

**CONTEMPORARY  
DANCE  
FROM FLANDERS**  
*1980 – 2016*

**Pieter T'Jonck**

*An essay on thirty-five years of contemporary dance  
in Flanders, including Brussels*

**Flanders Arts Institute invited Pieter T'Jonck** to offer a bird's-eye view on contemporary dance in Flanders. As Flanders' foremost dance critic, he has been keeping a close track of the field since the mythical 1980s with great curiosity. In the essay *Contemporary Dance from Flanders (1980-2016)* he offers his reading of thirty-five years of contemporary dance in Flanders with a broad consideration of the societal context in which the genre took shape.

#### About the author

Pieter T'Jonck is a civil engineer and architect. He writes about dance, theater, visual arts and architecture for, among others, newspaper *De Morgen* and several magazines in Belgium and abroad. T'Jonck also works as a mentor at *DasArts* in Amsterdam.

## INTRO

Despite a relative lack of interest in contemporary dance from the Flemish Government, since 1980 a dance scene emerged in Flanders that has become so rich and varied in its output that Brussels, the Capital of Flanders and Belgium, has widely been considered as the contemporary dance capital of Europe. Contemporary dance emerged virtually from nowhere as if by magic in the early 1980s.

Apart from the Royal Ballet of Flanders in Antwerp and Maurice Béjart's 'Ballet of the 20th Century', the former resident company of *De Munt/La Monnaie* (the National Opera) in Brussels, there was almost no dance to be seen in Flanders. This makes it all the more remarkable that a number of individual artists almost simultaneously, but individually, started creating work with which they redefined the idea of what dance could be, in a relatively unique and personal manner. No less remarkable was the fact that their break with the existing landscape not only appeared a sensation on the home front, but was also considered to be radically innovative in cities such as Paris, and even New York.

However, this revolution was not isolated. Also the theatre landscape in Flanders underwent changes during this period that emerged at a pace that matched their radical

## THE FLEMISH CONDITION

### *two crises without a safety net*

nature. It is remarkable that for this up-and-coming generation, the distinction between dance and theatre was not truly relevant – what was at stake was a redefinition of the essence and spirit of the performing arts. This dance and theatre work would have a major influence on everything that was to follow over the next thirty years. The legacy was felt even more strongly because from the turn of the century, a lot of choreographic work from these early days was being performed again, often with the same people as dancers or rehearsal directors for a new cast. However, in what follows I would equally like to make the claim that the dance currently produced in Flanders contrasts sharply with the work from the 1980s and 1990s. Dance artists that emerged from the year 2000 onward stake a different perspective about what dance could be, work in a completely different way and embark on much more intensive collaborations, adopting a different view of their work.

In order to understand the sudden explosion of new and influential work in the 1980s it is important to compile a picture of the social conditions that existed in Flanders at the time. Flanders was definitely not a leader in developments in dance or theatre at the time. On the contrary. From the mid-1970s, fundamental changes swept through dance and theatre in the whole of Europe and the USA, long before they took place in Flanders.

For example, theatre directors no longer stuck to a piece's text. This formed the rationale for a collage-like, associative montage of actions and images. In this way they destroyed the idea of a theatre performance as an independent, complete reality alongside and beyond normal life, and thus immediately also any illusion of realism. Their work could only be read as an 'open' proposal that demanded considerable effort from the audience. The same was true for dance. When the twentieth century had already witnessed widespread new techniques and dance vocabularies, in addition to those of ballet, the time had come for choreographers to put an end to the self-evident idea that dance had to demonstrate exceptional physical control or had to work with coded, stylised movements. Each movement, even the most banal and least elegant, could suddenly be incorporated in dance. Choreographers also increasingly omitted a recognisable story. Thus this new dance appeared to start from scratch with every new production, to repeatedly ask the question of what the (social) meaning of dance could be, or from where it could emerge. Moreover, additional media such as video, film or text were liberally used to enhance the work's impact. Here too the audience found itself in a radical new position: it was forced to attribute meaning itself to sometimes highly disparate images. The German researcher Hans-Thies Lehmann coined the term 'postdramatic theatre' to describe this new form of theatre. What's striking is that in Lehmann's classical study of this

subject he often refers to the theatre that emerged in Flanders and Brussels from the 1980s. One could conclude that Flanders was not so much a pioneer in the new developments but became a leader in this new aesthetic after a certain delay. Of course the question is how, apart from the individual talents of choreographers and directors, it was possible that Flanders appeared to have almost entirely missed the boat until the beginning of the 1980s.

The first explanation for this leading role may sound rather paradoxical. In contrast to neighbouring countries such as France, England or Germany, Flanders did not possess a strong theatre or dance tradition by any means. In the postwar period very little happened in the field of dance, in contrast to in the Netherlands, where Hans van Manen established a new dance tradition during the postwar period. There was a simple explanation for this: there was a lack of resources, both financial and intellectual. In the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, Flanders had suffered a long period of impoverishment. Only after the war came a period of sudden and great prosperity, but this did not instantly lead to a new mentality that was open to contemporary art, except in a few major cities. One could even say that the opposite was true. Due to a long anti-urban tradition, often of a Catholic or nationalistic nature, the upcoming middle class was barely able to comprehend what form a cultural (urban) scene could take. They needed to enter an unfamiliar domain, because until then, Belgian culture was mainly ruled by a predominantly French-speaking, urban – and thus considered ‘alien’ in cultural terms – bourgeoisie.

