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When the Surprise Makes the Clinic

Workshops sometimes deliver surprises. Once one has gotten over the surprise, the questions emerge. I wish to share my reflections about this practical experience.

The aim of this article is not to relate the workshop in itself, but rather the way it was set up. I made this choice for two reasons. Firstly, because the most important thing, in what I want to share, isn't to make or produce anything concrete. The point is to «preoccupy»¹ and not to occupy the child. It isn't because the child is occupied with a task that he is at work.

Before broaching what is covered by this notion of «being at work» and thus what is aimed at in a workshop, it seems to me useful to specify what we mean by the term «workshop.» Workshops are moments in the day that take place outside of daily living, which is to say, outside the moments of dinners and evenings. There are four of them, two in the morning and two in the afternoon. They are moments of the day whose duration is limited in time to one hour. From September to June, excluding holidays, they take place each week on the same day at the same hour. The workshop is lead by the same intervenant(s) and concerns the same children who are enrolled in them.

Thus, the workshop is a moment that can become a marker in time for the child. The fact that the workshop lasts a defined lapse of time introduces the idea that there is a beginning, but also an end, precise and always the same. In addition, the fact that they are repeated each week, at the same hour and with the same people, harks back to the idea of a permanence in time. This allows certain children to find a way to locate themselves throughout the week. In this way, we have been able to observe that, for a psychotic child for whom the notions Monday, Tuesday, etc. do

not allow him a way to divide and order time, the workshops provide a way to organize his week. He is thus able to say: «Today I have workshop X, then workshop Y. Tomorrow, I have workshop with So-and-so...» We see that the workshop's permanence in time can serve as support for the child, replacing what doesn't allow him to locate himself with the words Monday, Tuesday, etc., words which suffice in themselves to orient the rest of us.

In posing the question of what is the aim of the workshop, we rediscover the notion of «being at work.» What is covered by this notion? The work in question has nothing to do with a professional activity. It is not a paid activity. The goal is not to produce either, to whip up little objects for their simple utility. Thus, what is central to this work in workshops is not the object which might be created, but the child himself, or rather the speech of the child. In plain English, one can hear in this notion of «being at work» the fact that the child constructs something of his own history and the coordinates of his symptom. This elaboration is effectuated by the intermediary of speech. Thus, one of the functions of the workshop is to render possible the emergence of speech. And the production of an object intervenes as support to this work, which is to say, insofar as it permits the child to speak. It is easy to state that children rarely set about speaking of what concerns them without recourse to a drawing or a game, for example. The production of an object, then, is a necessary support, but it must remain in the position of support. In effect, it is only with regard to what the child might say that the production of objects find their place at the heart of what we do. This is why the production of objects is secondary to the production of signification, or, in other words, secondary to the words with which the child accompanies this production, whether it be drawing, painting, the creation of an object, etc. The fact that we don't keep all the productions that a child might realize in a workshop illustrates this. Our work is not that of making collections.

This leads to another aim of workshops, that of the elaboration of clinical case studies. This takes place in teams, during meetings or practical seminars.

What is pertinent about this construction of clinical cases? This elaboration of clinical case studies enlightened by theoretical notions is what underpins our practice. In other words, it justifies itself by being the beacon of our work. In this way, with the clinical elements brought out during the workshops as well as the daily life experiences, we attempt to locate what is at stake for each child case by case. Case by case means for each child in particular, because what reveals itself as being pertinent for one child is not generalizable to the others.

