

/re/framing the international

#3

May 2018

Trends, stories & reflections on new ways of working internationally in the arts

Walter Zamperri, Andrew Murray and Koen Verlaeckt on culture in Europe's external relations | Simon Leenknecht on the internationalisation of visual art exhibitions and residencies | Tom Van Imschoot in conversation with Bára Sigfúsdóttir | Nico Kennes in conversation with Teun Verbruggen | Pier Luigi Sacco on the position of the artist in the global art market | Hilde Teuchies on European commons | Dirk De Wit on the role of private foundations

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editorial

Welcome to the third and final issue of our pop-up magazine, *reframing the international*. It too looks into trend analyses, critical reflections and experiences from actual practices about how we in the arts work internationally. Again, difficult questions are not avoided. At the same time, the focus now shifts towards potential trajectories for the future. What will the new 'working internationally' look like in the future?

Well, have a look out your window: it is already here.

Just do it

In his article, professor of economics Pier Luigi Sacco calls our attention to a crucial tension in the way contemporary visual arts operate (internationally) today. In the last few years, the global art market has been in the midst of an enormous boom. From a distance, says Sacco, this might seem a good thing, but from close by, it presents a far less cheerful vision. Despite ever more and ever richer art collectors, for most artists, everyday reality has become increasingly difficult. *"This does not mean that for the average artist, the possibilities of making a living through the arts is better than a few decades ago, especially so in the light of the increasing demands in terms of mobility, titles and resources that are needed to keep up with the standards of the contemporary system."*

On top of that economic tension, Sacco adds, there is also an internal one. If works of art become collectors' items for the international elite, does that not undermine the critical potential of the arts in relation to urgent social issues, and specifically, the increasing inequality generated by global capitalism? He argues that we should step away from existing production and distribution systems in order to start out from the idea of what art can mean for citizens and communities.

With this, the picture that was already revealing itself in our last issue becomes clearer. In recent years, the internationalization of artistic practices has soared. This opens up possibilities, but it also opens a Pandora's box of frictions and contradictions. The chasm between what artists really want to do in their art, in terms of content and significance, and everything that is necessary in order to 'make it', grows ever larger.

Dirk De Wit – head of international relations
& Joris Janssens – head of research & development
at Kunstenpunt/Flanders Arts Institute

What can be done? In our previous issues, artists and observers expressed hope for a paradigm shift, towards a radical new system in which artistic practices can be made more sustainable. It sounds very complicated. It is a knotted maze of problems, because everything depends on everything else. All by yourself, you can never resolve it.

But there is also good news. As a performer mentioned in one of our roundtable discussions, you can sit around and think about it for a long time, but you can also just get on with it. Discontent with developments in the international art scene has increased so much in the last couple of years that many are indeed doing just that. Those in search of examples of artists and organizations who want to tackle things differently do not have to look very far.

This issue of *re/framing the international* takes a look at quite a few of these practices. In-depth interviews with musician Teun Verbruggen and choreographer Bára Sigfúsdóttir examine international practices in their respective sectors, and how they determine which choices they make in their own practices. The intrinsically broad pallet of experiments in practices embraced by new ways of working internationally reveals itself even further in an inspirational series of sessions that we organized this spring, about 'New Ways of Working Internationally'. Here, musicians, visual artists, performers and people working with art organizations reveal the obstacles that they encounter, and how they are trying to handle things differently. They are all modest examples, but it is precisely this that makes them so inspiring. This is not about the hollow words of self-proclaimed improvers of the world wanting to throw the whole system overboard. These are small, but precise interventions in the work of artists and those who work with artists, who, sometimes after extremely tenacious analyses, develop concrete and innovative solutions to very complex problems.

Can the total of this sort of experiment eventually make the difference, bring about a shift in 'the system'? If prominent academics, artists and organizations all make a plea to step out of the international bubble created by the marketplace and the canonized Western ethos, how can this be translated into policy?

At the moment, the answer to that question is not a simple one. The signals from professional practices are at this moment very diverse. Recent years have seen an increase in 'non-liberal democracies' in a number of countries like Hungary and Portugal. In many other countries, we are witnessing diverse variations of inward-looking nationalism, populism or economic protectionism. Precisely these kinds of turbulent geopolitical developments cause policymakers to slowly but surely want to look differently at cultural policy and cultural diplomacy, both at the European level and within the individual member states.

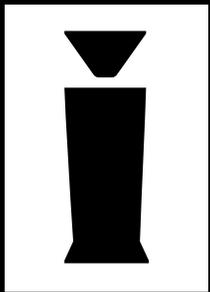
In the policies developed by the EU over the last ten years, active citizenship, identity and the forming of communities were already important keywords – although in recent years they have been snowed under by an economic agenda focused on job creation. That those exercises in rethinking strategic policy decisions are now very much in progress can be seen in the interview with Walter Zampieri, Andrew Murray and Koen Verlaeckt. The sharpened focus on culture within the foreign policy of the EU could be viewed as a sign of this. And to the same degree that some member states seem to be setting their frames of reference outside that of the European Union, there are other countries that want to do just a little bit extra. Murray and Verlaeckt indicate how, at this level, they see possibilities, from EUNIC, the umbrella organization of cultural attachés and national cultural institutes. A number of players have organized themselves under the motto of *More Europe*. A communal European cultural strategy is taking shape here, one that does not stand in the way of national representation, which is important for individual member states.

When governments are receding, also many private foundations and philanthropists are active in Europe and on other continents to support the development of an open society and citizenship, sometimes through the support of independent cultural initiatives. They are working more and more together with the cultural and foreign policy of the EU and its member states to realize objectives relating to culture and civil society.

Does all of this go far enough, and is it happening quickly enough? In the third part of her essay about European cultural policy, Hilde Teuchies concludes her plea to place culture at the very heart of the European project. Precisely because Europe today finds itself in crisis, it should be able to choose bottom-up experiments by its citizens – including artists – and reinforce them, connect them and upgrade them. It is precisely through the connections of artist and citizen initiatives, she claims, that you create a new European 'commons', a culture that is intimately involved with citizens. Many artists play an important role here: sometimes as a flea in the ointment, sometimes as a connecting force, and sometimes as a way of imagining the future.

How can practices that evolve from the bottom up gradually form a broader movement, one which increasingly involves other artists and organizations and, in time, also policy? The conviction that things can no longer go on as they are is more and more alive, amongst artists, mediators and policy-makers as well. Most of all, it takes time and trust in a collective process. Hopefully, *re/framing the International* can be a small link in this chain: we are identifying, giving a name to what is taking place, revealing relevant experiments and trying to better understand them, in order to build a new language and a new narrative around these important issues.

/re/framing the international #3 is the third and last issue of a three-part 'pop-up' magazine series in which Kunstenpunt/Flanders Arts Institute brings together trends, ideas and stories around new models of working internationally in the arts.



Later this year we'll publish a pocketsize booklet, summarizing what we have learnt.

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Benjamin Verdonck

theatre-maker, writer & visual artist

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Defining the contours

In the past I did a lot of projects in the public space, often bigger projects for lots of people. After about 15 years I felt that these kinds of projects no longer made sense. I had the feeling that I couldn't scream louder than the billboards that screamed around me. So I decided to go in another direction, i.e. as small as possible. That way you can infect or infiltrate the public space. I developed a number of miniature theatres that I can take with me in a box on the train or on my bike. I play these shows everywhere, both in more institutional contexts and in the so-called public space. When you travel from place to place internationally, you discover a lot, but there is also a whole world to discover in the city of Antwerp. Next year I am planning a world tour in Antwerp, and I will try to play in as many different places in Antwerp as possible.

Once I invited my youngest daughter to my studio to see what I was making. 'I don't think that what you're making is all that interesting', she said. I then decided to share my making process and to work for six months in my daughter's primary school. I had my studio in the school, and I had a plan. I had seen a fragment on YouTube in which the economist Milton Friedman uses a pencil to explain the free market: the graphite comes from South Africa, the wood from the US, the aluminium from China, the paint from India, and so on. Literally thousands of people have to collaborate to create this pencil. People who do not know each other and who do not have the same language or religion. No one is telling them what to do; this is done by the magic of pricing. When we go down to the store and buy this pencil, we foster harmony and world peace, as Friedman put it. I wanted to take the opposite direction: to deconstruct the pencil and to bring it back to where it came from. It became a project about geography, the economy, etc. It resulted in a project that no one else saw, except for the people in the school: an installation in which the children played for a few weeks.

Once we were invited to do a show in Estonia. I decided to invest the entire budget for the project in travelling by train with the whole team. Are subsidies not meant to sustain economically uninteresting practices? If you travel by train to Estonia, the budget increases enormously: it takes three days, so you also have to pay people for those days. It became an artistic project in itself.

It was an opportunity for me to work with Toneelhuis, as there was a budget. Before, I was working from the margins. I wanted to see if I could do this kind of work in the centre: discussing my work and points of view in a city theatre is already an attempt to reshape the system ... However, the impact is minor and I find that painful, that it is seen as an individual engagement, an individual choice, an individual responsibility.

I don't want to be a moral crusader for the green cause and I'm not saying that everyone should suddenly start making things in cardboard, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't be a lot more radical. We don't have to go along with the idea of a growth-driven economy – this idea that we always need to expand, that it always has to be better, that we must always go further ...

To end on a hopeful note: I know very few artists who do things just like that. That makes me think that it surely can't be impossible to expand that to the way in which you organise your work? And to indicate the contours within which you want to make your work? And then there are also arrangements that you should be able to make with your organisation? The strength of an artwork lies by extension also in the practice, the way in which the artwork comes into being and exists.

Kris Verdonck

A Two Dogs Company

How to maintain a healthy balance between international activity, personal well-being and ecological responsibility

Learning how to say 'no'

After a premiere, a long tour and, on top of that, a large exhibition in a foreign country, my team demanded a couple of months' break to get together and think how to move forward. It was not an obvious decision, but we made it. How can you find a healthy balance between participating in the international circuit to remain visible and informed, on one hand, and keep a healthy team and a responsible ecological footprint on the other?

Long-term relationships that are built up as you go along have made way for fragmented and short-term relationships that leave you, as an artist, increasingly vulnerable. Moreover, tours are more difficult to organize because of the 'shopping behaviour' of many curators and programmers. In recent years, we have noted that where you used to be invited for a series of performances, you are now being invited for a single evening. As a result, we drove three large trucks to Thessaloniki with a team of nearly 20 people to do a single performance.

For A Two Dogs Company, presenting ourselves and our work in Europe and other continents is important. Today, we perform primarily in neighbouring countries, so the costs in human energy and our ecological footprint are relatively low. Performing more in a single country or region is an option, but from a production

and organizational standpoint, it still remains difficult. The core question is whether accepting an invitation to perform somewhere out of the country is in fact worth the investment in terms of human energy and the ecological footprint it leaves behind.

As an artist and as a company, you need to take that framework of considerations into account in order to sustain working internationally. Criteria are needed to correctly assess the factors involved: the ecological footprint, the human effort on the parts of the artist and his/her team, the nature of a contract (long-term or one-shot deal), the inspiring feedback of the audience, the international recognition that it produces, economic aspects such as income and the chance of a performance generating new professional contacts. Saying 'no' to a project can have a negative impact in economic terms. As a subsidized company, you cannot simply reduce your activities in other countries because of personal welfare or ecological considerations. For many artists, creating a break in the schedule to ask these urgent questions has become a necessity.

Dirk De Wit
&
Karl van den Broeck

An interview with
Walter Zampieri,
Andrew Murray &
Koen Verlaeckt

Culture in Europe's external relations policy

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

Flanders Arts Institute invited three privileged witnesses from the Flemish and European level to discuss civil society, active citizenship, transnational realities and intercultural dialogue.

Walter Zampieri is head of the Cultural Policy Unit of the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission. Andrew Murray is director of the EUNIC Global Office, EUNIC being the EU National Institutes for Culture. Koen Verlaeckt is the secretary-general of the Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs. He is also the current President of the EUNIC Global Office.

The interview was conducted by Dirk De Wit (Kunstenpunt/Flanders Arts Institute) and edited by Karl van den Broeck (BOZAR).

Artists have been travelling from one country to the other since the beginning of civilization. Cultural exchanges may be very old, but international collaboration has only become common practice since globalization started some 30 years ago. This evolution is not neutral. What about Western dominance, the unequal access to the means of production and distribution, the precarious situation of individual artists, and the trend whereby art becomes a commodity in a commercial environment and gets alienated from society?

All these questions also surface in discussions with European and national policymakers who shape cultural policy in the member states, the EU and in the relation to other regions of the world. Europe is first and foremost an economic project and cultural policy is shifting towards the creative industries, a sector that has become very important in terms of employment. Europe challenges North America and Asia which used to dominate this sector. Meanwhile, Europe is also working on a new European project and this reflection also stimulates the debate on European cultural policy.

The British Council published a policy note in 2014 titled *Culture Matters: Why culture should be at the heart of future public policy*. The Belgian sociologist Pascal Gielen compiled a book titled *No Culture, no Europe*. Where are we today in the rethinking of the European project? Is culture something peripheral? Or is it the heart of the European project? Mr Zampieri, what is the current status of these intentions towards bringing culture to the heart of the European project?

Walter Zampieri (WZ): Eleven years ago the EU started dealing with culture in terms of policy. There was more optimism then. Before the crisis we probably thought that things would come automatically. Culture was considered more as a luxury. The priorities were 'hard' projects in the economic field.

I think today there is an awareness that there are also cultural divides that need to be tackled. And you can only tackle them in an indirect way, in the long term and through culture. The *Gothenburg communication* after the Summit of November 2017¹ stressed the importance of strengthening European identity through education and culture. That was very important because it was the first time that we said very clearly that culture is an important element for active citizenship, European integration, identity and for the sense of being part of a community.

We value our diversity, which remains essential to the European project. But diversity should set ourselves apart from each other.

There is still a lot of work to be done, especially to promote the circulation of works of art and of artists and cultural workers. The Berlin Philharmoniker will always tour Europe and the world. But for less famous artists it remains very difficult to be part of the transnational conversation that is the essence of culture.

Culture is the conversation that underpins the European public space. We often complain that there is no such European public space, but if you look at the cultural section of your newspaper, you realize that it does exist. It has always existed.

In Gothenburg we signed our 'contract' for cooperation at EU level in cultural matters. And of course, the international dimension, our relations with other countries and regions, is also a shared ownership with the member states.

Does that mean that the budget for culture will go up?

WZ: The budget for culture is not only Creative Europe (1.46 billion euros). If you include the Structural Funds, we are already at around 1 per cent of the European budget. And that is what the UN asks.

Even when it comes to Brexit, I want to be optimistic. I am not giving up hope that the UK might continue to participate in cultural exchanges. It would be very odd if the UK should leave the education and culture programmes altogether.