Nevertheless this upcoming Flemish middle class quickly and effectively understood that cultural literacy was important if it finally wanted to establish its own Flemish ‘identity’ following a long struggle. It also understood that ‘culture’ was a major asset in improving its position in the world. This high regard for culture nevertheless often amounted to nothing more than lip service. Cultural literacy did not yet run deep. This was revealed, for example, by the distrust that largely applied to any cultural expressions that went ‘too far’. Groundbreaking authors such as Antonin Artaud

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or Samuel Beckett, choreographers such as Merce Cunningham or artists like Andy Warhol were dismissed for being ‘too extreme’. Their work could be seen in Belgium, but generally only in Antwerp or Brussels. Therefore the drastic innovations in the arts that already announced themselves on stages in neighbouring countries from the early 1960s only penetrated a small group of early innovators (many of whom also connected with the innovators from the 1980s). On the other hand, the general public resolutely clung to ‘decent’, safe (and deadly boring) homegrown productions.

As a result, the generation born around 1960 developed the impression that theatre visits organised by their parents or schools were also a form of theatre in itself. To them it was as if their parents’ generation ‘acted out’ the idea that the middle class was progressing not only financially but also intellectually and mentally. It is hardly a coincidence that two major productions from this period, namely *Rosas danst Rosas*, the second production by *Rosas*, and *Het is theater zoals te verwachten en te voorzien was*, the second production by Jan Fabre, explicitly refer to theatricality in their titles. In the 1980s, young Flemings indeed discovered that ‘the good life’ in which their parents believed might have been an illusion, that the cultural emancipation for which they strived in their theatre visits was a ritual that offered little meaning. They would use theatre and dance precisely to highlight this. Works from this period contained a generous dose of punk energy. Their work soon went further, much further, to completely redefine the relationship between the artist and the audience.

The realisation that the myth of Flanders’ cultural emancipation was flawed suddenly and comprehensively spread due to two crises that followed in rapid succession in less than ten years’ time. In Flanders, just as in the rest of Western Europe, in the 1960s, ancient, religiously-inspired values and traditions collapsed under the revolution of a generation that no longer wanted to tolerate the whims of (religious) authorities. During this period the Catholic Church soon lost its position of power and other ideological pillars also saw their influence visibly wane. Initially, these new viewpoints constituted a source of great optimism among young people. This optimism grew even more as a result of the period’s economic prosperity. At the time

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nobody reflected on the burden of having to shape one's own life according to still unwritten rules.

Not that much later, in 1974, a second crisis followed, this time an economic crisis. As a result of targeted actions by the OPEC countries there was a sudden and acute shortage of oil that (literally) brought the economy to a shuddering halt. The consequences of the oil crisis would be felt for a decade. The generation born around 1960, the heirs of the notorious 'soixante-huitards', discovered that its future prospects were far less glorious than those of their predecessors. This generation soon exchanged a naive belief in progress for deep pessimism. The future was not rosy, and there was no longer any ideological safety net to drown out the pain with soothing words and actual support. Also this was punk energy.

But how to create art from this kind of impotence, if there isn't even, as in neighbouring countries, a model at hand for credible art? The generation that turned twenty around 1980 was suddenly perfectly clear about what Belgian theatre and dance actually offered: nothing more than a rudimentary copy of foreign examples, without any noteworthy individual tradition and full of dubious ideological influences. Genuine art it was not, but apparently it no longer had an alternative meaning either. This lack of inspirational examples appeared to be a blessing in disguise. Young artists wanted to air their criticism or vision of a society that had left them nothing more than a cardboard copy (on stage and in real life) of a worthy existence. They at least wanted to make an alternative view visible in their art. To this end they developed their own models without the burden of intimidating predecessors that watched their every move. This resulted, as if perfectly naturally, in a form of postdramatic theatre.

It did not mean that these artists had no idea about what was happening abroad. On the contrary. [Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker](#) and Jan Fabre are two outstanding examples of the hunger this generation harboured for new art forms. However, they adopted the position of amateurs when it came to incorporating the input from abroad in their own work. They went their own way in the most idiosyncratic manner. This bold attitude also explains why, for a long time, just wafery-thin boundaries existed between the theatre and dance disciplines and why they jointly influenced each other. In fact the latter is still true with regard to the work of the young generations of artists, although people will be quicker to categorise the border traffic between theatre, dance and visual art with the term 'performance'.