The work of case studies thus permits us to make or refine a diagnosis, or to specify the work that is to be begun or pursued with a child. The only reason for this diagnosis is to orient us in how we work with the child. However, it is clear that we don't come out of these meetings with a list of interventions to be made or not made. There are no tricks, no recipes. But we don't just do «whatever» either. Thanks to the construction of these cases, we have at our disposition a line or thread that can guide us in our interventions. I cannot avoid pointing out the fact that the term 'intervention' includes the term 'invention.' For it is indeed a question of invention. It is a matter of inventing an intervention, and, although one cannot know in advance what effect it will produce, it must be targeted. And it can't be targeted unless we have at our disposition the minimal elements to orient it. Thus, what is at stake for the child must be located so that we can intervene in the most adequate fashion possible. For example, as regards the making of a diagnosis, we intervene differently with a neurotic child than with a psychotic child. Without going into details, it might be adequate to play on the meaning of words, on their ambiguity with a neurotic child, but we avoid such interventions with a psychotic child. The psychotic doesn't play on the meaning of words.

This reflection on the pertinence of an intervention brings out another notion, that of the «after-effect.» We often say that we work in the after-effect. What does that signify? It can be understood as the thread of what comes to be evoked -- when, above, I spoke of intervening more adequately. This after-effect can be understood in the fact that it is only after having made an intervention that we can measure its effects. In the same way, it is in the after-effect that the pertinence or impertinence of an intervention reveals itself.

What is important about the question of pertinence, then, is specifying the how and why of the pertinence. It isn't important to know that an intervention has worked (which would situate it at the level of a trick that it suffices to reproduce), but rather what was operative in this intervention. It is also from this that a clinic can be invented.

This after-effect concerns us, since what follows is a reflection on the setting up of a workshop, which clarified for me the way in which the work in a workshop can take place. Until then, I had seen it in a rather rigid manner. For example, having the idea that the child must absolutely say something about a drawing, I would plant myself in front of him and encourage him to tell me. I took note of everything that was said. Suffice it to say that from this start not much happened, the child being blocked by a precise and insistent request. Or again, I saw the workshop as something regulated. If it was a painting workshop, then one had to paint. I left very

little space for negotiation at this epoch in which I was trapped by rules that I had posed as inflexible.

After these little detours, a place for the surprise!

It was a Wednesday afternoon. All the children were present and we couldn't decide what to do or how to do it. Having waited a long time, Laura asked to go listen to music in one of the workshop rooms. Permission given, she went. Time passed. Laura still hadn't come back, so I went to make sure everything was alright. I then discovered Laura, John and Valerie, each one preoccupied with what he had found in the room. As Laura invited me to join them, I settled in with them. Recess time being close, we left the room.

The next week, to my great astonishment, the same three children clamored for the workshop. Thus, this impromptu moment had become a workshop. I then took the role of letting myself be guided by them, and I proposed that we «construct» the workshop. So we needed to find a name for it. It was Laura who gave it: «Workshop All the Names.» Having failed to ask her, we will never know if this should be written names [noms] or NOs [nons] or... They then created the rules: take off your shoes to come in because there is carpet, take note of what they are going to do, each one works at an activity in the place defined by the room, the workshop begins/ends when one turns on/off the radio. We would later see how each of them managed with the different rules.

Only the purchasing of materials remained. Innovation here also -- we decided to do it together. Once again it was surprising. Each one had a precise idea of the materials to buy: notebook, storybook, scissors, glue, crayons or balloons... If something lacked, they didn't complain; they made a list, and we bought it the following week. It is interesting to note that the fact of being at the heart of the workshop project, having constructed it, and thus its being allayed with their own desire had set aside the usual complaints along the lines of «That's not it, I want something else...» Perhaps this has to do with the fact that this workshop, being their creation, had not been presented as a caprice on the part of the intervenant or as something imposed on them.

The following concerns what was revealed to be particular for each child and can be read in view of a diagnosis:

Nathalie is a psychotic of fourteen. Her relation to the rules of the workshop were more that scrupulous. Thus, it was impossible for her to begin the workshop if we forgot to turn on the radio. In the same way,

if the words «end of the workshop» were pronounced, the radio had to be turned off immediately. This radio came to mark indelibly for her the beginning and end of the workshop. We see that for the psychotic subject, it is out of the question to play with the rules. They cannot, under any circumstances, be called into question. To give another example, she strictly held to what she had decided to do at the beginning of the workshop. Her activities always turned around drawing, cutting and pasting. Here again, she was fixated. There is no place for the impulsive in psychosis! The same things always happened in the same way: after having drawn in a notebook or leafed through a magazine, she would tear out all the pages, cutting out all the images to then glue, unglue and finally throw them out. This hard labor, ceaselessly repeated, was punctuated with little phrases. To each torn out image, she said, «I'll keep it.» She then threw it away, punctuating her gesture with the words, «Too late. I threw it out.» This little scenario, endlessly renewed, remained very enigmatic. The following event clarified it a little: when the workshop was finished, we put away the materials. She had decided to keep her work. However, she threw it out, only to ask us, very angrily, who had thrown it out. This is coupled with the fact that at certain moments she screams in the night and can only say of it that «It screams in my head.» Or again, she holds forth dialogues in the bathroom when she's all alone -- «Stop. That hurts.» This makes us wonder if, at these moments, she isn't invaded by auditory hallucinations. Thus it would be an imperative pushing her to throw out her material. How has this served us? It permits us, for example, to be attentive to the fact that she cannot respond to the question «Why did you throw it out?» This makes us realize that it isn't pertinent to ask her this question in an attempt to make her take into account that it is she, herself who has done the throwing out. In fact, she has no response.

For Laura and John, two neurotic children, the relation to rules was different. Even if they partook in setting them up, we would see that each one played with the rules in his/her fashion.

Laura is eleven. She gives the first impression that she's the one who regulates the workshop for the others: she reminds them, for example, to take off their shoes before coming into the room. But she is also the one who knows: she knows how to draw, count, write, etc. And she presents herself as the one who can teach the others. But, watch out! Not at just any old moment. Only when it's her idea. What is at stake for her is the element of mastery. Nothing must escape her, above all, not decision making. She, thus, makes herself the spokesperson for the rules of the workshop, an appeal to the rules which justifies this relation to mastery. She can in this way quickly become a «tyrannical master» whose exigencies must be satisfied. Underneath all that, it is easy to say that Laura wants to be the unique object of our attention. She leaves no place for the other

children. Whether in workshop or in daily living, she wants to be the one to whom we pay our attention, above all, in exclusivity. Our work with her consists of specifying what is at stake for her in this place of exception in which she's installed herself. It is very difficult to dislodge her from it without being subjected to the most vehement thundering. It goes without saying that having located this is not sufficient in itself. What remains is to let her speak about it so that we can aim, perhaps, at changing this position.

As to John, he is six. The only constant that one can find for him in workshop is the following: he never manages to do all that he's decided to do, his enumeration is so long. In this way, at the beginning of workshop, he will say he wants to draw, cut-out, color, read, play ball, do a puzzle...and I pass on the rest. Evidently, there is not enough time to do everything. Things continued like this until the day he called my attention to the fact that he never finishes what he starts to do. I refrained from answering this question. I simply acquiesced, while specifying that it was, all the same, bizarre, all the more bizarre in that he found it important that I continue to write down his schedule. This is how he found a solution to his «problem:» it sufficed to simply decide on a maximum number of activities, he told me. But that wasn't the question, because then he found himself confronted with another problem: after having decided on an activity, he then always wanted to do something else. What is at stake here is not that the number of activities that he envisions doing is too large, but rather it is a question of the difficulty of choosing. What he puts forward in this way is his impossibility to choose, for whatever he chooses means losing something. If one chooses to do one thing over another, then this signifies, in fact, that the second cannot be done. And this question of the unbearable loss is impossible to resolve by simply fixing a smaller number of activities. It will always be about something else. It is he who must do this work on the question of loss in order to find a solution that will be acceptable to him. He is, moreover, working on it. Thus, it is up to us to accompany him, without always having an idea of the solution, since it remains to be discovered.

We now come to the place I occupy in this workshop, which I qualify as being that of «witness.» This evidently implies my being present. This phrase might seem to be a big banality, however, the notion of «presence» merits being developed. Rather than a presence, I will speak of a particular mode of presence.