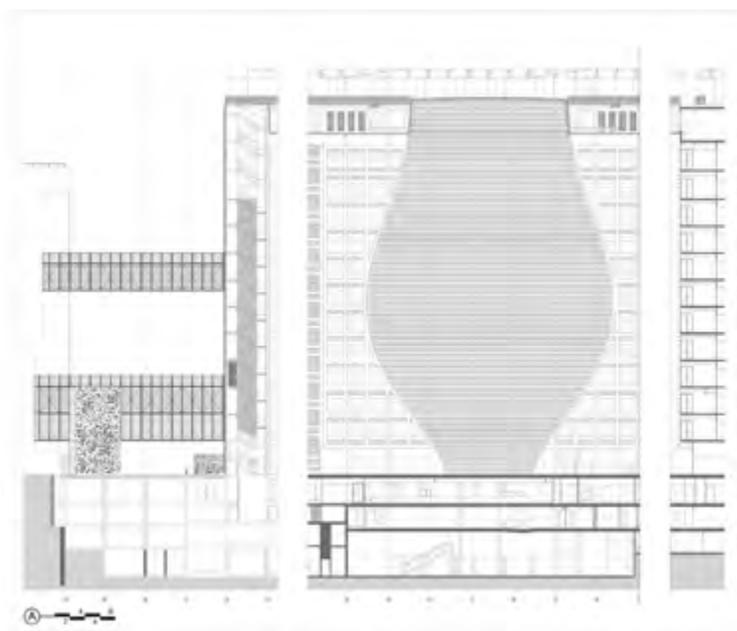
Let us turn to the Flemish government. Mr Verlaeckt, we have seen a shift in policy that stresses the importance of 'nation branding' and the role of culture in civil society.

Koen Verlaeckt (KV): I think there are basically three dimensions. There is international cultural policy. That's the policy which is being set up by the Ministry of Culture in the Flemish government and that is basically about internationalizing the priorities of the domestic cultural policy. There is an overlap with the other dimensions where Foreign Affairs is more in the driver's seat.

The second dimension is about nation branding. This is the 'old school' approach where culture and foreign affairs meet. I still remember the time when Luc Van den Brande was Minister-President of Flanders (1992–1999). He appoint-

Culture is the conversation that underpins the European public space. We often complain that there is no such European public space, but if you look at the cultural section of your newspaper, you realize that it does exist. It has always existed.

Walter Zampieri



Section view European Council © Philippe Samyn and Partners sprl, architects & engineers

Today we have a strategic approach to EU international cultural relations but we do not yet have a strategy. We need an agreement between the member states, the European institutions and the cultural sector about how to implement this approach.

Andrew Murray

ed Cultural Ambassadors with big chunks of money. After Van den Brande left office, the money was transferred to the Ministry of Culture and so the whole idea of culture as an instrument for nation branding disappeared from the political spotlight.

The third dimension is where we try to – and I know this is dangerous – instrumentalize culture. We use it to intensify our bilateral ties with other countries. If you want to foster economic ties with the US and you have a business delegation visiting the country, you create added value if you can invite them to a concert afterwards.

Then there is culture in civil society. I would like to emphasize the role of EUNIC in this regard. In December 2016, the conference *European Angst*² took place at BOZAR. It was one of the first events with big visibility, where the role that culture can play in the societal debate was really put centre stage.

But there is also the capacity-building programme the Flemish government put in place in the 1990s. We paid a lot of attention to the ‘new’ member states (Poland, Hungary, the Baltic States, etc.). Our government invested 3 to 4 million euros annually in a programme that was aimed at capacity building, while at the same time opening up a dialogue. We also invested in our relations with Ukraine. One of the messages that I will always cherish is that almost the only way for Russians and Ukrainians to keep talking to each other is through joint cultural exchanges. That remains the only lifeline for them.

Andrew Murray (AM): The 1990s were very important. I was working for the British Council in Romania and Poland in that period. The British Government set up the UK Know How Fund to support the accession process and as part of that process to help build an independent cultural sector. This was an important shared objective and was part of a carefully thought-through strategy. Today we have a strategic ap-

proach to EU international cultural relations but we do not yet have a strategy. We need an agreement between the member states, the European institutions and the cultural sector about how to implement this approach. The primary goal is promoting mutual understanding and trust between people.

We also need an inclusive definition of culture. It is about more than the arts. It is also about education, science, sport, tourism and cultural heritage.

At this point we are trying to work out what the roles and responsibilities should be of these three actors and how they can pool their resources.

A big problem is that culture and education are competences of the member states. How can we go back to the spirit of the 1990s when we had the ambition to help build and strengthen an independent cultural sector with our partner countries?

How does EUNIC deal with countries that promote nationalism? Either the independent cultural sector in these countries has been taken over by governments or else it faces serious budget cuts.

AM: We can put forward the arguments for culture in its wider sense and its importance for the European project. Most individual member states support this view. Questions often arise when we try to define what European values are. Values are a really difficult concept to define and elaborate. Often, they are defined in a prescriptive way, and they are used to divide people rather than to build bridges. I would rather use values to describe what people value themselves. If you prescribe values to promote a sense of identity, you will risk not only building walls between Europeans, but also between Europeans and the rest of the world.

WZ: What are the European values? They are listed in the Treaty. I like to think in terms of ‘framework values’, as proposed by

political philosopher John Rawls: all we need to agree on for democracy to function is a 'framework'. If you look at the values that we have in the European Treaty, we are talking about human rights, rule of law, democracy, non-discrimination, gender equality. These are framework values that allow a free conversation to take place, but they do not dictate anything about the content or even the tone of that conversation. But you have to comply with that framework, when the Commission believes that that is not the case, and there have been recent cases, in Poland and Hungary – action is taken to try to redress the situation.

Our framework values make us more credible partners worldwide. We don't put forward French values or German values. We promote European values. This is also an opportunity for the member states. Nation branding is for the member states, my job is rather to look for the added value of the EU. But nation states can also brand themselves as countries that are responsible and important players in Europe. In that case it makes sense to work with the EU.

You mentioned the cultural public space. That is a complex concept in an age when migration is becoming very important. Migrants want to identify with the culture they are living in, but they stay in contact with the culture of their country of origin. How do you deal with this complexity?

WZ: It's a large-scale experiment that is taking place before our eyes. Never in history has it happened so quickly and so widely. On the other hand, migration is not an entirely new phenomenon. I'm not sure that keeping ties with your community in the 'old country' really hinders integration. Look at the experiences of the Chinese and Italian communities in Europe and the US: they kept their ties with their countries of origin, but

they also identify with the country they live in.

In the US a lot of people said that Hispanics would not learn English because they were in constant contact with Latin-American media. But in reality, we have seen that they *do* learn English. The fact that you have access to your own culture does not mean that you are not ready to integrate in a new one on the condition that it is interesting and appealing and that it doesn't refuse you. And I think that is the key point. If you refuse them, they will stay within the boundaries of their own communities. If we multiply the possibilities of exchange, that will not happen. I think the final result will be better.

The University of Antwerp conducted a study that showed that people from migrant communities feel more comfortable identifying with Europe than with Belgium or Flanders. An opportunity for Europe?

WZ: With all the caution that we need to have, we can be confident about the attractiveness of Europe.

AM: As long as we do not call ourselves 'a cultural superpower'.

Mr Verlaeckaert, how does Flanders deal with this 'hybridization' or 'transnationalism'?

KV: In Flanders we are not dealing directly with these issues because there is the division of competences between us and the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the colleagues dealing with asylum and migration procedures. At the Flemish level, it's more about integration policy, which doesn't fall within the competences of my own ministry.

On the policy level, we see more emphasis on defending the interests of our own local population. The basic rhetoric you keep hearing in discussions about integration policy in Flanders or in Belgium is: *"We fully respect the culture of people*

arriving in our country but they have to comply with our own values."

This brings us back to the same problem. What are our own values? The typical European 'between-brackets values' of the Enlightenment.

Recently an Iranian human rights activist, Darya Safa, joined the political party N-VA. It is a step in the right direction to hear a woman who fled Iran because of the problems she had with the regime defending the values of the Enlightenment.

Our government is also trying to reach out to a number of diaspora communities. There is the Darna project (formerly known as Darkom). It used to be a house for Moroccan-Flemish cultural relations in the heart of Brussels. It has been replaced by a much lighter and more flexible programme of cultural activities. But we must realize that countries like Morocco are really putting in place a very explicit diaspora policy which is not so neutral. There is always a risk of a hidden agenda.

In countries like Hungary and Poland we make sure that we keep our differences out of the government-to-government interaction. We only put neutral topics on the agenda: economic or academic cooperation. Cultural cooperation is one of the chapters but in a lighter dimension: the exchange of some dancers, some music festivals.

What we are trying to add as a complement to this government-to-government dialogue is to invest directly in the civil society. We do that under the radar.

The embassies of these countries are instructed to focus on the softer areas of cooperation. They just pretend that nothing is wrong, which I find pretty uncomfortable.

Do you think it's possible to work under the radar, to work on the two levels?

KV: Yes, we are doing it in some countries, and we try to combine both. I think the most stupid thing to do is to close down your

channels of communication with the government. You should not antagonize them. You have to use the double approach.

AM: There is a place for traditional cultural diplomacy. For example, in Iran at the moment, you can only operate through embassies. We have to use the tools available for us in a certain context. So, in Iran, you have to work through embassies, and we have a EUNIC Cluster in Tehran that is working with local cultural operators.

In 2009 I was Director of the the British Council's operations in Iran. The Iranian authorities forced the closure of the office a year before they burned down the British Embassy. They regarded our cultural work as a potentially greater threat to the regime than the work of the diplomats. One of the priorities of the Iranian authorities at the moment is cultural heritage and its potential to grow their tourism sector, partly because they need foreign currency but also because they want to start to open up Iran to the benefits that could be gained from encouraging more tourists to visit their splendid cultural sites. EUNIC, including the British Council, is ready and willing to help them achieve that.

There is a variety of different approaches available for practitioners of cultural diplomacy and cultural relations: from traditional nation branding to the 'arm's length' approach, where you basically enable cultural operators to work together and operate without interference from their governments.

We should explain the concept of cultural diplomacy to the people who will be standing for election to the European Parliament next year. Efforts could be made to make sure that this concept finds its way in the party programmes. That's really an urgent task because those programmes are being written as we speak.

Koen Verlaeckt

EUNIC is working in Rabat (Morocco) with several European cultural institutes, including the Goethe Institute, Institut Français, Cervantes and others who are members of a EUNIC collaborative 'cluster'. On the other hand, we have organizations like Darna that work with Moroccan communities in Brussels. How can the two relate?

AM: We are not making enough use of these connections between civil societies in the EU and the Southern Neighbourhood. The work that Kunstenpunt is doing by mapping those connections between Morocco and Flanders is very interesting for us. We lack data and evidence. So, at the moment, I think EUNIC is still learning how to work with civil society organizations. It's a very young organization, only ten years old. It is composed of diverse members ranging from ministries to arm's-length institutes. They are still learning how to work together. I think the EU institutions can help us with that, as a catalyst.

In countries like Morocco and Tunisia the EU partners are starting to understand that we have a common purpose: the building up of an independent cultural sector. The paradox is that the members of EUNIC are working together more closely outside Europe. We have a clear common purpose there that we often don't see when we work in the EU.

Mr Zampieri, recently the Commission put in place an extra fund for Tunisia. The money is distributed to Tunisian applicants through the EUNIC Cluster in Tunisia. What are the possibilities of this new fund?

WZ: For us this is a long-term project. We need to see what the added value of the EU is. We can serve as a platform for national cultural institutions and cultural operators from Europe.

The cultural world lacks

multipliers. If you look at education policy, you have universities that all pursue the same mission. In the cultural world, it's not so easy to identify good, reliable, effective multipliers. We think that national cultural institutes can do a very good job in that respect. That's why we want to work with them.

Tunisia is an experiment. What we lack are the instruments to do something like that on a bigger scale. Creative Europe is limited. We can only work in Europe and the neighbouring countries. Of course, there are more resources in other DGs like DEVCO (Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development) and DG NEAR (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations), but this money is not earmarked for cultural exchanges. That is the problem you encounter if you want to fund activities in certain countries: you can find that DG DEVCO can finance activities over there, you can finance activities here, but it is impossible to find a project that pulls the two together.

We hear that in Tunisia some people are afraid of the negative perception that the money is again managed by the former colonizing countries.

WZ: As for post-colonialism, that is who we are, that is our history. We can only be open and transparent about it. And it is probably better to go there as Europeans than as Brits, Italians or French people.

AM: Let's look at this from a different perspective. If your goal is to support an independent cultural sector in Morocco or Tunisia or anywhere else in the MENA region [Middle East and North Africa, KvdB], the governments of those states, might not necessarily want that, because the independent cultural sector could be critical of the government. If you were to give the money directly to the government, it may not be used for that purpose, so you need to find some interme-

diary. And at the moment, that is the experiment. We are looking at European cultural institutes to work as an intermediary between the cultural sector and the government. We are doing the same in Ukraine. By channelling small grants, funded by the EU, through the cultural institutes the cultural sector can grow and learn how to support itself.

There is also the private sector. In the MENA region, you have foundations like the Kamel Lazaar Foundation in Tunis that do a lot of education and art archiving. They do it because the government does not. Is there a way to cooperate?

KV: They could partner with the local EUNIC Cluster. There should be no problem.

AM: A good example is the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF) that gets some funding from the EU. We are working with Anna Lindh in our cluster in Athens, where the head of EUNIC is also the head of ALF.

WZ: There is also a parallel with development aid where you have people giving money not to the dictators but to people on the ground, but there the UN is a very identifiable unity. You know, we work with the UN. If someone in Morocco gets money from EUNIC, he does not know this money is coming from Europe. If we want to be more visible, we should make sure that people in these countries identify the aid as coming from Europe. It would lead to better perception of what we are doing there. I can understand that you want to keep a very low profile in some countries, but the UN is not afraid to work – openly – in the most horrible dictatorships.

AM: We have to remember that most of the funding for cultural diplomacy and cultural relations is spent by member states. The key challenge is for member states to reallocate some of that bilateral funding to multilateral funding to support European cultural rela-

tions. This is what is happening in Tunisia and it proves that with this little bit of money we can achieve a lot. We can achieve even more if we want to start to use some of the bilateral funding which is mainly used for traditional cultural diplomacy. It is important to get foreign affairs, culture and development ministries in member states to work together. The Dutch are a good example, since they have a more integrated approach than most member states.

Can EUNIC Clusters in Western countries learn from EUNIC Clusters in Rabat, Tunisia or Turkey? They are doing fantastic work collaborating in Turkey now.

AM: We have 40 clusters inside the EU and about 70 outside the EU. Over the past few years, we have focused more on outside the EU. What should our priority be inside the EU? The Presidents of our EU Clusters have agreed it should be social inclusion. Some clusters are also tackling emerging challenges like populism and nationalism. Here in Brussels, the *European Angst* conference started to think about how we can respond to that challenge.

WZ: We want to do more for the intra-European mobility of artists and cultural professionals. We will never have the money Erasmus has. On the other hand, there are lots of small-scale activities in member states, also thanks to cities and cultural institutions.

KV: Look at the Tunis example. The programme is being delivered by a local cluster consisting of those organizations that are on the ground. The question is: how can EUNIC members such as Flanders and the Netherlands benefit from these experiences? I think it could also help to counter this idea that 'the old colonial masters are back'.

If my Ministry of Culture or my Ministry of Foreign affairs would see that this dialogue is meaningful for us, they would be

willing to find money. You have to sell the message to your politicians.

If you just want to sell the message about cultural cooperation or nation branding, they will say that it is not essential in 'these difficult economic times'. It all changes when you say that you are investing in cultural dialogue and an independent cultural sector in Morocco to help us formulate answers to the problem of foreign fighters. The Moroccan government wants to be our first ally in North Africa. They say they can help us. We have problems with education and the training of imams in our local mosques. They can help us find a solution. And it is about selling that message.

