period of data collection</b>
<b>Participant observations</b>	<p>Nine half days of observation within the makerspace (in particular on the first floor)</p> <p>Three half days of observation of the external environment (cafés, neighbourhood associations)</p>	2015 (January-July)
<b>Semi-structured interviews</b>	<p>Seven semi-structured interviews (1 hour each):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Two with staff members (general manager and PR)</li> <li>- Two with residents</li> <li>- Three with neighbours: two with members of an old local association (very close to MS) and one with a neighbour of MS</li> </ul>	2015 (January-July)
<b>Archives</b>	Internal (status of MS, internal rules, leaflets, etc.) and external (publications in journals and magazines about MS)	2015
<b>Online resources</b>	Blogs, social networks, websites, fora about the environment, artistic squats and the broader territory	2015
<b>Photographs</b>	500 internal and external pictures of the place and the area around the place	2015 (January-July)

**Table 1: Ethnographic style of investigation in MS**

	<b>Event I: Individual artistic project</b>	<b>Event II: Floor collaboration</b>	<b>Event III: Training sessions</b>	<b>Event IV: Lunch breaks</b>
<b>Spatial context</b>	Immobile. In the creative areas and rooms, on the floors.	Mainly in liminal times and spaces (corridors, stairs, conversations in movement, etc.)	On the ground floor, close to the coworking space. Visible from the entrance.	In the kitchen inside, in private apartments or (more rarely because of the price) in bistros around the place.
<b>Temporal orientation</b>	Fragmented. Fabricating the piece of art takes time. Sometimes, people also work at home.	Ephemeral, fragile collaborations between people who will probably meet again.	Intense moment between participants who will probably never meet again and who mix with local members on a weekly basis.	Intense moment of conversations that can be interrupted and resumed later.
<b>Relationship with noise</b>	Silent time. Strong focus. Also avoid disrupting visually and aurally other people.	Noisy time, but contained by liminality and/or movement (walked conversation)	Noisy moment in an open context (the ground floor with the often empty coworking space connoting business)	Noisy moment contained by a room and a particular time of the day (lunch break) making noise non-disruptive.
<b>Learning</b>	Co-created situated learning	Bilateral/Inter-personal learning	‘Technical’ learning	Social learning

**Table 2: Four key events at MS and their relationship with noise and silence**



**Figure 1: Silent liminality: A cabin booth in a coworking space (Source: Authors' own photograph)**

- i For Merleau-Ponty (1960, 2010), nature is not a virgin world expecting human transformation and appropriation. Nature is the legitimation and legitimate flow of our life, what we do not even ‘see’ but that which is at the heart of our visible life.
- ii Merleau-Ponty died the year before the publication of Austin’s (1962) seminal book on performativity. Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty’s concepts of visibility and invisibility present similarities to Austin’s work, and even to the later temporal view of performativity elaborated by Barad (2007). The visibility-invisibility loop is a condition of possibility of action that emerges in the flow of action itself (it is not a transcendental process as defended by Kantian views).
- iii We see some similarities to Ricoeur’s (1985) work on narratives and time. Interestingly though, Ricoeur barely quotes Merleau-Ponty (except on pages 41, 57, 415 and 416).
- iv I can delegate this task to an alarm clock. But even if I set it up myself, phenomenologically, in my present, it will not be a decision I made.
- v This is a fictional name that will be used throughout the paper.
- vi This stance has been questioned by recent research that highlights the prevalence of the ‘community-orientation’ of the hacker movement over its political engagement (see Davies, 2017).
- vii Silence was then an opportunity for a ‘felt solidarity’ between entrepreneurs (Mazis, 2016).
- viii We never found a fully silent space. Hosted activities always produce a minimum of noise. Phenomenologically, even in places where no ‘external’ noises could be identified, we were surprised to hear all the noises produced by our own body (breath, stomach, pulse, body movements, etc.); full silence would be death.