This new work virtually emerged without any state funding, and therefore had to rely on the scarcest of resources. The only

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The only thing these artists possessed in abundance was time. Time that was spent refining their work to a sometimes remarkably high level of perfection, even though they often worked with pure amateurs. However, these artists knew how to make intelligent use of a then widespread, almost innate Belgian habit of improvising and abusing loopholes in the system.

thing these artists possessed in abundance was time. Time that was spent refining their work to a sometimes remarkably high level of perfection, even though they often worked with pure amateurs. However, these artists knew how to make intelligent use of a then widespread, almost innate Belgian habit of improvising and abusing loopholes in the system (e.g. in terms of unemployment benefits as well as grants for the arts) to set up their own production organisations. In addition, a number of production organisations, notably Hugo Degreef's Schaamte in Brussels, were of enormous importance. Degreef provided a major source of financing for a collective of artists such as [Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker](#) and [Jan Lauwers](#), through co-productions with theatres abroad. Of equal importance were the new presentation platforms, the so-called 'arts centres', that mushroomed all over the country. For that matter, they equally operated as production houses for the emerging generation. They operated mainly in the margin of the official circuit, but through their programming of pioneering foreign work appealed to a new, younger generation of spectators. They offered the emerging Flemish performing artists their most important stage. During the first decade of their existence, these centres neither received notable state funding, but displayed a similar resourcefulness in order to survive as the artists who performed there. The Beursschouwburg in Brussels showed the way. Kaaitheater in Brussels, Vooruit, Nieuwpoorttheater and Victoria (today merged into CAMPO) in Ghent, Stuc (today STUK) in Leuven or Monty and deSingel in Antwerp all were of vital importance to the survival of the dance scene in the 1980s. These arts centres would, despite their insecure financial and organisational basis, soon claim the lead in the Flemish cultural regime, to the detriment of the existing cultural institutions. They thus strengthened the new dance and theatre companies' impact, which made the Royal Ballet of Flanders and even the Ballet of the 20th Century look

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From 1993, a new policy took shape in the 'Performing Arts Decree' that invested considerably more in the newcomers and their organisations. In addition to 'theatre' this decree also recognised 'dance' as a separate artistic discipline. For the first time, a number of choreographers and their companies thus received structural funding instead of an ad hoc support. The decree furthermore officially recognised and subsidised the new production and presentation platforms as 'arts centres'. It was remarkable that a number of organisations, such as the pioneering Klapstuk Festival in Leuven and De Beweeging (later wp Zimmer) in Antwerp or (as from 1997) Dans in Kortrijk (which later merged into Buda) were recognised as dance organisations. De Beweeging and Dans in Kortrijk would become the model for the 'workspaces' that would acquire their own position within the Flemish cultural policy in the years 2000 and would prove to be excellent breeding grounds.

Yet a number of comments should be made with regard to this 'victory'. In 1993, the Royal Ballet of Flanders still received the same amount of subsidies as all the other dance organisations put together, while the company's output, certainly in quantitative – but most definitely in qualitative terms – remained substandard. Until today the Ballet continues to receive preferential financial treatment as compared to contemporary dance. However, this comparison is currently difficult to make, since the recent merger of the Ballet with the Vlaamse Opera (Flemish Opera). Also, since the 1980s, much has changed artistically that the existing Ballet company hardly resembles its former self. After the Australian Kathryn Bennetts,

old-fashioned. That's the most amazing part of this story: without any notable state funding this generation of choreographers and directors succeeded in winning an audience that was prepared to put up with hard benches and sometimes take rickety stage conditions for granted, rather than sinking into the plush seats in the major theatre houses. In less than ten years, these houses had also lost their credibility. In time even conservative newspapers devoted more attention to a premiere by Rosas, Needcompany, Alain Platel, Wim Vandekeybus or Jan Fabre than to the work of the official theatres.

Once the Government of Flanders realised this they jumped on the bandwagon.

previously ballet master with William Forsythe's Ballet Frankfurt, brought the company substantial artistic credibility due to her staging pieces by the very same Forsythe, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui recently took over the direction. Cherkaoui is, as will be revealed later on, a child of the revolution in the dance world of the 1980s. He developed his own idiom that can draw on international success, but is now far removed from the spirit of the 'Tachtigers', even from his 'godfathers' Alain Platel and – to a lesser extent – Wim Vandekeybus. As a matter of fact, when in 1993, the government provided the new generation of artists with a solid financial basis for the first time with a new Performing Arts Decree, it also had other reasons for doing so apart from the success enjoyed by these artists. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Flanders namely became a full Community with autonomous cultural competences in the federal state Belgium. This was the result of a complex political development which began in 1970. The new Flemish Community needed cultural symbols to prove that Flanders was no longer the retarded sibling in the Belgian polity. This had already been shown in economic terms. The international success of the Flemish performing artists – to which the government had contributed precious little – demonstrated the cultural rebirth of Flanders.

Around 1990, the reputation of the pioneers of the 1980s had indeed been solidly confirmed at home and abroad. Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker (Rosas), Alain Platel (les ballets C de la B) and Wim Vandekeybus (Ultima Vez) retain this leading position to date and still receive the lion's share of the subsidies allocated to contemporary dance. What's remarkable is how different these companies were and are today in every way.

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[Flanders Arts Institute's website provides a detailed overview of their work \(flandersartsinstitute.be/specials\)](http://flandersartsinstitute.be/specials). Therefore, I only wish to situate them here by pointing to some of the most distinct characteristics of their work.

The oeuvre of [Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker](#) and her company [Rosas](#) is the most explicit in 'choreographic terms'. De Keersmaecker became well known for the intense connection she makes between musical and choreographic structures. However, the interesting thing is that this relationship is never one-to-one, but always displays a contrapuntal tension. In this field of tension De Keersmaecker also often seeks and finds space to highlight emotional content and images, without having to expressly name or explain them. Interestingly, De Keersmaecker has continued to evolve. For example, her recent work is far more complex yet simultaneously more sober than her exuberant, repetitive early work.