After the last bomb explosion in Omagh in Northern Ireland, organizations asked the government for money to help the victims and their families. They got peanuts. Then they said they wanted to work with universities to conduct a study about the economic impact of trauma. Suddenly all the ministries were interested. To a certain extent, it is about selling the message. And cultural diplomacy sounds nice, but if you can't give the extra content, it will always be extremely difficult to find resources.

AM: We have not yet found a set of indicators to evaluate the impact of funding culture so that we can convince finance ministers to spend more on culture.

KV: Efforts should be made to try and measure the impact. Even if the outcome is only raw statistics. We did something with the Flemish University Council. We conducted a study about the impact of universities on Flemish society. The outcome of the study was that, for every euro invested, there is an outcome of 6 euro. And that is a very conservative guess.

We should explain the concept of cultural diplomacy to the people who will be standing for election to the European Parliament next year. Efforts could be made to make sure that this concept finds its way in the party programmes. That's

really an urgent task because those programmes are being written as we speak.

What could help, for example, is to take ministers or other political dignitaries on a site visit to one of those projects. I have seen it with my own Minister-President, Geert Bourgeois. We are running a development cooperation programme with South Africa, Malawi and Mozambique. Every time, questions are being asked about whether these investments make sense. We decided to take them on a 12-day field trip. And the skies cleared immediately. He was able to witness first-hand what kind of work we are doing, what our added value is in the field. Maybe you should invite all European Ministers of Culture to Tunis.

How important is it to broaden the definition of arts and culture?

AM: It is gradually being broadened. For example, the European Commission has funded the European Year of Cultural Heritage to the tune of eight million euros. I am impressed with how the programme was put together for the Year of Cultural Heritage. Their ambition is to be applauded. And their vision is about the future, not about the past. Cultural heritage is about how to build a better future.

It will be interesting to see what happens at the end of the year. What will be the legacy? What has been the return on investment?

- 1 ec.europa.eu/education/news/20171411-strengthening-europe-an-identity-through-education-and-culture_en
- 2 goethe.de/ins/be/en/kul/prj/ean.html?wt_sc=europoanangst





A conversation with
Bára Sigfúsdóttir

Tom Van Imschoot

Being on the move

At the age of twenty-one, Brussels-based artist, dancer and choreographer Bára Sigfúsdóttir (b. 1984) left her home in Iceland, curious to explore the paths beyond the horizons that had been opened up to her by the Icelandic Academy of Arts. Ever since, she has been on the move. But for Bára, being 'on the move' doesn't just equate to a desire to get as far away as possible from her original starting point. She also sees it as a way of reconnecting, looking for the space from which her creativity originates, the one that connects all the places she dwells in: the image-space of the body when it becomes a meeting ground. 'I have always felt myself to be a mixture of South and North, East and West. Actually, I believe we all are. We carry the genes of ancestors that had to migrate to find a space for themselves.'



As artists and citizens, it is important to understand the reasons why we travel. We are responsible for what it can bring to a community, but also what it can destroy.

Dancing started early for Bárá Sigfúsdóttir, moving to the sound of ballroom swing and Latin grooves: samba, chachacha forever. When she finally decided to take dancing lessons, however, as a teenager in the nineties at a local school in Reykjavík, she was immediately told that she was a very late starter; maybe too late, that is, to become a professional dancer. In order to master the basic techniques, she was required to attend classes with much younger children. And when, just about to turn nineteen, she returned home after a year in Texas, USA – the first time she had left the island for a longer period, filled with longing to discover new places – the school principal told her that it was ‘such a pity’ she had gone abroad ‘since it had fatally damaged her prospects.’ Despite her insatiable desire to learn, Bárá felt lacking, sad and frustrated. And if I’m not mistaken, her body language betrays a lingering hint of all those emotions, when she talks about that period. A desperate application to a dance school in Amsterdam led to a painful rejection, based on a so-called ‘lack of coordination’.

Luckily, the Icelandic Academy of Arts had just launched a university-level training programme in dance. A former teacher recommended it to Bárá, who subsequently applied and was accepted – she was one of just six students. *“It really was a guinea-pig year, the whole set-up was purely experimental. We had to improvise a lot, which appealed to my taste for freedom. And I realised that the narrow-minded ideas about when you traditionally need to start or stop dancing could easily be replaced by a more research-oriented idea of dance and a more reflective, less virtuosity-based attitude, much like the approach you can find in art schools. This really opened up many directions for me.”* As a matter of fact, the very next year saw Bárá enrol at the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten (University of the Arts) in Amsterdam, where she forged some

lifelong friendships. Fast forward another year, and eager to move beyond the emphasis on craftsmanship and technical improvement in Amsterdam, she auditioned for P.A.R.T.S. in Brussels, where she was accepted and studied for three more years, from 2008 until 2011.

Keen to seek out her own trajectory, Bárá eventually left P.A.R.T.S. without completing her studies. Instead, she created her first solo, *On the other side of a sand dune* (2012), based on the memories of old Icelandic women. During that process, she met Klaartje Oerlemans, who became her producer and still is today – by now under the heading of the choreographic platform GRIP. All the while, Bárá kept performing for diverse artists (Or and Oran dance company, Miet Warlop, Quan Bui Ngoc, Aëla Labbe, Iris Bouch & Kobe Proesmans, among others). But, with Klaartje’s valuable support, she also embarked on a series of self-initiated choreographies. Merging disciplines such as music and the visual arts, these works allowed her to travel in all cardinal directions, while maintaining Brussels as her principal base. *THE LOVER* (2015), a collaboration with French photographer Noémie Goudal, Icelandic musician Borko and Belgian architect Jeroen Verrecht, catapulted her to the Circuit X-programme and got her on a tour of the Low Countries. *TIDE* (2016), with Norwegian composer and musician Eivind Lønning, forged artistic links between Brussels, Mechelen, Reykjavik and Oslo. And her most recent work, *being* (2017), with two Iranian performers, brought her from Ghent to Teheran, before returning to Brussels again.

When we meet to talk, over coffee with a scent of Japanese green tea in a Brussels café, I express my amazement at the pronounced international aspect of her artistic journey to date and ask whether this has something to do with trying to break away from her island birthplace – a worn-out cliché, I know. Yet, as there appears to

Images from THE LOVER
Portrait © Aëla Labbé
Seaweed © Aëla Labbé
Le Grand Mont © Aëla Labbé







Presence can happen through distance, just as you can experience distance while being present in a specific location or situation, too. In short, you do not always have to be in a place in order to experience it.

be hardly any ice to break between us at all, and with neither of us claiming any specialised expertise on the topic of ‘internationalisation’ whatsoever, Bára immediately explains that the international character of her collaborations is far more coincidental than it is intentional. “When I choose artists to work with, I’m looking at who they are as people and artists, and not where they come from. Eivind Lønning, the musician I worked with for TIDE (2016), for instance, just happens to be Norwegian. But it was his very specific way of improvising with sound that I was interested in for our collaboration. The same goes for the residencies I choose to work in. I select them because of the specific contexts they provide, since every space and place will feed differently into the creative process. In fact, when I come to think about it, I doubt whether I consider myself to be an international artist at all.”

Doubt makes for a good conversation. It opens up what seems self-evident. It creates the conditions we need for an encounter, an exchange of perspectives on the basis of not-knowing. “At this point”, Bára says, “I feel as though I’m experiencing a moment of transition. I’ve worked hard over the past few years: three pieces in as many years, THE LOVER (2015), TIDE (2016) and being (2017), plus I’m also now co-curating the Nowruz festival with the Nona arts centre in Mechelen. Lots of wonderful things have happened, so I know I’ve been lucky, but there have also been some challenging and disorienting moments along the way. Right now, having lived through this acceleration in my productivity, I am really looking to find a space where I can meet and listen to new stories, not even trying but just allowing creativity to come. That is how I like to approach a creative process: not knowing what will happen already but allowing myself to be gradually transformed by it, past new encounters and improvising on the spot.”

being, © Aëla Labbé



Living in a time of transition, looking for a space, waiting for the transformation to come: I imagine there are worse ways to summarize what it takes to live, work and survive as an international artist.

Yes, perhaps that makes me an international artist after all. It's just that I mainly associate the word 'internationalisation' with an economic process, rather than one that is cultural or artistic. Whenever I hear it, I think of 'exploitation': corruption, unhealthy and unfair competition, a lack of balance between our existence and our environment. Besides, I don't like to label. I love living in Brussels because the city and dance scene is incredibly international, but does that make me an international artist? I'm not sure. The same goes for how I describe myself as an artist in general. Of course, people call me a dancer and a choreographer, for instance because I studied at P.A.R.T.S. and work in the so-called dance scene, but I rather see myself as someone who works with movement. It's closer to the visual arts, I often think. I prefer to say that "movement" is my medium.

Movement also happens to be a key feature of internationalisation, both in terms of how easy it is to travel these days but also in respect of migration on a global scale. What does it mean to work with movement in a world that also seems to be continuously on the move?

There are lots of people who cannot travel, so there are many absent voices in this 'globalised' or 'international' world. As artists and citizens, it is important to understand the reasons why we travel. We are responsible for what it can bring to a community, but also what it can destroy. I generally think our origin should not limit us to travel. I am aware I was lucky enough to have been born in Iceland to simply have that opportunity. I have never needed to show anything but a valid

passport or visa in order to travel, and up until now these could be easily obtained. It remains unjust, however, that our world functions with groups of people having so much more priority over others, merely based on the place where they happen to have been born. In moving through the world, and for this very reason, I have always wanted to create a space that brings people together.

Why did you leave your country of origin in the first place?

I needed to leave Iceland in order to pursue opportunities that were not available to me if I stayed. To learn from different people. To discover different approaches. And perhaps even more crucially, to simply have the space to be myself. Iceland has a small population, which is charming in a way, but it can also feel suffocating. My parents were poor. They did not have a large social network, let alone a cultural one, so this was not something they could provide. In fact, coming from the countryside, they felt out of place in the turmoil of Reykjavík; especially my father, who felt dislocated, while my mother worked immensely hard to support our family. We lived in a sort of bubble really, maintaining our old countryside habits in the midst of modern city life, not least because we also spent most vacations and every summer in the beautiful countryside. In fact, when I met people from Iceland later on in life, they often mistook me for someone from the countryside, since I speak so much about my time spent there. Besides, I soon learned that the contemporary Icelandic dance scene, which is in itself very interesting, suffered from a lack of funding and, as a result, offered fewer opportunities. I saw many artists leaving. Some returned, others did not.

I kept on returning; I started to gravitate towards Iran. And since repetition and returning are essential to all learning, whether mental or physical, it also became this space where I was confronted with my background, my knowledge, my expectations and my limitations, and opened up to another way of being.

Given your trajectory, I was particularly struck by the fact that you temporarily returned to Iceland, too, for the creation of your first solo, *On the other side of a sand dune* (2012)?

That was truly an important moment, indeed. It had to do with both distancing and reconnecting at the same time. On the one hand, of course, I had felt the need to distance myself and find a space of my own. Yet, on the other hand, I also learned to appreciate and understand my background better through distance. It is as if I needed to go away in order to get closer. More specifically, the process enabled me to discover that getting closer to a place does not necessarily mean that you literally have to be there. It can also be related to one's imagination. Presence can happen through distance, just as you can experience distance while being present in a specific location or situation, too. In short, you do not always have to be in a place in order to experience it.

That is the secret law to all good storytelling, indeed: it transports you to a place where you are not. Yet, since your first solo was based on memories that were recounted to you by old Icelandic women, how did you communicate their life stories through movement? Dancing and storytelling don't seem very compatible, do they?

Maybe I must first explain that for me storytelling itself has always been closely linked to my father, to whom I feel a strong connection. He is a peculiar figure, living near a lake, just outside a village rather than in the heart of a community, close to nature, and often alone. I consider him to be an artist, although he does not make art, as such. Why? To begin with, he is a bird expert, not because he studied ornithology, but because of the knowledge that he inherited from his father. He has this wonderful sensitivity that enables him to listen and look, which is a crucial quality if you are to acquire knowledge from what seems to be silent and

unseen, from what nature says and shows, whether it be vegetal or human. For instance, I have always known him to visit elderly people from the area he grew up in and listen closely to their stories.

I see, that's where you got the idea to collect stories for that first solo yourself?

Partly, yes. My father is the most amazing storyteller himself. In fact, he reminds one of an ancient travelling storyteller, someone whose stories take you to places where you have never been before, who tells you tales that allow you to travel yourself. So when I went back to Iceland to spend some time with him, I got indeed inspired by his habit of listening to people's stories and so I started visiting some women in an elderly home myself. You know, I have always been very eager to speak to people, to hear their perspectives, or learn how they experience the world. I have always wondered what it would be like to temporarily be someone else and to know how it feels to be in their shoes. So when I met this wonderful woman who was a hundred years old and who made me realise she was already considered old before I was even born, no matter how lively and young she felt, I instantly knew that I wanted to work with her startling perspective on time and age in the performance I was about to make.

But in that first solo performance you did not present yourself as a storyteller in the end. Or did you?

No, I do not work as a storyteller – I make a bad one in comparison to my father. A storyteller makes you look at the world through his or her eyes. What I do, instead, is turn my body into an image whose movements are nurtured and organised by underlying stories. There are clear references, at times, but I am much more interested in layering the stories in my dance performances. I always search for

an under-layer of communication, so to speak, a moving space of reflection and questioning where perspectives can meet.

The image of the body that is present and nearby allows us to make contact with something distant?

Exactly. That is why I always try to distance my emotions, as in *THE LOVER* (2015), for example. I can get emotional when I think about the particular subjects I work with, but in my art I search for another way to communicate. That does not mean people can't get emotional during my performances, of course, but I want them to reflect for themselves and have the freedom to choose how they see and feel things. By distancing my emotions, I think I can create a more interesting space for questions and reflections. I don't provide any answers with my work, and I don't have them either. I prefer to act as a catalyst for thought. Through movement, I hope to ask questions that we can collectively deal with.

Are politics at work in that poetical ambition?

I have always found it important to avoid being explicitly political in my work, but in wanting to create a space to come together and share experiences, I imagine it is clear that I believe in collectivity and community. Contemporary society puts so much pressure on people – it's a case of non-stop working and unending production. I wonder what meaning it has. Where will it lead us? "*Sometimes, making something leads to nothing*" to quote one of my favourite works by the Belgian artist Francis Alÿs. Can human values have more impact than capitalistic ones? I do not want to be naive in this, but I sometimes think we need some naivety in order to keep on believing in things.

Can you be more specific?

Can we, as citizens, connect in a collective way and, as a result, effect a radical and meaningful

change? How might things develop differently if we allow ourselves the time to reflect and think, instead of all these actions that seem to be taking place on autopilot? Would we make faster progress if we took more time to reflect? And how do we find this time? It is not a given. The increased emphasis on greater productivity – always cheaper and quicker – makes us less contemplative. Both as an artist and a citizen, like so many others, I feel a huge need to find answers to this problem. Creating a freely accessible space for reflection in my work, both for myself and for others, is my response to that need.

In searching for that open space, it appears you are also looking to cross boundaries – boundaries between people, societies, cultures, ages... Is this the case? Is it something that art can or should do?

Art can indeed be a way to transcend boundaries. But each artist must independently decide how to approach that issue. I'm not convinced that it should be a goal. We need diversity and versatile approaches, an awareness of one's choices. Personally, I prefer to think that I'm looking for dialogue with my work. It is already part of the process. I have an idea, I'll try it, the trial feeds back on the idea – sometimes it conflicts or leads me to new thoughts – and then I have to listen and continue from there. There is a constant interplay between giving input and stepping back again. The need I feel to receive or to listen is often as great as my need to suggest, or sometimes exceeds it. It is key to trust this communication process, like in any kind of meaningful relationship. All players and factors in the process are in a constant search of their role.

