

# Session on the position of the artist in the performing arts

*Sector meeting performing arts*

Netwerk (Aalst), 22 November 2018 (10h00-12h45)

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## Participants

Yassin Mrabrtifi (choreographer, dancer), Eva Wilsens (coördinator Manyone), Shaka Jean-David (artist, kijkt voorstellingen voor 30CC), Giovanni Baudonck (theatermaker), Helga Baert (zakelijk directeur wpZimmer), Sara De Bosschere (artistieke leiding & theatermaker de Roovers), Kristof Jonckheere (directeur BUDA Kortrijk), Maarten Bresseleers (coördinator Sociaal Fonds Podiumkunsten), Charlotte Saelemakers (onderwijsontwikkeling en internationalisering, Koninklijk Conservatorium Antwerpen), Doriane Dubost Dessertine (choreographer Moonstein), Michael Helland (performer), Gosie Vervloesem (artist), Tania Ghyselinck (SABAM), Delphine Hesters (presentation, Flanders Arts Institute), Tom Ruette (minutes, Flanders Arts Institute)

**This presentation was prepared by:** Delphine Hesters (Flanders Arts Institute)

## Introduction and presentation

In the Landschapstekening (LST), the (precarious) position of the artist in the field will be one of the central ‘wicked problems’ Flanders Arts Institute will analyze and discuss. In her presentation, Delphine shares the ‘storyline’ we built up around this topic in the performing arts, based on the research and exchange done over the last couple of years. The data and graphs shared in the [Cijferboek Kunsten 2018](#) feature as building blocks in this story.

This work session is meant to share this material and to receive feedback. Is the narrative we build valid and sound? Do we miss something? How can it be strengthened?

## Reflections, questions, discussions in response to the presentation

### In response to the projectsubsidies- analysis

- What was the reaction of the commissions or the administration after seeing the ‘success rate’ of dossiers drop over time?
- The average amount of subsidies/dossier has gone up. Individual dossiers ask for more money: this can be related to a growing cost of life, but should also be related to this observation that project subsidies are not any more ‘starting subsidies’ for ‘instroom’ of ‘jonge makers’. They are used to finance solid projects of different generations.
- The high threshold (‘zeer goed’ artistic advice needed in order to receive subsidies) is bad for the field. The dossiers we support at wpZimmer get through, but artists without this strong professional support simply don’t get a fair chance anymore. It is not a fair competition and more defining elements in who gets a chance are not artistic.
- There is a big risk here, if this continues, it will weaken the fragile structure of the who ecosystem of the field. It’s a catch 22: you need more ‘professionals’ to get project subsidies, but actually the project subsidies are also the instrument to ‘become professional’.

- There is also a responsibility in the Department, to guide the beoordelingscommissies well in this context. (And in the Departement as well, who does the administrative evaluation?)
- In relation to the share of subsidies the performing arts get in comparison to the other artistic disciplines in the Kunstendecreet. Can we see how these evolutions are similar between the project subsidies and the structural subsidies? Do we see the same raise for performing arts as we see in the project subsidies in the structural subsidies?  
→ Note for Flanders Arts Institute: take this into account once we can analyse these data, after the Department can release these data.
- Is there a relation between the decrease in projects being funded and the rise of werkplaatsen, residencies and management bureaus? Or the policy decision to give a more explicit responsibility to the large institutions to facilitate smaller organisations? The answer is probably no. The current policy making uses different logics. The lowering of the project subsidies (in the up and down movement we see over time) is not a deliberate choice in itself, but the consequence of other decisions considered more urgent. (Also, if it would be the logic of the policy makers, it would not be valid. Werkplaatsen and AMB's usually don't have the artistic budgets of their own to offer artists payment.)
- The criteria for subvention make you "tick the boxes" and this influences the practice itself.
- At the other hand: the system of the Kunstendecreet is very open. We should be more blunt in putting forward our vision, our way of working, different kinds of practices (fairer practises, slower, research-based, ...). It's in our own hands.
  - Christoph: practise what you preach is slowly being tried out in the larger institutions, but it is hard. Be able to fail and start again! BUDA aims to pay the residents correctly, but this has an important impact on the budget.
  - Delphine: experiments on improving things will also be mapped in the LST.