[Wim Vandekeybus](#)' work often revolves around the notion of 'reality' on stage. For example, in his first pieces dancers threw stones at each other while moving. This involved real danger. The directness with which men and women literally attack each other in his pieces also creates a tension that no longer relies on suggestion and acting. Thus by showing 'real' events Vandekeybus often breaks the ancient taboo of Western theatre. In later work Vandekeybus increasingly also incorporated stories. However, he portrayed them in his own inimitable way using surrealist (film) images and actions, which are far removed from conventional theatre codes. He rips the theatre logic apart to make room for unexpected events.

[Alain Platel](#) christened his company 'les ballets C de la B'. By doing so he openly poked fun at Béjart's pompous 'Ballet of the 20th Century'. It is also a question of positioning: Platel opted for the world of 'ordinary' people. He repeatedly seeks their misery, great emotions and rich power of the imagination. Therefore Platel rarely chooses hermetic forms, and makes frequent use of mimic elements. His theatre is 'popular'

in the best sense of the word. The cast in the earliest productions consisted of amateurs. From 1995, he worked in ever larger productions with professional dancers. He also made increasing use of (classical) music to intensify the emotional impact of his work.

In addition to the big names many other choreographers also circulated, such as [Alexander Baervoets](#) from the 1980s. They coloured the landscape at the time but were never able to fully break through to the international scene. So, often they also had difficulty growing in organisational terms. One notorious exception is [Marc Vanrunxt](#), who is still active to this day. Vanrunxt trained with [Lea Daan](#), who introduced expressionism to the postwar world of ballet. In contrast to his contemporaries, Vanrunxt remained loyal to the expressionist desire for an unadulterated emotional expression. In doing so Vanrunxt often balanced on the tightrope between kitsch and a strong belief in the truth of dance. This tension produced a number of masterpieces such as *Antilichaam* (Anti-body) and *Raum* (Room).

In addition to these choreographers there were also a number of theatre makers, especially [Jan Fabre](#), [Jan Lauwers](#) and [Grace Ellen Barkey](#), who were crucial to the development of dance in Flanders. Dance was often afforded an important place in their 'postdramatic' theatre. [Jan Fabre](#), among others, has played a leading role in the development of dance in Europe, for example through his choreographic pieces for the Ballett Frankfurt with [William Forsythe](#). However, [Fabre](#) did not originally train as an artist. One could say that he penetrated the art world from the outside, initially as a visual artist and performance artist. From his earliest

[more on: flandersartsinstitute.be/specials](http://flandersartsinstitute.be/specials)

work on he undermined all the codes and conventions of the art, but in doing so demonstrated a keen understanding of them. It was never about the game of codes itself for [Fabre](#). Essentially it involved him reconquering the idea of beauty in the art. Not the pale beauty of bourgeois art, but the cruel, ruthless, solemn splendour of the aristocratic world. He presented this world as a pitiless form of discipline in a series of stunning ballet productions. By serving ballet with a generous dose of real pain and tragedy the work acquired an extraordinary poetic power that definitively changed our view of dance.

Being a visual artist [Jan Lauwers](#) was an outsider when he produced his first theatre work in 1983. Lauwers also injected an early piece *De Struiskogel* with a generous dose of 'reality' that scrutinises a family keeping up appearances at dinner. Later on, after founding his 'Needcompany', Lauwers continued to be fascinated by people's hidden motivations. He portrayed this in work such as *The Snakesong Trilogy*, a triptych with a dark, excessive, highly fragmented aesthetic. Dance played a prominent role therein. Since the creation of *Isabella's Room*, stories come more to the forefront, but Lauwers also breaks through the theatrical illusion by allowing the reality of the ensemble to shine through in the story. The contribution of exceptionally talented dancers make these pieces an incredible experience at the dance level. Besides [Jan Lauwers](#), [Grace Ellen Barkey](#), [Maarten Seghers](#) and the duo [Hans Petter Dahl](#) and [Anneke Bonnema](#) also created work at [Needcompany](#). [Barkey](#) in particular developed as the choreographer of dance and mime productions with an audacious, wild power of imagination without equal.

## THE GROWTH OF THE 1990s & influx from abroad

The official recognition and support of the emerging contemporary dance since 1993 had profound consequences for the theater and dance landscape in Flanders and Brussels. The arts centres suddenly had relatively substantial means at their disposal, but also the performing artists who had been their partners now had their own organisations and funding.

This forced the arts centres to reconsider their role. More than before they could now invite prominent foreign choreographers such as [Jérôme Bel](#), [Xavier Leroy](#) and [William Forsythe](#) to show their work in Flanders or even come and work there. This foreign input fuelled the debate on dance in Flanders to a great extent, and thus had a major impact on the work of young dancers. Towards the end of the 1990s the term dance also acquired an almost self-evident significant expansion. 'Dance' was considered less and less as a discipline with its own traditions and methods, and more and more as a field of practices that reminded spectators of their relationship with the work being performed as well as the world around them. This new concept intentionally demolished the boundaries between art and society in a way that was reminiscent of evolutions in the visual arts since the 1960s, such as neo-Dadaism and conceptual art. [Kaattheater](#) followed this 'new dance', which was increasingly referred to as 'performance,' the closest. Many

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Companies like Rosas, Troubleyn (Fabre), Needcompany, Ultima Vez and les ballets C de la B were appealing workplaces for young dancers with ambition, because of their global reputation. At the fringes of these companies a very lively artistic scene came into being. The foundation of P.A.R.T.S. (Performing Arts Research & Training Studios) in 1995 afforded the development of a dance scene in Flanders and Brussels an equally strong boost.

upcoming choreographers were attracted by this adventurous approach to the medium.