Do you think these mutual poetics are specific to dance, or to the collective energy of the performing arts?

No. First of all, dance, to work with movement, is an art form of infinite possibilities. We are all

labouring under misconceptions as to what dance actually is. Secondly, as I said earlier, I like to think of my body as a visual entity that has the potential to communicate layers of thought, emotions and sensations. As an approach, it is perhaps closer to the visual arts than to dance, or at least in the way that we tend to perceive dance nowadays. Thirdly, in respect of boundaries, there is a cultural and societal obsession with definitions, yet in the end it shouldn't really matter too much how we define things. To draw a frame around things, and therefore create expectations, can sometimes limit or even block our thought processes, whereas I think it is important to allow ourselves to experience art with all our senses. In this regard, I believe there is huge potential within the field of movement, one that I feel is only just beginning to be explored. It's really fascinating. Perhaps we will start referring to dance as movement, which is what is happening in the Iranian dance world. Over there, what you do is far more important than what you call it. Their approach, which is caused by their current situation as citizens, puts them perhaps a step further in the evolution of our art form. Everything is process.

In being you collaborated with two Iranian artists, Masoumeh Jalalieh and Alireza Mirmohammadi. You apparently distanced yourself so radically during the process, when you were searching for your respective roles, that – for the very first time – you were absent from the stage. You directed, while Masoumeh and Alireza performed. Can you tell us more about how that creative process evolved?

Sure. It started with a workshop I gave in 2014 at the UNTIMELY Festival in Teheran. Masoumeh and Alireza were participating and I was intrigued by their skills and their presence. The dialogue that grew out of the encounter generated

the creative process that eventually resulted in *being*. During this period, Masoumeh and I wrote a text in which we described our movement performance as a meeting of two individuals on stage, focusing on the development of human dialogue, the sharing of a space. We also conceived it as an exploration of how to communicate with one another within the context of our cultural similarities and differences. We wished to find a common language of movement that would transcend the cultural preconditions and social constructions that impact upon our lives, our behaviour, our choices, our knowledge and our identities. In trying to enrich one another's reality by combining the various questions we had in respect of our differences, we eventually wished to make a contribution with our performance to the development of an inclusive community of global citizens.

Our society is constantly expecting us to be in control. In reality, it keeps us from moving. It keeps us from accepting and embracing the transformation that is actually taking place. That is why we sometimes have to cut loose from what we are or seem to have been, so as to reconnect with the experience of being in a state of transition, both individually and collectively.

being © Aëla Labbé



That sounds idealistic, especially in terms of transcending boundaries and differences. Did it work?

Some things did, others did not. To begin with, what struck me about working in Iran was people's openness towards strangers: people you barely know will generously invite you to their houses or to travel with them. They have a completely different concept of time. This was the greatest revelation. In fact, it made me feel completely at home in the country. The energy I felt in Iran was similar to the one that I knew from my father: it is very different to what I feel in Reykjavík, Brussels or other Western cities, where our quality of life is generally diminished by the constant stress on quantity and multi-everything. As a result, I kept on returning; I started to gravitate towards Iran. And since repetition and returning are essential to all learning, whether mental or physical, it also became this space where I was confronted with my background, my knowledge, my expectations and my limitations, and opened up to another way of being. In that perspective, my decision to direct the performance and leave the stage open to Masoumeh and Alireza was not about distancing. It was about getting close in a different way.

So what did not work? Did you come up against any censorship in Iran when staging their encounter?

We knew about the context of Iran's official culture, but we turned it into a creative framework. Since we wanted to be able to perform the work both in and outside of Iran, without changing it, we decided that we would take the current condition of censorship in Iran's official culture as a working alphabet, or a code, and use it as a device through which to perform and give physical expression to the actual work. For instance, Masoumeh could not touch Alireza on stage, and there were several body parts that neither

could reveal, to a certain extent. This was the starting point for our research. The trouble we run onto, however, was that we ended up with huge visa problems. We missed a whole month of our working period and got to know that only one week before. Luckily, I knew an Icelandic-Indonesian artist who could temporarily help us out, but of course, I felt very stressed about all the extra work of fixing and organizing outside the studio.

So border control and problems with visa turned out to be a much stronger impediment on working internationally here than having to deal with censorship and other cultural frameworks or subtexts?

Yes. It's a problem of inequality that exceeds the arts. For instance, Alireza's wife wanted to come to Europe and attempted to obtain a visa so that she could visit her sister in Germany. But the visa was refused. That is simply the reality for many Iranians. My European boyfriend once received an invitation to travel to North Korea, but this woman could not even come to meet her sister in Europe.

Globalisation and internationalisation work better from West to East than the other way around, you say?

Sure. We are born the same, but we don't have the same rights. It depends on where we are born, as I stated earlier. This very realization appeals to my sensibility and responsibility as an artist as well. On the one hand, it is true that we need to address the plurality that is locally present; you don't have to go to the other side of the world to find diversity or people who are different from you. But on the other hand, we must remain aware that we do not meet everybody in our immediate surroundings. There are a lot of people who cannot travel. A part of the world's diversity is

lacking in our streets. There are many parameters we are not aware of. I feel lucky to have the chance to dislocate myself in order to distance myself from what I find self-evident and take for granted as well.

So dislocating yourself as a artist is a way to open up and negotiate your own cultural borders, too?

Like names, borders define what can be said and can be seen. I look for what is unsaid and unseen. As long as you do not focus on borders as an end in themselves, they can become an invitation to meet what you do not know yet. When working with censorship, for instance, we would especially give focus to the subtext that emerged out of that cultural context, the political control of the body in this case. But there is a subtext to every context, just like there is a way to read between the lines of what you reveal in a movement performance. We made *being* via working periods and residencies in Teheran, Potsdam, Neerpelt, Groningen, Ghent, Brussels and Istanbul. All of us got dislocated at some point, so all of these locations have had an impact on the performance. Particularly, the subtext of Istanbul resonated strongly, as an age-old meeting point of East and West. That triggered so many connections.'

How did Masoumeh and Alireza experience their dislocation, performing in the Western art scene?

Well, apart from our troubles with the visas, which meant that they constantly had to travel back and forth, and which seriously hampered our research capacities and the time we needed together to just get on track, they were both quite impressed by the prestigious venue that we played and rehearsed in, as they are used to working in an underground scene. They were curious, especially, to know how the audience would react, especially since they were concerned about

not being trained as professional dancers – unlike me, for that is how they initially perceived the situation. To me, however, the true point of interest was their personal and imaginative ways to work with movement, regardless of being 'professionally trained' or not. I felt we had a lot in common in how we approached the body.

The diverse, culturally established codes of dance did not generate another border to move beyond?

Contrary to the traditional idea of dance, I am not interested in making a hierarchy of movements. Movement performance, to me, is about communicating through the presence of one's body, whether it does something or not, let alone something technically difficult. It's about what the body allows to be felt. In that respect, I generally prefer to work with the body's vulnerability and fragility. In the end, we are all incomplete, and I think there is a beauty in sharing one's incompleteness.

Talking about incompleteness, being seemed to me about reaching out for the missing other, the one that might complete yourself but that always remains at a distance. Perhaps this is a reason why you were not physically present on stage for the first time, too?

We simply thought it might be too illustrative if the meeting had been staged between the three of us. Then it would have looked as if we had labelled ourselves as male and female, East and West... while I generally prefer to avoid labels. But in fact, even before we had started to work in the studio, I had already felt and decided that I needed to be present in another way, as an alternative to being on stage myself. I wanted to create conditions that allowed all of us to speak for ourselves, to have our autonomy. It is a logical step, I think, in trying

to turn my presence into a meeting ground and a medium of reflection for others. This force was already driving the movement in my earlier performances, too.

Is it a response, too? In having your own bodily presence lacking, I feel as though you touched upon a taboo of our own Western culture, a sacred rule that demands that you manifest yourself, that you put yourself in the centre of things, in order to obtain success and recognition. Wouldn't you agree?

Essentially, it is all about letting go of control, as this is the only way that something unexpected might happen. Our society is constantly expecting us to be in control,

not least by naming and identifying. In so doing, it feels as though society is trying to keep everything and everyone in its place. Restlessly, I would even say. In reality, it keeps us from moving, however. It keeps us from accepting and embracing the transformation that is actually taking place. That is why we sometimes have to cut loose, I think, from what we are or seem to have been, so as to reconnect with the experience of being in a state of transition, both individually and collectively. For the only thing that we can be certain of, as many say, is that everything keeps changing. Nothing is permanent. All is 'on the move'. It's funny.

What's funny?

The remark makes me think of my name.

What does it mean?

Bára means wave.

Image from MOSI, an ongoing collaboration with photographer Aëla Labbé.



A Portrait of the Artist *as a* Traveller

Quantitative analysis
of the **distribution**
of **solo exhibitions**
and **residencies** of
contemporary artists
from Flanders & Brussels

Simon Leenknecht

Globalisation and the visual arts: over the past decades, the subject has been covered in numerous exhibitions, symposia and publications. According to the narrative, 'globalisation' refers to a number of fundamental changes that the field of the visual arts would have undergone at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the present century. It is in this new context that 'contemporary art' is created, exhibited and traded in places where this was not the case before. The manner and scale at which art is made and the way in which communication and information flows take place in the art world have been radically altered by the emergence of new media and the internet. The international mobility of artists and curators has changed radically, partly due to changes in regulations on labour migration and the support mechanisms of national governments. At the same time, global flows of capital have emerged that influence the production, presentation and sale of art worldwide. With these changes, the roles of museums, biennials, art fairs and other cultural and commercial infrastructures have also evolved and been called

into question. However, the views on how and to what extent the contemporary art world has been 'globalised' differ.¹

This article, which is the harbinger of a more extensive study by Kunstenpunt/Flanders Arts Institute, elaborates on the theme of the mobility of artists and their work. More specifically, we will focus on the distribution of solo exhibitions and residencies of professional contemporary artists from Flanders and Brussels. A residency or the creation of a solo exhibition (usually) means that the artist in question travels to a certain place and stays there for a time. Both activities imply an engagement of the artist with a local art institution and, conversely, an engagement by the institution with the artist and his or her oeuvre. The distribution of the solo exhibitions and residencies gives a picture of the mobility of our contemporary artists and of the places where people are interested in going deeper into their work.

Has the distribution of solo exhibitions and residencies by contemporary artists from Flanders and Brussels changed in recent years? If so, do we see traces of globalisation here or are

there other factors at play? Do artists exhibit more abroad than in the past? Does the same apply to artist residencies? Are more solo exhibitions and residencies occurring in places that do not belong to what is traditionally regarded as the 'core' of the contemporary art scene (especially Europe and North America)?

To answer these questions, we can make use of the online artists' database of Kunstenpunt/Flanders Arts Institute.² Since 2005, this database has been collecting the CVs of hundreds of professional contemporary artists with a link to Flanders and Brussels. These data (about solo exhibitions and residencies, but also for example about works of art or education) are largely supplied by the artists themselves, so that we have a more complete picture of some careers than of others. While the database is still being supplemented in a targeted manner for the current research, in this article we will already venture a first exploration of the available data.

Graph 1 highlights the solo exhibitions between 2005 and 2016, the period for which we currently have the most data. The numbers of solo exhibitions are divided into four-year periods: in absolute figures, it concerns 1,521 solo exhibitions for 2005-2008, 1,613 for 2009-2012 and 1,410 for 2013-2016. Please note: the differences in absolute numbers do not necessarily indicate a decrease or increase in the number of solo exhibitions. There may be gaps in the data collection for certain years and this has an effect on the absolute numbers. For this reason and to facilitate the analysis of possible differences in the distribution of these exhibitions between these three periods, the numbers were converted to percentages. The share of solo exhibitions in Belgium is marked in blue. That of solo exhibitions in other European countries is orange

and the share of such exhibitions on other continents is indicated in shades of grey.

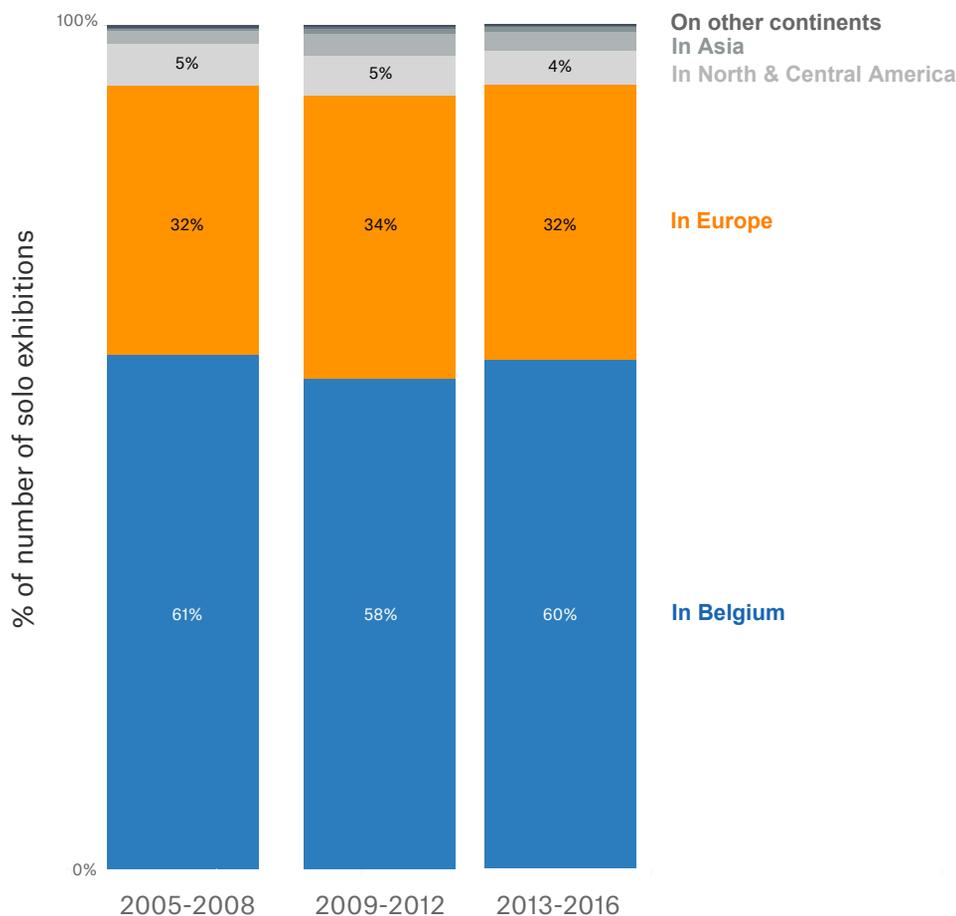
If we compare the three bars, it is immediately obvious that there are few differences. The share of domestic solo exhibitions remains fairly stable (61%, 58% and 60% respectively in the three consecutive periods). In each of the three periods, a third of the total number of solo exhibitions took place in European countries other than Belgium. The underlying data tell us that these are mainly the Netherlands, Germany and France. The share of solo exhibitions in North and Central America (the lightest shade of grey) is between 4% and 5% (this largely concerns the United States). The share of such exhibitions in Asia (dark grey) fluctuates around 2% and 3%. Solo exhibitions in South America, Oceania and Africa (the darkest shades of grey) are each around 1% or less in the three periods.