But before clarifying this notion with what happens in the workshop, we will broach the term «witness.» It also merits being qualified. Its definition in the *Petit Robert* dictionary is the following: «Person who

attends an event, an act, and perceives it...Simple spectator who does not intervene.»

So the first part of this definition designates the fact of attending an event and perceiving it. In other words, it is the place of reception, the place of address. What the child has to express necessitates his having at his disposition a place to address it. However, as suggested by the second part of the definition, do we remain only a spectator who does not intervene? That would be a gross error.

So now it is time to get specific about this notion of «presence.» Being present and spectator is not enough. I bring forward three definitions of the term «presence»: the fact of being in the place of which one speaks, the fact of being involved, of participating, and the fact of a country playing a role in a territory.

I would say that the mode of presence which sustains our work is to be found in a synthesis of these three definitions. It is, above all, necessary to be physically present. However, this is not enough. One also has to be involved. The clinic is not a spectator sport. One has to get wet! To this is added the third definition. It concerns playing a role, the role of witness.

I will illustrate this with what happens in the workshop. In this way, after having noted down the date and, for each one, what he has chosen to do, I also chose an occupation. It might be coloring, crosswords, etc... In any case, it is something that I want to do at that moment. Occupied with a personal task, I am not, for all that, not listening to everything that happens. I simply am not free, and not waiting for something to happen either. What's more, the fact of being occupied in this way suppresses the important element of invasion. It concerns the gaze. I would say that this mode of presence plays on a certain absence -- the absence of a gaze, but also the absence of «omnipresence» (if you will, and in default of finding a more correct term) since I am occupied by other things than directly by what the children do. It is interesting to note that the moment that one is no longer waiting, the child begins to ask. I am frequently solicited, in this way, by one or another child, who asks me to read what he has written or to help him draw a picture. This mode of presence is supported by speech. Not a speech which comes up with a solution to the question -- as we saw in the case of John -- but rather speech constituted as a relaunching. It is one way to signify to a child that there is something there to be gotten at, but this style of intervention is obviously not generalizable. Take, for example, the case of Nathalie. We were able to state that, for her, there was reason to avoid exactly this kind of thing, since it would only send her back to a question for which she hasn't any answer.

Another absence must equally be taken into account in this mode of presence. I will approach it from what we call a «position of non-knowledge.» First, we specify that a position of non-knowledge is not equivalent to an empty knowledge. It is rather a question of nuance! We had seen earlier the pertinence of having at our disposition clinical elements in order to orient an intervention. I did say orient an intervention, and not determine it. These clinical elements located for each child are the beacons of our work. It concerns knowing a maximum on everything from general cultural myths to, why not, even football! It also concerns knowing as much as possible about clinical structures and theory, which is to say Freud's metapsychology and Lacan's mathemes. Thus, the knowledge in question is vast and diversified. But in no case must this become a barrier to our work. Thus, what one knows must only aid in guiding the interventions. It must never let us prejudge what's going to happen. What is at question in not knowing is not understanding too quickly -- in other words, with our prejudices, the stupidity inherent to each of us. It concerns not understanding too quickly what a child or adult means when he/she says something. Do I dare say that this non-knowledge is the little alarm clock that warns us to listen, but that we don't know what we are going to hear? In other words, it is only at the price of letting go of the idea of knowing what is going to happen that one can leave the child the possibility of elaborating the speech that is proper to him/her. Moreover, it is only from such a position that the work can open onto the surprise and the invention.

What can be concluded from this work? Simply that there is no conclusion in the sense of a stopping or fixation. The notions that have been broached have no other reason to be defined than that of relaunching the question. It isn't a question of believing these questions resolved. But rather, setting out from these few elements, letting ourselves attempt something. The elaboration of the clinic is never ending.

¹ Dominique Holvoet. «D'une tentative de localisation de la jouissance avec un enfant autiste.» *Les Feuilles du Courtil* #1, 1989; p. 69.