This was a deliberate task the arts centres, and later also the workspaces, took upon themselves: they increasingly took care of the emerging, younger artists. The harvest was astonishing at times. The American choreographer [Meg Stuart](#), who made her European debut at the Klapstuk festival in 1991, would become the artist that bridged the gap between the ‘Tachtigers’ and the flood of young makers that emerged towards the end of the 1990s. Meg Stuart was the first choreographer in Belgium to explore the possibilities of this extended definition of dance. For example, she explored the boundaries between dance and architecture and visual arts. She was also the first to emphasise the reflexive and (social) critical aspects of dance. It is noteworthy that Stuart also regularly collaborated with other choreographers and artists, and certainly not the least: Philipp Gehmacher, Benoît Lachambre, Stefan Pucher, Jorge Leon, Gary Hill and many more. They had a major impact on the nature of the resulting work.

In selecting new choreographers to support, the arts centres soon wrestled with l’embarras du choix. New choreographers proceeded to emerge in ever greater numbers. In contrast to the generation from the 1980s, they no longer originated exclusively from Flanders or Brussels, but also poured forth from all over the world. There were at least two reasons for this. The first is that companies like [Rosas](#), Troubleyn (Fabre), [Needcompany](#), [Ultima Vez](#) and [les ballets C de la B](#) were appealing workplaces for young dancers with ambition, because of their global reputation. At the fringes of these companies a very lively artistic scene came into being. These dancers developed their own work ‘after hours’ or after leaving the companies. Surprisingly enough, the works often had little to do with their (ex-)employers’ oeuvre. One of the most famous choreographers who started his career in this way is Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui who, having been born in Antwerp, was an exception among the largely foreign new guard. He has achieved phenomenal recognition and public success in and beyond Europe with his distinctive language, eclectic mix of popular dance styles such as hip-hop or show dance, Eastern techniques and

influences from contemporary dance. In 2015, this also made him the ideal figure to take over as artistic director of the waning Royal Ballet of Flanders to give it a new impulse and find a new audience.

The foundation of P.A.R.T.S. (Performing Arts Research & Training Studios) in 1995 afforded the development of a dance scene in Flanders and Brussels an equally strong boost. In educational terms the school’s model was groundbreaking. The school recruits internationally, leading to largely international student body with only a handful of Belgians as part of each generation. The curriculum also includes not only technical dance training in such diverse genres as classical ballet or Trisha Brown’s ‘release technique’, but also theatre and music classes, and courses such as the general history and theory of art and culture. The teachers are, without exception, among the best in their field. The school exerted a huge impact on the dance landscape in Brussels in no time at all. The first generations of graduates soon earned their fame in Europe and many did so with Brussels as their home base. Just as important is the fact that the school gave rise to a strong intellectual and artistic network of young choreographers, which also endures after their graduation.

Around 2000 ‘workspaces’ appeared here and there, making Flanders extra appealing for emerging choreographers. In the 1990s, the arts centres proved to be of eminent importance for the vitality of contemporary dance, but only partially succeeded in supporting young choreographers in their development. This task gradually shifted toward a new kind of organisation, the ‘workspace’. A particular characteristic of workspaces is that research and development are not necessarily connected to the objective of the creation of a performance. Young choreographers can develop their artistic idiom or take the time for creating in peace and quiet, and often with considerable dramaturgical and practical support. The Flemish government should be credited for supporting structures with no obligations whatsoever with regard to public outreach – this model is relatively rare in Europe. These workspaces always were particularly generous toward foreigners. Precursors were De Beweeging, which later transformed into wp Zimmer in Antwerp and Dans in Kortrijk, which merged into Buda. Later on, in Brussels, Workspacebrussels and Pianofabriek Kunstenwerkplaats were founded. Also in Brussels, workspaces such as Nadine and Les Bains::Connective arose who, different from the other ones mentioned, were established and run by artists themselves. This says something about the degree of (political) self-awareness of this generation which was not only occupied with the development of the performing arts, but equally with an alternative model of working and



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Although the Flemish Community proudly carries the title ‘State of the art’ – which, measured by the artistic output, not only of dance, but also of theater, visual arts and architecture in this insignificant part of the country is completely legitimate – when it comes to numbers, it does seem to attach little importance to the arts.

living. These spaces, too, established Brussels as the mecca of dance.