Graph 2 shows the number of residencies between 2005 and 2016. In absolute numbers this concerns 215 residencies in 2005-2008, 264 in 2009-2012 and 167 in 2013-2016 (again, one has to be careful not to equate the differences in absolute figures with real increases or decreases in the number of residencies). In contrast to the solo exhibitions, the majority of residencies surveyed took place abroad. Residencies in European countries (orange) other than Belgium represent between 43% and 46% in the three periods. Again we read in the underlying data that this mainly concerns France, the Netherlands and Germany. The share of residencies in Belgium (blue) shows a different picture: it changes from 31% in 2005-2008 to 37% in 2009-2012 and even to 41% in 2013-2016. The shares of residencies in Asia and in North and Central America (marked in the lightest shade of grey) decrease throughout the period (from 12% to 8% and from 13% to 4% respectively). Residencies on other continents (the darkest shades of grey: Oceania, Africa, South America) tended to be the exception.

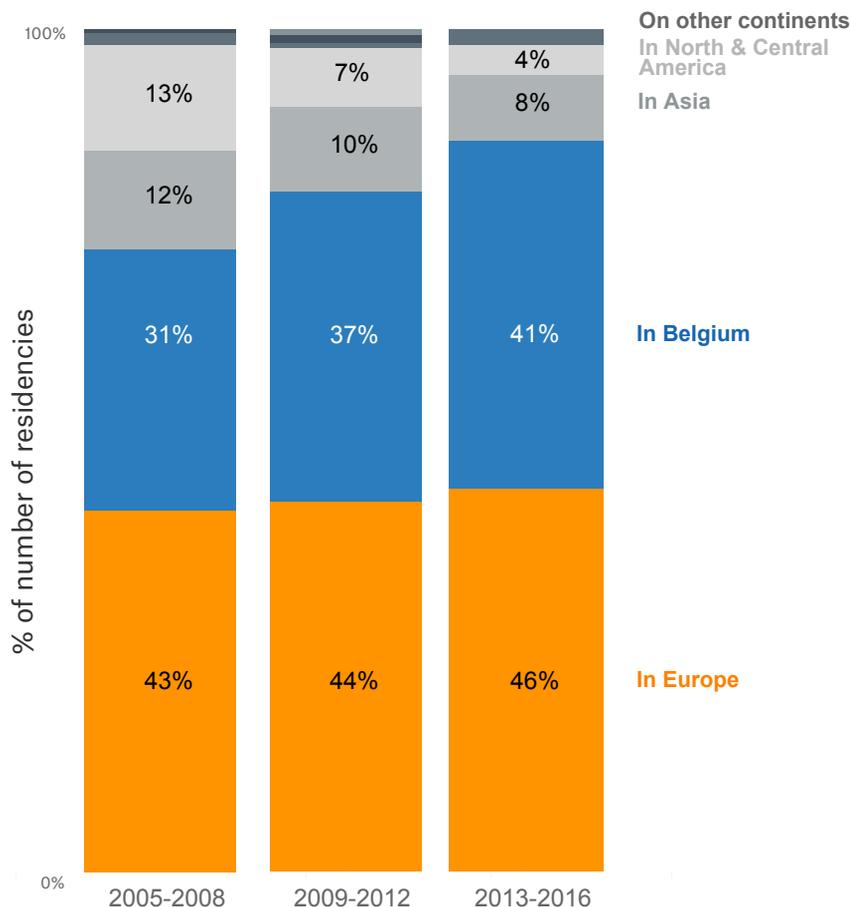
The picture we obtain from the two graphs is not consistent with thoroughgoing internationalisation. The distribution of the solo exhibitions of Flemish artists mainly takes place in Belgium. The foreign horizon is largely comprised of Europe and to a much lesser extent North and Central America. Solo exhibitions on other continents are rare. We also note little change in this situation between 2005 and 2016. While the Flemish artists mainly had residencies abroad during the period under review, we see here just the opposite of progressive internationalisation: the share of residencies in Belgium increased. The available Belgian residencies therefore grew between 2005 and 2016. We can see this in the underlying data. In addition to older organisations with a residency function (the Frans Masereel Centre or AIR Antwerp, for example), a number of new initiatives emerged during the course of this period, such as Wiels (since 2007), Overtoon (a subsidised operation with residencies since 2013) or the Emile Van Doren Museum (which has offered residency locations since 2010).

The findings about the activities of contemporary artists from Flanders and Brussels are

Graph 1: The distribution of solo exhibitions of contemporary Flemish artists (2005-2016)



Graph 2: The distribution of residencies of contemporary Flemish artists (2005-2016)



in line with a number of studies that call into question the globalisation of the visual arts field.³ Among these critical voices it can be said that the field is still dominated by actors from Western countries who have been at the centre of the contemporary arts field for a long time.⁴ We also see this in the underlying data on the solo exhibitions and residencies: when these took place abroad, it was mainly in countries such as France, Germany and the United States. In between, we find the Netherlands, a country that, like Belgium, is further removed from that centre of global visual arts. Our neighbour, which traditionally has played an important role for the Flemish artistic and cultural field, remains a frequent destination for visual artists in the period under review.

In the last two graphs we zoom in on two groups of artists that are included in the Kun-

stenpunt/Flanders Arts Institute database.

Graph 3 shows the numbers of solo exhibitions and residencies (added together here) for contemporary artists who were in their mid-thirties during the first years in which the database was active (2005, 2006 and 2007). This concerns a total of 44 artists born between 1970 and 1972. Graph 4 shows the same numbers for 37 artists who are ten years younger: they were in their mid-30s in 2015, 2016 and 2017 (and born between 1980 and 1982). Based on informal knowledge of the field, this age (here defined as 33 to 37 years) is a turning point for many artists' careers. In the database we also find mainly solo exhibitions and residencies that took place at the time when the artist in question was in his or her thirties. The latter *might* indicate a peak

in the number of activities at this age. Some caution is recommended with this statement, because it is possible that we mainly received data from artists in their thirties, which could distort the picture.

Graphs 3 and 4 highlight a number of specific moments in the careers of these two groups of artists. Because we are limiting ourselves here to statements about the CVs of these artists, we can go further back in time than 2005 (at least for the artists who were born between 1970 and 1972). CVs often present a selection from the career of the artist, which influences the absolute number of exhibitions and residencies. For this reason, and again to make the comparison easier, everything was converted into percentages.

The data for the group born between 1970-1972 (Graph 3), are for the years 1995 to 1997 (when they were in their mid-twenties), 2005 to 2007 (when they were in their mid-thirties) and 2015-2017 (when they were in their mid-forties). If we look at the three periods from left to right, we see an increasing share of foreign solo exhibitions and residencies (activities in Belgium are again in blue, those in Europe in orange, and in shades of grey for the other continents). Especially the relative number of those in Europe increase. Also in Graph 4, depicting solo exhibitions and residencies of artists born between 1980 and 1982, we see that more foreign (mainly European) activities are reported on the CVs as they get older.

If we compare the two different groups of

other continents	North & Central America	Europe
	Asia	Belgium

artists with each other, we see among those 23 to 27 years of age in 1995-1997 a smaller share (61%) of solo exhibitions and residencies in Belgium than among those 23 to 27 years of age in 2005-2007 (74%). The share of domestic activities among those 33 to 37 years of age in 2005-2007 and those in 2015-2017 is approximately the same (54% and 55% respectively). We note no major shifts in the international distribution of the solo exhibitions and residencies of those in their mid-30s, except for a smaller share of activities in North and Central America (11% in the group born in 1970-1972 and 5% in the group born in 1980-1982).

The picture given in Graphs 3 and 4 suggests that the number of international activities in both age groups is related to career development. The most striking difference in distribution between the age groups concerns not foreign countries, but Belgium. The Flemish arts field looked very different in 1995-1997 than in 2005-2007. A number of important exhibition and residency locations have been added such as the aforementioned Wiels (since 2007) and AIR Antwerp (since 2000), but also S.M.A.K. (since 1999), Be-Part (since 2005) and KIOSK (since 2006). Young artists who finished their studies around 2005-2007

had more opportunities to exhibit in Belgium or to do a residency than ten years earlier.

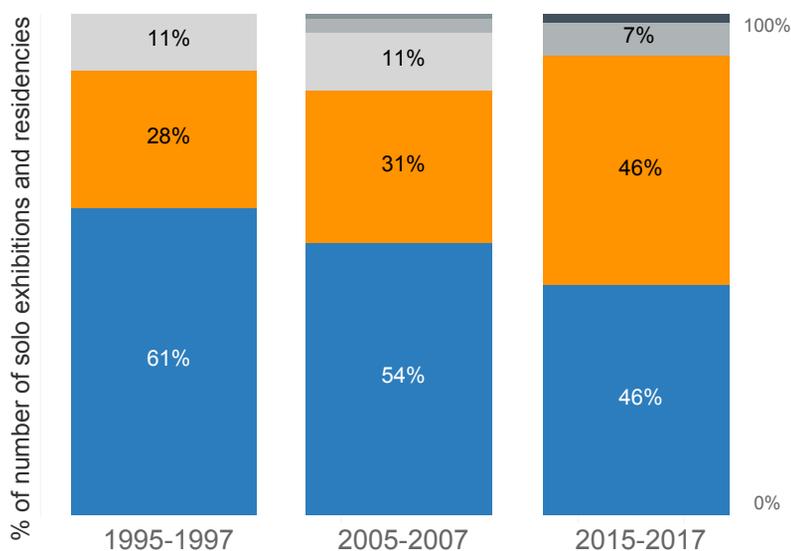
Investigation of the data from the artists' database started from a number of questions about the distribution of solo exhibitions and residencies of contemporary Flemish artists and the possible impact of globalisation on this matter. The results so far suggest that the share of solo exhibitions and residencies abroad has not increased. There is also no question of a significant expansion of the distribution of these activities to regions that previously played no or only a peripheral role in the contemporary art scene. Changes in the professional arts field within Belgium, however, do emerge in the preliminary findings of the study. We see a larger share of domestic residencies than in the past, and the exhibition and residency opportunities for (young) Flemish artists have expanded compared to the nineties.

- 1 See for example: Olav Velthuis and Stefano Baia Curioni, *Cosmopolitan Canvases: The Globalization of Markets for Contemporary Art*, 2015; Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel, *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds*, 2013; Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, *The Global Art World*, 2009; Charlotte Bydler, *The Global Art World, Inc: On the Globalization of Contemporary*

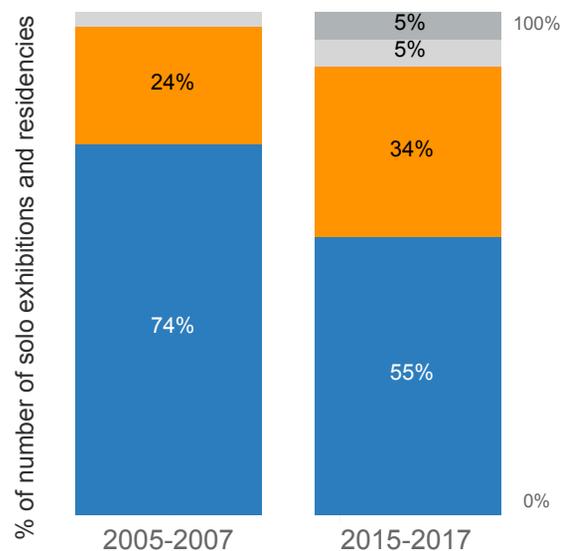
Art, 2004.

- 2 bamart.be/artists. To be included in the database, artists must meet a number of criteria. These can be found at bamart.be/pages/detail/nl/528
- 3 A collection of critical papers can be found in the aforementioned volume *Cosmopolitan Canvases: The Globalization of Markets for Contemporary Art* (2015), edited by Olav Velthuis and Stefano Baia Curioni.
- 4 See, for example, "The Impact of Nationality and Territory on Fame and Success in the Visual Arts Sector: Artists, Experts, and the Market" by Alain Quemin and Femke van Hest in *Cosmopolitan Canvases* (pp. 170-192).

Graph 3: Solo exhibitions and residencies of artists born between 1970-1972



Graph 4: Soloexhibitions and residencies of artists born between 1980-1982



Wim Wabbes

Handelsbeurs

Train Time, Quality Time

In the wake of slow food and other slow applications, slow travel is one more for the list. In the quest for sustainable mobility, slowness is a crucial concept. Slowness is the equivalent of time as an added quality.

Taking the train as an alternative for driving or flying has everything to do with both sustainability and quality. Although the train is not as fast, it offers more quality time, as well as less interrupted or unusable time. With flying, getting to the airport, checking in, security checks, finding your gate, boarding, taking off and landing are all brief interventions in time that preclude any long-lasting activity, and they are often stressful. With driving, there may be a single long road, but it offers limited freedom of movement and high levels of concentration and stress.

Travelling by train means frequent long, restful trajectories, with a rhythm of their own, comfort in which to work, read, sleep, stretch your legs, eat and drink.

If you take the entire trip into account, from door to door, taking a train may not even be so much slower, and sometimes not at all. And then, the experience of the travel is so much more intense and authentic.

For a trip of 1000 km, or one day of travel, the train is often the most sensible choice. Setting low-cost airlines aside, it is also the most financially feasible (even travelling first class). It takes seven hours and twenty minutes to travel from Ghent to Berlin, with a long, uninterrupted stretch from Cologne to Berlin. A return ticket is under €200. You only need to change trains twice. The flight takes an hour and a half, but if you include all the travelling and waiting time, the most you gain would be some 90 minutes.

Like many things we do by habit, it comes down to finding a different attitude, a different perspective, and then the switch is easily made. We can just hope that our railroad companies and national and European governments see the sense and the necessity of an efficient railroad system and reinstate cancelled long-distance train services.

Rósa Ómarsdóttir

choreographer & dancer

Sharing concerns and solutions

I came to Belgium seven years ago to study at P.A.R.T.S. After my training I decided to stay in Brussels but since my graduation I have been working every year in Iceland as well. I have always felt some kind of responsibility towards the scene there. I think this is typical of smaller communities. But even if I wanted to work more in Iceland, it is just not possible because of a lack of funding there. The risk of living in a place mainly because of work can be that everything in your life becomes about work. As an artist you are constantly in residencies and you mainly meet people who work in the same field. I wrote down a list of suggestions that I can share with other artists about how to create a sense of belonging, how to feel at home somewhere. One piece of advice is to 'try to have some friends who are not in the same field as you'.

In 2016 I started the research project *Secondhand Knowledge*. Much of my own knowledge is actually second-hand knowledge. When I was younger, there were hardly any foreign dance shows in Iceland so I saw a lot of work through YouTube clips and I made up the rest of it. In fact, my generation was really influenced

by work that we completely misunderstood. Second-hand knowledge can best be described like the game of Chinese whispers. A word gets passed from one person to the next in a whisper and gets distorted in the process. It is a social form of knowledge, a knowledge where you rely on the account of others about a certain topic. In this project we question this hierarchy of first- and second-hand knowledge and the dichotomy between the two.

This notion of second-hand knowledge is often felt more in countries that are either geographically or culturally considered peripheral because of their isolation or for economic reasons. They have little contact with or direct links to the larger international dance scene. Often they are considered as lagging behind or exotic. But of course you can also question what 'the centre' is. And in this project we really question the sort of bad reputation this notion of second-hand knowledge has and the dichotomy between first and second.