## In response to the 'inflation of co-productions'

- What about individuals who 'co-produce', if they work as an independent (e.g. with a bvba)? Are they mentioned as co-producers? → This situation seems very rare in the performing arts, but it would be interesting to check it out.
- It would be interesting if we would consider artists who work for free (or for too little money) as co-producers of the work. They invest. → Could we calculate how much the free labor is worth in euros, i.e. how much money artists (and other art workers) invest in the arts?
- Sarah gives the example where she is paid an income by her company de Roovers and she works as an actress in a piece of another company. When this company doesn't have to pay her income, they consider this as a co-production between the two companies. It is not a direct transfer of money, but a shared cost.
- There is a relationship between the high demands to be able to get funded and the growing number of co-producers per piece.
- The situation of the multiple co-producers or collaborating organisations is difficult for artists, because you have to know the whole network. You have to know that A does not want to work with B, etc. This consumes a lot of time and energy and gives a lot of pressure.

## In or out of the system?

- This high demand on the artists to work with several different organisations (cf. supra) makes certain artists look for other ways of working. E.g. to deliberately choose for an income from outside of the arts in order to finance the work, rather than to have to go and do the tour of the possible co-producers in the arts field.
- Artists also try to find other contexts for presentation of work, in order not to have to meet the presentation requirements set up by the larger institutions. People are leaving the funded system.
- However, trying to remain out of the system also is risky business. At one point, you can get stuck and opportunities can be closing down because you didn't nurture the 'right' relationships.

- Being dependent on organisations has always a kind of corrupting effect. Therefore, and in that sense research grants are great.

## On precarity and the question of the arts career

- The system that we have been building over the past decades, painstakingly, is becoming too full. It's stuck. Not only for organisations but also for individuals. Now the question is how we can make the transition to a breathing system again?
- What is a career? There's the young talent and the institutionalised players, but what with the ones in between?
- The performing arts don't have a vast private market, so they don't function according to the 'winner takes all'-logics which are more visible in visual arts and music. But the differences between 'haves' and 'have nots' are there.
- When you put a lot of work in setting up projects and getting organised, there is no time to look back and see it slowly grow, because I have to start working on setting up the next project. "We always look forward all the time".
- It's a challenge, looking for a pattern in life, a rhythm of life, always adapting to the social context. By being so tired of creating the conditions, you don't get to the creation of art itself. And it is even worse if you suck at creating the conditions for yourself.
- It is interesting to see how money changes relationships.
- The regulations of employment are complex and what the best contracts are to align everything in order to earn your right to unemployment is often unclear.
- Testimony of an artists that has been asked by a large-scale institution to work under a contract as a volunteer: this is a big red flag. Having been asked to be paid through KVR before was more okay, even though this should also not happen.
- Tanja: make sure you get your author rights organised.

## On fair practices

- The need for fair practices for artists and the issues of precarity are also valid for (smaller) organisations. So the artists-versus-organisations is a trap.

- There is a lot of non-visible work in the sector. Hence, not only non-paid, but also non- or less recognized or valued work.
- Also, some information about the position of the artists and also of current practices of development, creation, production is lacking in important parts of the field. People just don't know what is going on. There are fixed ideas about what 'production' or 'development' stands for, which are reductive. In talks among workspaces it becomes clear that different commissions have different 'standards'. E.g. for some giving an artists three opportunities for presentation or production can be seen as a good model for 'development'. Another example: 'production' apparently can be used as a term for simply providing a space. However 'production' in practice entails much more.  
→ This is also a comment on the previous Landschapstekening: it had clear definitions on what all types of organisations are; but now there is much more freedom in how you self-identify and the practices under the the terms of the functions differ greatly.
- So many artists that are competing for a limited amount of money. Do we want to enlarge the cake to be distributed, or do we want to have a smaller sector, in which everything is properly funded?
- Other problematic mechanism is the dropout of women throughout careers.
- "I wish for more humanity in the system, in the relationships we build!"

## Call for suggestions, feedback on the narrative, things missed?

- Gosie: my practice is research based. It is slow and sustained, hence I don't recognize what I do in this description of the 'project work'. Running after all these co-producers in order to create a piece and the focus on presentation does not fit my actual practise. Is it not dangerous to present this flexible image?  
→ Note for Flanders Arts Institute: be careful about which image our choice of terminology projects. The 'project worker' or flexworker as description comes from the labor market perspective (as opposed to 'long-term fixed employment'), but should not uncarefully be transmitted as description of an actual artistic practice.
- The problems of artists and precarity are also valid for art workers in general

- Rethink the definitions of the types of organisations. All organisations and artists together make the sector, but they are all individual agents, so how to get them to work together?