This big influx, and the strong support through education, workspaces, arts centres and a more generous subsidy policy lead from the beginning of the 2000s to an extraordinarily broad and differentiated dance landscape. This caused a problem for the Flemish Government: an increasing number of young dancers appealed to project or structural funding. As from 2001 there was a considerable increase in subsidies owing to a new decree – the Arts Decree – which encompassed the whole arts sector (performing arts, music, visual and audiovisual arts, architecture and design). With regard to what the dance scene demanded, however, this extra funding was long insufficient. It was, for that matter, the first time that even important choreographers such as [Marc Vanrunxt](#) or [Meg Stuart](#) were able to make use of a structural subsidy. The development of the subsidies did not keep

up with the explosive development of the number of dance artists in Flanders for a long time. Eventually just a handful of makers received structural support, just a few of whom received ‘adequate’ support, while the rest received just enough to prevent them from going under. Gradual new cutbacks on the already pledged subsidies in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis started to exert pressure on the whole system.

During the 1990s, Flanders was the scene of great political unrest once more. The extreme right-wing party *Vlaams Blok* (later *Vlaams Belang*) suddenly appeared on the scene out of nowhere and grew with every election until it threatened to become the largest party. This revealed that the ideological crisis that had smouldered two decades earlier had now erupted into a raging fire. The silent collapse of the industrial fabric and resulting unemployment – not an exclusively Belgian phenomenon – exacerbated the situation. Apparently this had all severely eroded the population’s morale. Suddenly it seemed as though the artists who had emerged in the 1980s had long predicted this crisis with their keen observations and rebellious design experiments. Did this also explain their success? Could their art possibly contribute to a new social dialogue? This hope did indeed exist, however little thought had been given to it. It also contributed to the ideological basis for a subsidy policy that took shape from 2001

(and the first implementation of the Arts Decree) onwards, believing in the power of art to contribute to the social cohesion of a society. However, soon enough the government again questioned the supposed beneficial role of the arts, not in the least through a creeping but, by the time the 2008 crisis hit, unequivocal ideological swing to the right. This translated into equally creeping cuts of the allocated funds. The most recent decisions for the structural subsidies for 2017-2021 confirmed this policy swing. Although the Flemish Community proudly carries the title ‘State of the art’ – which, measured by the artistic output, not only of dance, but also of theater, visual arts and architecture in this insignificant part of the country is completely legitimate – when it comes to numbers, it does seem to attach little importance to the arts.

# THE ROLLER COASTER

## *of the latest generation*

Choreographers of the first hour, such as De Keersmaecker, Vandekeybus and Platel, continued to build on oeuvres in which strong thematic and/or formal developments are taking shape. Consequently we can consider them to be genuine ‘authors’, despite the paradox that these ‘authors’ themselves indicate that the dancers greatly contribute to the creation of the works and in a sense are thus ‘co-authors’. Their input to the structure or to strategic choices of these works is, however, almost always too limited to result in obtaining concrete ‘rights’, for instance when a production is rerun.

The dancers and choreographers that made their entrance in ever greater numbers in Flanders and Brussels after 1995 placed less of an emphasis on such authorship. By 2005, a term such as ‘the dance community’ was commonly used to describe the landscape. It referred to a practice in which the younger generations went more in search of new experiences, insights (with a distinct preference for ‘cultural studies’ and ‘queer theory’) and learning processes rather than immediately or exclusively venturing to create their ‘own’ oeuvre. For some, the concept of an oeuvre itself even seemed to be ideologically suspicious, a too limiting construction for the reality of a versatile and diverse ensemble and a ditto world. This gave rise to the peculiar situation in which dancers joined large companies (even several successively), created work of their own, but also cropped up in the work of other young makers. The large companies often provided support, even if it merely consisted of advice or making workspace available, and even if these young dancers – highly respectfully to be sure – had ideological doubts about the large companies’ models. There was no longer any conflict between generations, in contrast to the situation in the 1980s. Thousands of flowers blossomed.

The choreographers and dancers that sought out the stage in Belgium around the turn of the century had a completely different

point of departure from their predecessors. The ‘foreigners’ did not carry the history of Flanders and its political sensitivities with them. They were, especially in Brussels, less susceptible to the political issues that unsettled the country. In addition, however, there was the simple fact that choosing a dance career in 2000 was no longer unusual, even extreme, as it had been a few decades before. Being a choreographer was no longer a choice that would definitively and totally determine your life. This had several reasons. The amount of formal trainings, also apart from P.A.R.T.S., in Europe was bigger and better developed, in particular resulting from an strong increase of workshops. Therefore you no longer had to do everything on your own, something the ‘Tachtigers’, apart from Keersmaecker, had had to do. Performance art was no longer – or not to the same extent – the dubious career choice that parents did everything to dissuade their children from embarking on. On the contrary, in Europe the status of the arts grew at the end of the twentieth century, as it never had before. This had less to do with their intrinsic qualities than with the fact that a great many cities are eager to host cultural events to showcase their city or region. The circuit of festivals and the associated group of ‘international’ artists, which started taking shape from the 1980s, reached its climax around 2000 and was highly visible. This type of circuit also needed ever more ‘fresh blood’. Dance profited enormously in this respect, as a non-language form of expression. Therefore ‘dance’ not only received a certain social recognition as a ‘profession’, there was also ‘work’ for those who were prepared to roll up their sleeves.