We travelled to different places that were in some way peripheral or isolated. I visited Syros, a small island in Greece as well as Aarhus in Denmark, Reykjavík, Cyprus, Zagreb, Riga and Trondheim. In each place we

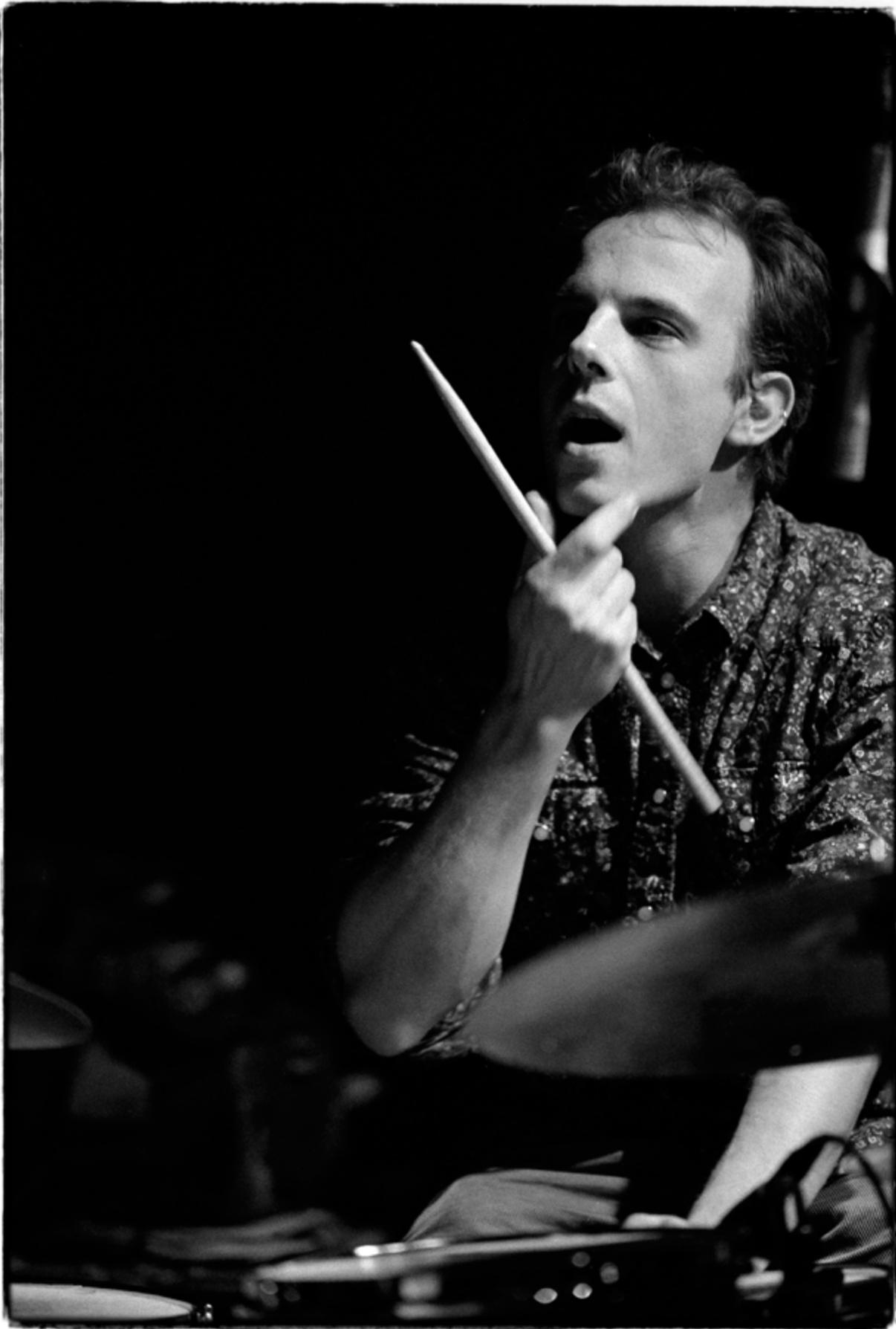
stayed for two weeks. What we did there was twofold: first, we conducted a workshop where we worked with local dance artists. During each workshop we started by talking, by mapping out and sharing our ideas about how we relate to this notion of second-hand knowledge. We mapped out our influences: what are they and where do they come from. 'Who do we owe our practice to?' was the guiding question. Secondly, I interviewed different people who were in some way related to the local dance scene: dancers, choreographers, teachers, dramaturges, producers etc. From these interviews we then created what we called *The Anonymous Autobiography of the Dance Scene* in each location. This is a script edited together from all the interviews, written in the first person, about the dance scene in that place. In these interviews, the concerns of each dance scene become clear. At the end of each residency we shared this 'Autobiography' through a little performative practice with the audience.

My travels with this project made me realise that there are a lot of common concerns. Dance scenes are struggling everywhere. To avoid burnout, most people seem to need a greater

sense of community, and in those places where they seem to have this sense of a scene they can belong to and be a part of, people seem to be more able to persevere and to avoid burnouts.

Another concern is the lack of visibility. The people sustaining these dance scenes often feel the need to travel to the bigger or more 'central' countries like Belgium, Germany and France to get recognition. I worked with those who decided to stay behind. Because of their precarious situation, they have to come up with creative solutions: in Syros, for example, they created a festival and residency space to bring people to the island and to encourage people to stay. In Copenhagen the artists had morning classes every day, even if there were only two people who showed up. They persisted and in the meantime they created a festival. In Riga there was not enough money for a dance house, so some artists created a pop-up dance house. In Trondheim, artists formed a dance company that is completely self-organised. I try to share these solutions with the other places I go to.





Since first picking up the drum sticks at the age of eight, Teun Verbruggen has had an impressive international career. As one of the most sought-after drummers in jazz and far beyond, he has performed with Alexi Tuomarila, Jef Neve, Melanie de Biasio and Toots Thielemans, to name but a few. Verbruggen is not only a welcome guest at live shows extending from Scandinavia, through Mexico and Australia, to Japan: The 'international' is also intertwined in many other ways in his work as a musician. Take his latest project, *Walter* for example: a workshop for musicians, video makers, visual artists and the like in an old textile factory in Anderlecht. All of which makes him one of the ideal partners for our interview series following the analysis *Have Love, Will Travel*, published earlier this year by Flanders Arts Institute. Below, we find out what working internationally means for one of the most respected jazz drummers in Belgium.

The International in
Teun Verbruggen

Nothing ventured Nothing gained.

You've played with many different talented musicians throughout your career. How important is it for you to be active outside Belgium?

I've been playing abroad a lot, in many different bands, since 2001. To *really* pursue an international career – by which I don't necessarily mean that you must become really famous, but rather that you play a lot abroad – you have to persevere. If you tour with only one band, your international career will stop if that group splits. And that doesn't have to be a bad thing. But if you want to build up something in the long term, you have to maintain your contacts. I always make it a

point to chat with the organisers of the performances I play abroad, and with the musicians in other groups. In this way you build a network on which you can fall back later. And it's very important that you maintain and expand that network.

You must try to ensure that the dynamic within your network is one of give and take. Unlike in pop music, jazz musicians like me often organise concerts themselves. In this way I can do a return a favour to those who once booked one of my bands: by inviting them to come and play in Brussels, for example.

In this regard, it is perhaps easier to build connections in the jazz scene: if you're a pop act, then

it's primarily the manager who develops his or her network. The musicians benefit from this only indirectly. If you play a concert with a number of musicians in Berlin, of course you will come into direct contact with them. Jazz musicians tend to be freelance musicians: we play in many groups. And thus you notice that the world soon becomes very small. New bands are constantly being put together, with people from totally different countries. For example: I just returned from a tour with a Norwegian, a Parisian, an Englishman and a New Yorker. We come together for a week to tour, and then each go our separate ways. One of these musicians even flew specially from Austin, Texas. And the following week he went to Chicago.

That's a lot of travelling.

Yes, but that's how it goes. I've also known periods in which I regularly flew to Mexico to play, and then flew on to Canada. I once even toured Canada with two bands at the same time: I played a concert one night in Vancouver with one band, the next evening a show in Montreal with the other group, then back to Vancouver to accompany the first band to the next gig.

Isn't that extremely tiring?

Of course it is. But personally I get a kick out of it: it keeps me focused. My favourite thing is travelling alone and touring with different groups at the same time. I think it's great to be alone on the plane, to play, and go somewhere else the next morning. But the hours of jet lag do accumulate.

Many of my friends have already warned me: 'Teun, you're going to pay for this one day, it's inevitable!' But they've been saying that for fifteen years, and I'm still on my feet. Last month I read somewhere that burnouts apparently arise mainly when you don't like what you're doing. If you are stuck in a situation that you want to leave, your stress limit would be a lot lower and you'll burn out more quickly.

I actually just heard the opposite: that burnouts mainly occur in people who are very passionate about their job, and always want to do more and better. Eventually you can't keep up. But maybe both are right?

It is indeed a double-edged sword. In any case, I notice that as I grow older, I've become a bit more relaxed in what I do. I used to go out quite often, drank quite a few beers after a performance, smoked a lot, and my diet was unhealthy. Nowadays I live reasonably straight: I try to eat healthy, exercise a lot and crawl into my bed on time. Which *is* possible: a concert usually finishes at 11 or 12 in the evening. It's possible to simply go to bed right away. I'm not able to stay up late like I used to.

You may be taking a calmer approach to partying, but you're still fully engaged in your work. Actually, you're lucky to have that drive?

When I graduated, I had a much less of an entrepreneurial attitude. Only when someone called me did I spring into action. I immediately said 'yes' to each cool offer that was presented. I did have constant work, but mainly because people appreciated my energy on stage. Not so much because I was looking for it so hard. But I have to add: when I was young, there weren't so many skilled jazz drummers. Now many good drummers from all over the country are finishing their studies. In our time there were a lot less. Today, young musicians are also much more on top of their business. They know much better where they want to go. In the beginning I just wanted to play with good musicians. I didn't really have a plan.

But at a certain point I no longer felt comfortable being so dependent on what other people offered me. I noticed that I was constantly playing music that I

You notice that the world soon becomes very small. New bands are constantly being put together, with people from totally different countries. For example: I just returned from a tour with a Norwegian, a Parisian, an Englishman and a New Yorker. We come together for a week to tour, and then each go our separate ways.

liked, but it was not really my own thing. And then I realised that – if I really wanted to do my own thing artistically – I would have to take matters into my own hands.

From then on, I always looked for new challenges. That was difficult in the beginning. But gradually I became addicted to it: I started a label, founded several new bands, and even now – with Walter – a bunch of new collaborations have been added.

Usually these are projects that people think are totally impossible. And sometimes they are: it happens, for example, that you call a musician who has just decided not to accept any new projects. I recently encountered this with a guitarist. But sometimes the reverse happens: someone you look up to and whom you hardly dare to ask to collaborate on your project, suddenly joins. Which is why I always kept in touch with Mike Patton: he is really my hero, in many respects. I know him a bit because we once joined him on tour with Flat Earth Society and because I often play together with his bass player. I also always send him the new music I make, to which he always reacts very positively. And at one point I told him that I wouldn't forgive myself if I never told him that I would really like to drum with him. He appreciated that and said he would keep it in mind. Of course you know that he plays with the best musicians in the world. But if you don't say something, you'll never know. It's like meeting a beautiful woman: if you don't talk to her, you'll feel sorry afterwards.

Nothing ventured nothing gained.

Voilà. And that's not easy. But nowadays I do it all the time. You have nothing to lose. So you might as well try. And sometimes you're really amazed by what happens next. I recently experienced that with a trumpet player with whom I wanted to work for a long time. I had already asked him a few times,

but something always came up: sometimes he had too much work, other times he was in the middle of a divorce or had to take care of his children. But I kept asking, every so often, without it becoming pushy. And after six years he finally said 'yes'. The result: the two coolest records of my career!

And if people say 'no', you shouldn't take it personally. Not if they do it correctly.

For many musicians, 'international work' today is still mainly export oriented: "Belgium is too small, we have to go abroad to expand our market". But you work internationally in very different ways: by playing together with musicians from all over the world, by inviting them to Walter, by performing abroad, and so on.

I simply find it all incredibly fun to do. However, there's a lot of hassle is involved as well: you have to call people all the time to keep your schedule on track. I spend at least four hours a day behind my desk. But I'm happy to include this part of the job. And I even think that I finally found the way of working that suits me best.. Having a manager doesn't necessarily make things easier. Because even then you still have to keep pushing for things yourself. Your entourage thinks in a different way. And they don't always have a network of musicians.

I certainly don't want to say that management offices and booking agencies don't have their place. But I think that organisers in the jazz world are still more inclined to work with musicians directly. Because many of these people hold their personal relations with musicians in high regard. For Wim Wabbes, for example, the personal contact with Marc Ribot was the motivation to continue in his job. He also works with management agencies, but without personal contact there will never be a long-term relationship. And I notice this

A career is never 'won'. A real 'star' does not actually exist.

myself: when I write to people personally, it comes across differently than if a manager does it for you.

Part of that will also have to do with the career you've built up so far and the professional development you went through. A similar request from a newly graduated jazz drummer probably has a higher chance of being ignored. Did you experience a moment when you gained momentum and suddenly were considered a professional?

A career in music always has ups and downs. But at times when I felt that less work was coming in, I tried to compensate by intensely looking for projects myself. I always made sure to keep myself busy.

But being busy doesn't always mean being paid. Financially, my career has had even more ups and downs. When I played with Jef Neve, for example, I was paid very well. Since I no longer play with him, that translates into my bank account. But is my career going downhill because of it? I don't think so. It was simply a very nice experience. And now other things take its place, which in turn have their value. I think the trick is to continually weigh things up for yourself during the course of your career.

How do you choose today which projects to accept and which not?

There is a generation full of young jazz talent that gets most of the attention and exposure. Naturally, most concert promoters want to book these young, hip bands. And that's great for them. But as a musician who has greater difficulty gaining attention due to this, you have to take that into account. You then have to look for ways to deal with it: 'how can I solve this? How can I continue to innovate?' In fact I find it all quite challenging. There are people who get frustrated because of this. But that will get you nowhere. You simply have to keep moving and devise things that continue to give people a reason to book your band. No one wants to see a plain Jane or average Joe on stage. And fortunately, these young artists are there to keep us awake.

Even now you continue to reinvent yourself?

A career is never 'won'. It can end in a snap. Even a world star like Madonna must continue to reinvent herself. Which is exactly the challenge. A real 'star' does not actually exist.

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Long-haul flights have an ecological footprint that is actually not okay. (...) Make sure that the tour fits within a long-term vision. (...) Make sure that it fits within your artistic story, and give something back to the local community.

The difference of course is that the Madonnas and Justin Biebers of this world are surrounded by a team of people who come up with the 'product'. And they have to present it. But most other musicians have to do it themselves. No one is going to take you by the hand.

And certainly not in the niche in which I work. Here, a manager would have to have a lot of motivation to work with a musician like me. You're aiming for a niche audience within a small scene. It's not easy to reach the right people. It's a lot of work, with very little to show for it. For me, that's okay: I do my own thing, and I also play in other people's bands. So I don't need to live off my *own* music.

Do you then accept these other projects purely for financial reasons?

No, I like all the projects I accept. There is no band that I don't like playing with. But I don't always have to be completely on board with the aesthetics of a band to like it. I can function perfectly in a band without the aesthetics of that band corresponding to mine.