However, there was also a flipside to the coin. The context of the landscape as it had been shaped in recent decades was also determinedly intimidating and complex. This meant that it was not easy for the younger generation to position itself. Dance had, also as a result of some impressive success abroad, reached a critical mass that simultaneously gave the impression that ‘it’ was all happening in the dance world. But ‘dance’ also became, as previously mentioned, an all-purpose term for a field of highly diverse practices. Rudi Laermans describes it as follows: “In fact contemporary dance is not a coherent artistic movement,

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This atmosphere beckoned to endless explorations and experiences, but at the same time discorded with the reality of a ‘market’ for the performing arts which was not necessarily waiting for that kind of work. Dance operates on an audience market and not, as do the visual arts, on a buyers’ market, and is thus dependent on large numbers of spectators, not on the one ‘believer’ who matters. The last fifteen years have shown that dance that fits more closely to what the general public imagines a ‘dance performance’ to be, has a much greater attendance than work that explores the boundaries of the medium.

fusion gradually grew among the public about what a dance performance was, and that with regard to an art form that was already considered to be ‘difficult’. Around this period and in response to this, a lot of programmers began to circulate additional descriptions of dance in order to guide or entice the public. At the one extreme were the sub-genres that appeal to a traditional idea of dance. This created a neologism such as ‘dance-dance’ for pieces that were confined to the organisation of artistic movements to music. ‘Theatre dance’ was one of them, but also promised a narrative aspect. At the other end of the spectrum one found genres such as ‘conceptual dance’ or ‘performance’, which came much closer to Laermans’ broad definition. Significantly, they were described using words borrowed from the visual arts, although they fundamentally differ in their essence, such as in terms of repeatability. What they did have in common with the visual arts is a concern for shaping discourse.

barely a genre, not exclusively an artistic practice, but mainly a social practice, centred around the belief in the concept of ‘contemporary dance.’”

Dance, then, as an atmosphere, a ‘community’ of ideas and lifestyles, often bore close resemblance to the freedom the visual arts had conquered long before. This atmosphere beckoned to endless explorations and experiences, but at the same time discorded with the reality of a ‘market’ for the performing arts which was not necessarily waiting for that kind of work. Dance operates on an audience market and not, as do the visual arts, on a buyers’ market, and is thus dependent on large numbers of spectators, not on the one ‘believer’ who matters. The last fifteen years have shown that dance that fits more closely to what the general public imagines a ‘dance performance’ to be, has a much greater attendance than work that explores the boundaries of the medium, even if the critics in Flanders have particularly favoured this sort of experiment for a long time, not to say that they have exerted themselves for it.

The least one can say, is that con-

However, in this domain, too, the first generation had already set out a new course and set up a standard. The remarkable thing about dance in Flanders after 1980 was indeed that it was coupled with a powerful discursive practice from the outset. The latter did not originate from the academic world: it was instigated by the dance organisations themselves. Marianne Van Kerkhoven (1946-2013), who, among others, was involved in Kaaithheater at its very beginning, led the way through her pioneering contribution in the early work by Rosas. She underpinned pieces such as *Bartók / Aantekeningen* by tirelessly questioning the production process and enhancing it with additional material such as texts or film. This practice was called dramaturgy, by analogy with the theatre practice. In the theatre the term ‘dramaturge’ could refer to the author of the production’s text as well to those who analyse and position it in historical-ideological terms. The second, analytical function mainly applies to dance. Due to the constantly ‘new’ character of a dance production it is rare for any ‘dance text’ to be available in advance. Thus a dance dramaturge questions the content of a production and its creative process, and, by extension, its positioning in a broader context. Van Kerkhoven already saw early on that dance needed this type of dramaturgy to prevent the thoughtless reproduction of existing relationships, and in particular those between makers and between makers and the public. This insight was actually innovative at the time, but twenty years later this practice had almost become self-evident. It was adopted across the board, also by critics, and to a certain extent began to lead its own life, separate from the makers themselves. The result was that young makers not only had to relate to a complex and broad landscape, but also faced a history that appeared to exist solely of milestones, and around which an extensive literature was woven. What a challenge for the young maker.

Yet many accepted this challenge. Looking back over the past fifteen years one sees an initially confused, wild experimentation movement in extremely diverse constellations, with all possible themes and forms, gradually crystallise. The Flanders Arts Institute’s website provides an overview of the most important artists in the current field of contemporary dance in Flanders. It is remarkable that many of these young makers have yet clearly found their own tone

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and/or themes and have been able to attract their own audience.

Under this (in some cases, not so) young guard, a more or less clear dividing line continues to exist between artists who stay closer to the (modernistic) definition of dance as a medium in itself and those who are moving away from it, and who certainly don't just look to the world of performing arts for their inspiration. The list below is in no way intended to be exhaustive, but aims to briefly touch on a number of typical or remarkable positions within a very complex field.

Salva Sanchis is an example of a traditional choreographer who explores the medium through improvisation, often explicitly questioning the physical and neurological parameters of dance. Thomas Hauert is another choreographer who has provided extremely important impulses to the dance scene where improvisation is concerned. Etienne Guilloteau and Claire Croizé can also be classed as more traditional choreographers, but in their case, the contours of oeuvre are outlined in the conventional sense in a growing repertoire of 'written' pieces. In a distinct reflective way, this oeuvre also relates to the history of the medium of dance. You get a different perspective on dance in the work of artists such as Lisbeth Gruwez and Jan Martens. They, too, use movement as a starting point, but examine the affective, emotional component of it more deeply, often with impressive results. A choreographer like Arco Renz, on the other hand, focuses more on the physical as an exercise in 'techniques of the self', although this aspect is also always present in the work of Gruwez and Martens.