My own projects usually involve a lot of musical research. And sometimes it happens that I listen to it five years later and ask myself: 'Wow, what's that all about?' But output is not always the most important thing for me. A record is just a snapshot. I'm very proud of most of my records, but not all. But that's not a problem. It's good that I made them. You learn from it and move on. It's all part of a bigger picture, of one great exploration of sounds and expression. It really is super fun that I'm able to spend my time doing what I like. Actually, I live a privileged life.

Do you incorporate (the results of) this musical exploration into your other projects afterwards?

I keep challenging myself, so I never get tired of what I do. Therefore I never feel that I've reached the end point with a band. So basically, I am a very loyal musician. I can't quit a band. If I ever quit a band, it was probably because our paths happened to diverge, or because the band needed someone with a different style. But really saying 'I quit', that has not happened often. Which does not change the fact that sometimes you can play together with people for so long that you no longer reinforce one another. Maybe it's then time for the band to play with a different drummer. But that doesn't mean that the relationship will stop. In the case of Jef Neve, for example, the feeling was mutual: we both felt that we needed to do something fresh. Which is quite normal.

But I've been playing with most people since I started studying in 1994. That creates a bond of trust that only makes the music better. Over time, the whole will transcend the sum of the parts. And sometimes there's a project of which I think: 'I really could have done without that'. But because it belongs to the path that the band is following, I'm happy to go along with it.

That's a very open vision.

Yes, but I wouldn't be able to function if I refused everything that is not entirely my thing. I tried that once, and it didn't work out well. When you play in a band like Flat Earth Society, you actually have to participate in everything, even though they work on a project basis. It's all or nothing. Compare it to a trip you make with a bunch of friends. Suppose everyone goes for a walk on the third day, but you don't join: then there's a piece of that journey that you haven't experienced. So you'll be unable to talk about it with the rest. Which is very strange. It destroys the balance in the group.

To come back to the international aspect of your career: you talked earlier about performing in Chicago. Do you mainly perform with European musicians outside of Europe, or do you play with local people on the spot?

At the beginning of my career – let's say roughly the first 10 years – I always played with Belgian musicians when abroad. But in recent years, it's mainly foreign bands that ask me to come play abroad. So I'm in two French bands and two Finnish bands at the moment. And we play throughout the world.

What matters when accepting or not accepting a show on the other side of the world?

We travel a lot. Sometimes it's a bit too much of a good thing. For example, I often play in Mexico. It's exotic, it's great to play a festival there, then play two club shows and give an interview. And then you travel to Yucatán in the north to play a concert there. Too often we musicians see this as a bonus. I think we have to assume a certain level of responsibility. Such long-haul flights have an ecological footprint that is actually not okay. So if you do something like that, you should make sure that the tour fits within a long-term vision. What do I mean by that? That you invite the right press, that you ensure that there are other relevant organisers in the room, that your record is in stores when you play somewhere. Actually, it comes down to doing everything that is not just playing around a bit for five days: ensuring that people see you, that you are making contacts, that you expand your network, that you give a workshop in a disadvantaged neighbourhood, for example. Firstly, make sure that it fits within your artistic story, and secondly that you give something back to the local community.

A kind of sustainability, both career-based and ecological.

Voilà. Which also applies to Walter. I want to involve the neighbourhood as much as possible. I not only want to present a high-quality international programme, but also to organise local workshops.

International and hyperlocal at the same time.

Exactly. I learned that from Jef Neve: if you play somewhere, you have to make sure that it's an investment for the next time. Playing for the sake of playing doesn't make much sense. I try to take that into account now. For example, if I'm asked to go to Australia, I always try to combine that with interviews, a solo concert, or a session with local people. I always try to make more of it than it is: to use my time optimally. I must add, however, that it's okay to relax every now and then. It's alright to visit the pyramids. But it's important to ensure that you don't just play anywhere, without it being an investment in the future.

Which is something few musicians think about. Somewhere I understand that: in the first place, you just want to play, to discover the world. It's to your credit you that you reflect on the impact that has. Perhaps that's something you learn over time?

Whenever I receive an offer, it's very tempting to accept it. I find it very difficult to say 'no'. I've been to Japan ten times, Mexico fifteen times, Australia four times. I find the flying and travelling itself fantastic. In any case, I set a very bad example in the area of ecology: I do not sort waste properly, and I drive a car every day, while I could organise myself differently and get about more by train and by bike. There are many things I don't do well. But I still try to do my part: by eating less meat, for example, and by not flying back and forth to Mexico to play two shows. You simply can no

longer justify that: it's irresponsible. I think that we should all reflect a bit more on this. Because in fact, things are not really going so well.

That's right. Now then, in addition to your career as an (ecology-conscious) jazz drummer, you also have a life outside of music. How do you combine your hectic existence with the home front?

Spending so much time abroad is usually not easy on your home situation is. Although I have to say that both my ex and my current girlfriend are very tolerant in that respect. Of course it's never pleasant when someone is far away from home. But I have to say that things are currently in balance. When I'm abroad, it's usually for a week, after which I'm back home for a week. I used to be away for ten days, then home for one day, and then away for another ten days. That's difficult, because then you really grow apart as a couple. That's also one of the reasons why my previous relationship ran aground. It's just not easy to stay at the same wavelength that way.

Also, I don't have children, because I'm afraid I'm away so much that ... [interrupts himself]. But on the other hand: should there suddenly be children, I will perhaps just organise my life in a different way. I think it's all possible, as long as you're together with the right person, who gives you the space to do your own thing. Provided that you also do your best to invest in your relationship from your end at the times you can.

In addition to your relationship, there is also your workshop/concert hall Walter. How does this fit into your already busy schedule?

It's going to be intense. Actually, it already is quite intense. That is partly because I'm going to organise a lot of things that I *want* to be a part of. That will necessarily mean making choices. For example,

I actually lose money with my label. I invest a lot in it. And in the past even more than now. Only after live performances do sales go well.

I received a very interesting offer to play with a group of really nice, young, musicians from Amsterdam, but that conflicted with one of the concerts I was organising here. And I chose Walter. While I thought: *“Jeez, I would’ve liked to have done that.”* But I feel I now need be present at Walter, I need to invest myself there, because I’m a bit of a signboard for Walter. Which is the way I want it to be. Moreover, I like watching other people play as much as I like to play myself. If I have to refuse an offer because something is planned at Walter, I try to view it as one of my own concerts. It happens quite often. It’s just a part of what I do. You simply can’t do everything. But as a result, I’m strengthening my network so that other things that I find equally important will eventually come my way.

It’s a progressive process, it seems. I have the impression that you are quite flexible and are patiently working on your career?

I’m very organic, in any case. I’ve already had to refuse so many nice offers because something else was already planned. But that doesn’t necessarily mean the opportunity is gone for good. Often such an opportunity presents itself again: so if it’s not for now,

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it’s for another time. For example, I was asked to play at Gent Jazz with one of the bands I like to play with most, on a day with a fantastic programme. And there was another festival linked to it. But two of my musicians couldn’t make it. And you just have to accept that. You’re looking forward to something for so long, and once the offer comes, you have to refuse it. That was painful: but so be it.

Didn’t you have a tendency to think: I want to do this so much, I’ll just do it with other musicians?

Well, the musicians who were unable to play said the same thing: ‘if you want to do it so bad, do it with other musicians’. But I couldn’t. And I wouldn’t want to either. If you were to pick one musician out of the band and replace him with someone else, the entire group would change. Then I’d rather say ‘no’. That contributes to the long existence of a band. Look at my trio with Mauro: we now play once or twice a year, but it’s been going on like that for ten years already. It continues to be fun, but it doesn’t need to be more. In the beginning, I thought being in a band with Mauro would be my ticket to Pukkelpop. I found it a fantastic band, which I liked to play in.

And I thought: we’re going to make it internationally with this band!

But of course that was not the case. Who wants to hear an avant garde band like that at a big festival? Moreover, Mauro was unable to accept most concert offers because he was then playing with dEUS. In the beginning I found that super frustrating. But in the end, I felt like: ‘that’s a sign that it wasn’t meant to be’. That happens when you get older: you learn better to accept things as they are: ‘if not now, then some other time’.

I also have the impression that if you keep pushing for something all the time, you turn people off. Occasionally I push a bit: if it concerns a doubtful situation that otherwise would not happen. But usually I tend to easily let things go. I’m becoming more and more convinced that you can’t actually force anything. If you’re positive and open in life, opportunities will present themselves. If you have an idea of where you want to go – in an open way – a lot will happen along the way that will take you in that direction. But you must also be able to let that go, because in any case your goal will shift over the years. Your ambitions will evolve with you. At this moment I just want to make good music, gain new experienc-

es and play with nice people. If I were to set myself the ambition to become a real star, I would only feel inhibited by the pressure to continually prove myself.

We've not dealt with one more aspect of 'working internationally'. How important are physical and digital releases for you, outside of Belgium? It's probably different than with a pop & rock act.

That's a good question. Since I grew up in a graphic environment, an album cover as an object is very important to me. Just like I much prefer to hold a book than an e-reader.

I recently released another new album, a limited edition. And almost 50% of journalists refuse to write a review if they don't receive a physical copy of the record. But I no longer want to send out vinyls because it costs me too much. Young journalists tend to be more open to a download or streaming link though. But for me, the artwork is inextricably linked to the music.

At the same time, pressing vinyl is actually an ecological disaster. Which is why I'm now thinking about how I can use artwork without having to press vinyl. A USB flash drive with a painting for example: that might be the middle way?

I've got nothing against downloading music. But those purely digital releases – streaming one song and then listening to something completely different – are often so volatile. I think it's fantastic that you can listen to everything at the touch of a button. But it's a shame that you as a musician get back so little for it. You put so much time and money into it, but the streaming services barely pay anything to the musicians, while they become rich themselves. That's not okay. On the other hand: if you're not present on the streaming services, you

reach fewer people. I think we're at a crossroads. I hope that in the near future artists will be paid correctly.

The opaque and often limited compensation by streaming services are a source of frustration for many musicians. On the other hand, you can hardly stay behind: because physical sales continue to fall.

Yet I think that people who really like your music will still buy a physical copy. Especially in my niche. Moreover: by being present online, new people will come in contact with your music, so hopefully in turn you can play more live. So indirectly it translates into income again. It's a double-edged sword: I'm not against it, I'm not in favour of it. But I think it should be arranged a bit more elegantly.

So you're present on the streaming services with your own projects?

I am present on the streaming platforms with all my projects. And I believe it does not hurt the sale of CDs. Although CD sales of my label are abominable at the moment. But I think that has more to do with the fact that our niche music is inaccessible to the general public. I don't lose any sleep over the sales. I don't worry about those kind of things. I make the record, and if people want to buy it, I'm super happy.

It must be very relaxing not to have to worry about recouping your investment because you have other ways to earn revenue.

I actually *lose* money with my label. I invest a lot in it. And in the past even more than now. Only after live performances do sales go well: I've just sold 60 CDs in one week. Which is great. But as soon as you stop playing, that number drops considerably. I sell about 25 items per year online. I get my income from playing, playing

and more playing. And occasionally by receiving a small subsidy for a specific project.

And how many pieces do you usually press?

250. So I have a big stock at home. I view physical albums as a luxury business card. When I meet interesting organisers or musicians, I give away all my CDs. As far as I'm concerned, they weren't made to make a lot of money. That's not going to happen anyway.

In that case, I wish you plenty of live shows so you can expand your attic.

Einat Tuchman

dancer, performer & activist

International exchanges about local projects

I arrived in Brussels in 2000. For more than ten years I danced in choreographies and created my own pieces with the aim of touring all over the world with companies such as les ballets C de la B, Victoria, and so on. I do appreciate and value the theatre environment where a creation can grow and achieve its potential by encountering multiple audiences. But with the evident change in world politics I slowly started to feel the discrepancy between what was performed on stage and the whole social context in which it is presented. The theatre space is open to a defined social economical class. The performance is a one-time event, and even if it had a great impact on its audience, it does not insist on social transformation through dialogue.

With les ballets C de la B we toured a piece that was about poverty and social problems. We could not perform in Brazil because 'for artistic integrity', it was impossible to replace 20 musicians with recorded music.

After all kinds of such experiences I decided to stop everything. I went to study at a.pass, where each participant had his or her own individual research but also worked collectively. While at a.pass, I revisited

my socialist past growing up in a kibbutz. I started researching how individual identity is created in constant relation to its collective environment.

To be able to explore this further I wanted to focus on the city I live in and to explore how it shapes me as an artist and defines who I am. I decided to look for the identity of the smallest, poorest and most multicultural community in Brussels, Saint-Josse.

As an ex-Israeli it was the first time I dived into encountering people from diverse Muslim cultures. That exchange changed me and changed the way I look at Brussels. I started my research by knocking on people's door and asking them to host me and to tell me a story about their favourite place in Saint-Josse. I felt like I was travelling much further than I ever did with all those international companies. After one year of all kinds of activities in Saint-Josse I created a project on hospitality that was part of the KVS project *Tok Toc Knock*.

During this research, I encountered many cultural houses: Flemish, Arab, Turkish, Christian, Walloon. I realised that these places are very important if we want to influence and process social relations. And maybe the

fact that they each belong to a specific culture actually creates a segregation in one community. So I asked myself: what if I would create a new cultural house that would be about gestures of invitations, about creating encounters, events and ceremonies that related to everyday life and to our contemporary culture? I proposed it to the commune of Saint-Josse, but somehow the process stopped at a certain point.

It was just before the last elections that I realised even more that we artists should focus on proposing local transformative artistic formats – if not we are going to lose the freedom that this country proposed, which is the reason why we all came here.

Once I took a tram from Schaarbeek to Fort Jaco looking for cultural houses. The richer the area became, the fewer cultural houses I encountered. I felt that I should propose artistic projects addressing the richer classes in this country. To become their guest and propose a creative dialogue about the individual and its environment.

Then I moved to Molenbeek right before the attacks. There I started to develop a local project in the *Maison de Quartier*. I initiate all kinds of activities, including creative exchanges among inhabitants. Every year I organise a 'fête de quartier'. It is a kind of ceremony people are familiar with, so they collaborate

more easily. Last year before the *fête*, I went to Venice with work-spacebrussels for the project *Dark Matter Games*. With a group of 20 artists, we were hosted at S.a.L.E. Docks, an occupied gallery, and together with their artists, we tried to create a reaction to the Venice Biennale. The Italian artists of S.a.L.E. Docks are working within a very different economic reality. There is no money or time to create art. We arrived there with our comfortable positions and luxurious art practices. It took us as 'Belgian' artists a long time to understand that we have to relate to the reality we are performing in. We cannot just arrive with our beautiful art practices, drop them there and go back home; we have to relate to the context. During the performances at the Biennale I was preparing the *fête de quartier*. I was on my mobile phone skyping with people in Venice about how to recollectivise the public space. For me, these kinds of exchanges make up the internationalisation of my practice. How can people who are working locally in many different places tackle very similar issues, exchange, nourish each other and create a different ideology? Another aim I have is to pool many artists into my little local initiative. There are many artistic methodologies that can also be used outside of the theatre space to help recreate the social fabric.

Musical & Human Dialogue

Wouter Vandenabeele

violinist

Playing the violin is interwoven with my life. Through music, I connect with people with whom I would otherwise never come into contact.



A poignant example of this was a jam session in a tent camp not far from Johannesburg, where 20,000 refugees were living. My local guide had warned me in passing to be sure to stay close to him, or I would otherwise undoubtedly get myself shot. But as soon as my violin and I engaged in a dialogue with local musicians on a street corner, I was suddenly embraced as if I had always been one of them.