In the 'theatre-dance' genre, the newcomer that stood out the most in the last decade was Peeping Tom, with an oeuvre that takes an in-depth look at family relationships in a coherent series. That said, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui was the most successful choreographer in this area. His work often more or less explicitly tackles sensitive social themes such as migration – not surprisingly, given his mixed Moroccan-Belgian heritage. At the same time, he builds on the idea developed much earlier by Alain Platel of using classical, but also

pre-classical folk music and oriental music to carry the affective component of his work. In addition, he is unrivalled in his ability to blend choreographic genres and traditions into a language of dance that surprises but continues to be recognisable, feels original and contemporary without shocking the spectator. An artist like Pieter Ampe, on the other hand, is very much out to shock in what by now could be referred to as an oeuvre with its own themes and idiom, even though he also frequently creates and performs in combinations with other artists such as Guilherme Garrido or Benjamin Verdonck. He adopts a very intuitive approach, but does manage to visualise the vulnerability, loneliness, confusion and related shame of the physical existence in a bitter-comical way for his audience with his powerfully theatrical physical theatre – and this, incidentally, without using any big words.

Then, there is a large group of choreographers who are classed under the heading of 'performance' or 'conceptual dance', even though the only thing these labels tell us is that these artists draw from a range of formal means that is as broad as possible, often motivated by a specific genre or a clear 'message'. Spectators have to piece things together themselves and can in no way rely on their knowledge of previous work by the same artist. At its best, this is the most exciting and intriguing work the younger generation has produced, but it is also work which actively courts failure, both in terms of its own starting

points and communication with the audience. A fine example is the work of Danish choreographer and dancer Mette Ingvartsen. The majority of her work can be described as a long-term exploration of themes such as physical expression, sexuality and ecstasy, and the way in which they are filtered by various media. Besides this, however, she also created a remarkable series of pieces on (the representation of) natural phenomena. So her performances tend to take questions or issues as a starting point rather than dance as a medium and as such are quite hybrid in nature. The same goes for the American Andros Zins-Browne. He studied 'art semiotics' before developing into a choreographer at P.A.R.T.S. He went on to train as a visual artist at the then prestigious Jan Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. His performances often touch on a wide range of themes, though always socially sensitive; rather than attaching conclusions to this, they confront spectators with the blind spots in their thinking. In contrast, from 2010, Eleanor Bauer, also American, tried to formulate an emancipation project, both personal and social, in a trilogy and recently also in the dance musical *Meyoucycle* which is based on a very specific and personal, experimental mix of dance and music. Alongside this, she has also developed a fairly successful career as a dance-comedian. And finally, an outsider in the new crop of choreographers is Alexander Vantournhout, who together with Bauke Lievens, 'upgraded' the circus genre. Their *anexxander* is a most unusual cross between circus tricks and form experiments, with the alienating physical images of Xavier Leroy never far away.

As mentioned earlier, this portrait of a generation is by no means, not even remotely, exhaustive. After all, until recently, this had been an incredibly rich and diverse scene. The painful truth of the present Flemish dance scene is that there is no longer the prospect of a thousand flowers blooming, but rather hundreds withering due to a sharp drop in subsidies. In absolute figures, things still seem to be okay, but once you take inflation into account, companies are quickly losing 'purchasing power'. Moreover, companies and individual artists have to make do with ever-dwindling, and at the same time increasingly selective, subsidies. Artists who also are not excellent agents of their own work, are faced with fast-disappearing opportunities and partners and are missing out more and more on subsidies too. One such artist is Charlotte Vanden Eynde. Over the past twenty years, she has created a series of most remarkable solos and together with Dolores Bouckaert – another underrated artist – is the creator of the 2014 subtle and complex duet *Deceptive Bodies*. As a result of the press paying less and less attention to the work of these 'lesser gods', it undeservedly failed to resonate with audiences and Vanden Eynde herself is not the kind of person who would then assertively demand such attention. And so, more and more voices are rather unnoticeably disappearing, voices which give the scene its distinct flavour, colour and richness and were at the absolute top of their game globally in dance. Moreover, many artists are gradually packing their suitcases, that is if they are not throwing in the towel altogether, as in the case of Salva Sanchis. A shameful situation for a 'State of the art' scene. Because at the end of the day, the dance sector in Flanders and Brussels has always managed to operate with very limited funds, but these few dollars more that are now being taken from it, are starting to have a dramatic effect. ≈

## COLOPHON

**Editing**  
Delphine Hesters  
Katrien Kiekens  
Stefan Maenen

**Author**  
Pieter T'Jonck

**Translation**  
Het Talenhuis

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+ De Roy

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**FLANDERS**  
**ARTS**  
**INSTITUTE**

Flanders Arts Institute  
Ravensteingalerij 38  
1000 Brussels  
Belgium  
+ 32 (0)2 274 17 60

[info@kunsten.be](mailto:info@kunsten.be)  
[www.flandersartsinstitute.be](http://www.flandersartsinstitute.be)