I also recall a trip to Senegal with a musician friend. During a spontaneous jam session, he tried in vain to write down and decipher all the parts being played by the local musicians, in order to learn them. I quickly understood that that approach did not appeal to me. I realized that I simply had to learn as I went, the same way those musicians had learned as youngsters. If you play with local musicians, or you give a workshop, then you are really connecting with those people.

There was an evening on one of my other trips, in an after-dinner political discussion, when I started talking with a number of

Palestinians. Those are the moments when you learn something, not just as a musician, but also as a person.

How can you avoid everything just becoming some form of exoticism? You make sure that you understand the music, without copying the musicians. Also, have the courage to take your time. A friend who lived in Norway for year had been afraid of losing her rhythm, that she would be 'out of touch' with the music scene. Her life there was indeed considerably less hectic. But that ensured that she was 'free', both in her music and in her everyday life. She had fewer obligations. And in retrospect, she wrote some of her best work there.

This does not mean that you have to wait until something like that happens to you. Sometimes you just have to pick up your instrument and go out into the world. That can mean travelling in an unfamiliar culture, but it can also just mean that you, as a pop rock artist, after a performance in some German music club, just take your acoustic guitar and go play an unplugged concert at the bar next door.

Post-
millennium
tension.

Con-
temporary
art
at a
crossroads

Pier Luigi Sacco



The relationship between the visual arts and patronage is a fundamental one, yet complex. Artists need patrons because, unlike writers or musicians, they cannot support themselves by selling large numbers of affordable reproductions of a master copy, such as books or records. As Nelson Goodman explains, visual art mainly operates within the autographic rather than the allographic regime. The quintessential nature of an artwork, therefore, is its originality and certification as such by the artist (supported, possibly, by his or her signature). This also means that works of art are generally expensive and beyond the reach of most people. Artists, as a result, depend upon patronage. This can take many forms, ranging from a wealthy collector to an acquisition by a public or private institution, or a grant. Public funding for the arts is not an alternative to patronage but simply another one of its many guises. Dealing with patronage necessarily means dealing with power: economic, political, or both. Since time immemorial, one of the key challenges for visual artists has been the question of how to balance the demands of a patron with the preservation of intellectual and creative autonomy. The history of art is filled with such relationships, both good and bad, many of which have been influenced by the vagaries of political and economic regimes. Contemporary artists, however, find themselves facing new challenges in respect of patronage since the issue of the day, the topic that dominates all social, political and economic life, is that of global inequality.

Yet global inequality is nothing new and one might even argue, at the end of the day, that we are living, if not in the best of all possible worlds, then at a time of unprecedented prosperity. Compared to just a few generations ago, there has been a marked drop in the level of extreme poverty and in mortality rates – a trend that shows no sign of abating for the foreseeable future. The same can be said of education, life satisfaction and access to technology, to cite just a few key benchmarks of modern well-being. However, the comparison between historical and contemporary living standards, which inevitably results in positives, gives no cause for celebration when it comes to absolute living conditions. This is especially true when one considers that despite a surge in global wealth – the prime driver of improved living conditions in recent decades – these resources have barely filtered down to the world's poorest communities. In other words, however significant these advances may seem in comparison with the past, they fall far short of what could, in theory, be achieved with such riches. Any improvements remain modest or even marginal, and even more so if one takes into account the evolution in baseline living standards triggered by socio-economic development. Most of the newly generated wealth accrues to an extremely limited number of people, which means that economic power (and, directly or indirectly, political control) is concentrated in ever-fewer hands. The influence of such people, who possess a capacity to direct national and global decision-making and

The global art calendar of art fairs, biennials and museum openings is richer than ever, and prices at art auctions consistently skyrocket. Art collecting is viewed as a full-time job for an increasing number of (affluent) people. But this does not mean that, compared to a decade ago, the average contemporary artist stands a better chance of making a living through the arts.

policies, has grown unchecked. This is coupled with a dwindling lack of concern for both the hidden and obvious forms of economic neo-slavery that are presented in the respectable guise of market flexibility. The steady disruption of even the most basic forms of welfare in socio-economically advanced countries barely seems to register. After an illusory and brief historical parenthesis, this double standard, which separates people into the 'haves' and 'have-nots' across all spheres of life – judicial, economic and social – seems to have gained ground as the 'new normal'. Unfortunately, democracy has not proven itself to be a solid enough barrier against the onslaught. On the contrary, the very opposite is true – which explains why an increasing number of dispossessed individuals, all over the world, are persuaded to support authoritarian forms of populism.

While everything looks rosy from afar, closer scrutiny of world affairs paints a far gloomier picture. And the same can be said, although in very different terms, for the art market. The global art calendar of art fairs, biennials and museum openings is richer than ever, and prices at art auctions consistently skyrocket. Art collecting is viewed as a full-time job for an increasing number of (affluent) people. But again, this does not mean that, compared to a decade ago, the average contemporary artist stands a better chance of making a living through the arts. In fact, given the high cost of keeping up with the growing demands of the art system, for example in terms of mobility or materials, they might actually stand less of a chance. Once again, while a relative improvement can be noted when comparing the present to the past, it is of negligible benefit within the context of an ever-shifting baseline.

The people currently fuelling the expansion of the art market – namely, today's patrons – present a far more fundamental problem. These are the men and women who stand to gain the most from the exacerbation of global inequality: that is, the happy few who control the international economy, lobby politicians, and benefit from outrageously preferential fiscal rules compared to those applied to 'ordinary people' (welcome back *Ancien Régime*). The crucial point is this: can contemporary art – whose economic (and to a certain degree social) sustainability depends upon the tastes and inclinations of this clique of privileged, ultra-powerful patrons – maintain enough autonomy and discernment to qualify as an independent, critical voice vis-à-vis global injustice? Or is art destined to become a decorative appendix to power, a sophisticated form of interior decoration for the mansions of the fortunate minority?

At first sight, the artists of today seem as combative as ever – political art has constantly been in the spotlight, is regularly featured in museum exhibition programmes, public art projects, and in the roster of biennials. But is it enough? I remember, at one biennial, seeing a photograph of a lone boy playing football in a miserable landscape of bombed-out ruins. The artist who had taken the picture was busy negotiating an exhibition of the series at an upscale gallery. In all probability, that particular photo (or one very much like it) would have ended up furnishing the living room of someone whose fortune was made in the global arms industry. Is this really so very different from hanging the stuffed head of a deer on the wall as hunting trophy? How credible is a creative practice that uses social critique to position itself within a system in which works of art objectively, and even ideologically, support the oppressor rather than the oppressed? This is the dilemma facing contemporary artists, and it is not an easy one. Artists need patrons. Yet today's backers are more likely to be the agents of social inequality. An artist who accepts this form of patronage,

At first sight, the artists of today seem as combative as ever – political art has constantly been in the spotlight, is regularly featured in museum exhibition programmes, public art projects, and in the roster of biennials. But is it enough?



Artists who want to preserve their credibility in terms of social critique should accept responsibility. They must join forces with the communities they approach and consider this interaction as a sort of social contract based on mutual trust. Short-term, demonstrative projects must be the exception and not the rule.

therefore, relinquishes his or her credibility as a political agent in the fight for a fairer society. And if the artist rejects such patronage, then he or she must find alternative support structures. In a political and cultural context where public funding for the arts, be it direct or indirect, is increasingly questioned, this is easier said than done.

A solution for many artists is to opt out of the market-based contemporary art system and to stop competing for the handful of places that are available in the global arena of museums, biennials, collections, grants and scholarships. It is a radical choice, indeed, but it is difficult to think of an alternative that lends credibility to an authentically critical stance. And in a sense, it is not only possible, but perhaps also necessary to escape the trap of academism which, despite the rhetoric of radicalism, increasingly plagues contemporary artistic research. There are many possible ways of 'opting out', of course – it does not mean, for instance, refusing to exhibit in a museum or boycotting all galleries. But it does mean setting priorities, and solving dilemmas, in favour of critical independence whenever such issues arise. And it also implies, even more crucially, jettisoning any kind of paternalism when striving to represent the motives and positions of the oppressed. In practice, this involves adopting *their* viewpoint as the sense-making perspective of one's own practice, rather perpetuating that of the oppressing agents. Viewed from this stance, many public art projects which should, in principle, stand as milestones of community involvement become involuntary manifestos of elitist condescension. In my view, Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument* – a project that literally inverted the Gramscian principle of the cultural empowerment of the community as a fundamental anti-hegemonic strategy – is a prime example of such failings, and this is but one example amongst many others. The main impediment to the aforementioned project was the adoption of a *limited responsibility* principle, one that can be likened to the values adopted by corporations. In the name of artistic practice, artists feel entitled to evoke the most sensitive and profound dimensions of community living, and to appropriate every single gesture of appreciation or participation from the community's side as an endorsement that will provide credit in multiple arenas. But this reveals a complete lack of responsibility on the artist's part: when the project is over, bags will be packed, the material traces of the project will be sanctified in a carefully selected museum or private collection, and everyone will say goodbye: it is an attitude that violates any common-sense rule of community practice, but one that is all too commonplace in the realm of public art. And how could

Short reading & viewing lists

Nelson Goodman:

Languages of Art

monoskop.org/images/1/1b/
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Understanding global inequality

socialeurope.eu/speak-
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Global extreme poverty

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Global health

ourworldindata.org/health-meta

Global rise of education

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Making a living through the arts

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Thomas Hirschhorn: Gramsci Monument

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Tania Bruguera: Arte Útil

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ruben-ostlund-the-square-inter-
view-force-majeure

it be otherwise for artists who are carefully managing their careers and whose imperative is constantly touring the world with exciting new projects opening in multiple locations? But this is exactly the point of opting out: making the community viewpoint, the perspective of the oppressed, prevail upon the outlook of the oppressors. In practical terms, and insofar as I wish to engage the societal point of view, this means that the agenda and priorities of the community carry the most weight.

For this reason, artists who want to preserve their credibility in terms of social critique should accept responsibility. In other words, they must join forces with the communities they approach and consider this interaction as a sort of social contract based on mutual trust. Short-term, demonstrative projects must be the exception and not the rule. The rule is a long-term commitment in which the artist and the community establish a joint intention that moves towards co-creation rather than the implementation of the artist's scheme. I am thinking, for instance, of Theaster Gates' work in the South Side

of Chicago, where he took responsibility by putting his competence and experience as an urban planner at the service of the community. In so doing, he was able to objectively counteract the apparently inexorable mechanisms of urban gentrification. I would also like to mention Tania Bruguera's concept of *Arte Útil*, in which the artist assumes the viewpoint of the community and, in so doing, makes it the cornerstone of his or her poetics. And there are many more examples, but they would need a level of scrutiny that goes beyond the scope of this brief essay. What matters most is the ability to differentiate. This means, in essence, that you either accept or decline responsibility.

Absolving yourself of responsibility is tantamount to accepting the fact that disenfranchised communities will soon learn to regard public art initiatives as a threat to their own interests and causes, as another form of manipulative expropriation of their own shared identity and significance, and as symbolic trophies. This is a plausible response, and perhaps even legitimate in certain strange respects, but it is not without its consequences. In the current socio-political arena, the

main upshot is the risk that these forms of artistic practices will come to be seen, at best, as irrelevant. This is poignantly argued in Ruben Östlund's film *The Square*, in which the art installation of the title stands out as an alien but inconspicuous object. It is intended to be a typical illustration of the mainstream rhetoric of public art: that of providing 'all people' with a space for caring, for non-hierarchical and non-discriminatory interaction. As the story unfolds, the irony of this statement looms as large as the characters in the film, most notably the museum curator who is the prime advocate of the artwork's status as a meaningful object. They constantly struggle with these precise issues. Yet they never stop to think, not for one moment, that the installation might be related to these difficulties and also to their personal lives – in other words, that the installation could actually fulfil its stated purpose. However, an unintended encounter with a young immigrant boy, whom the protagonist initially treats with a mixture of arrogance and disdain (an attitude that he would probably find despicable if the child happened to be a participant in a public art project involving oppressed minorities), provides the cue for an unexpected twist: the search for a moment of truth that, regrettably, arrives too late. Throughout this story, the only characters who genuinely respond to strangers' requests for care are the ones who are marginalised. In other words, the people who are oblivious to contemporary art, and who are unaware of its rituals and rhetoric. Touché. The king is dead. Long live the king? Or?...

Zooming-in

Is the Art Market in Flanders Sustainable and Diverse?

Dirk De Wit

The art market is changing drastically under the influence of globalization, because around the world, art is being considered a stable form of investment by ever greater numbers of the super-rich, causing demand to far exceed supply.

The insane prices for artworks benefits a small, top layer of artists who are represented by the so-called mega-galleries – primarily Western – whose worldwide access has meant radical increases in scale.¹ They each sometimes represent more than 50 artists, including increasing numbers of estates, with staffs of perhaps 100 people, with branches in different continents. The gap between them and the great majority of artists, galleries and public institutions grows ever greater: most artists need extra jobs to support themselves, while the medium-sized and smaller galleries survive with difficulty and the limited budgets of public institutions cannot compete with overvalued market prices.

In the internationalization of the art world, local anchoring and diversity is crucial: it is from close by that local talent is noticed. Medium-sized and small galleries play an important role in maintaining diversity of generations and art practices.²

Does this worldwide trend also apply to Flanders? Is the Flemish art market diverse and sustainable for artists? In 2016, Kunstenpunt/Flanders Arts Institute conducted an inquiry into the Flemish art market and questioned Flemish artists about their socio-economic positions.

The results of that research, entitled *Does Passion Pay? The socio-economic position of the visual artist* revealed that, as a group, visual artists have decidedly the lowest incomes of all the artists in Flanders whom we approached.³

Kunstenpunt's research on Flemish galleries reveals that, in 2013-2014, of the 64 Flanders-based galleries we approached, 19 were active in the global art market, in terms of scale and/or networks and participation in art fairs.⁴ Galleries whose primary location was outside Belgium were also included in this total. Flanders has no galleries with headquarters in Belgium that we could categorize as meta-galleries; they are primarily larger galleries with strong worldwide networks that still have local roots thanks to artists whom they have been following for years. In this research, we counted 45 medium-sized and small galleries with networks that are primarily focused on Belgium, surrounding countries and Europe. The investigation showed that more than half the artists represented by these mid-sized and small galleries live and work in Belgium. That proportion is much smaller in the case of the large galleries and mega-galleries.

That same research included 87 galleries. In the period from 2005-2015, 23 of these, primarily mid-sized and small galleries, either ceased their activities or moved to a different country. This took place primarily in the years after the financial crisis. This indicates the vulnerable character of these mid-sized

and small galleries, also for the future. For them, government support for the presentation of Flemish artists at foreign art markets, and such programmes as Kunstkoop, are important. Finally, the investigation showed that in 2015, of the 633 Flemish artists included, 324 were represented by a gallery. Of these, 151 had galleries in another country. These galleries were primarily based in, respectively, Germany, the Netherlands, France and the United States. As was also true of the results for participation of promotional galleries in art fairs, Europe and North America play the leading role.

The results of *Does Passion Pay? The socio-economic position of the visual artist*, revealed that, as a group, visual artists have decidedly the lowest incomes of all the artists in Flanders whom we approached.

- 1 Just 25 artists are responsible for almost half of all postwar and contemporary art auction sales, according to joint analysis by artnet Analytics and artnet News. In the first six months of 2017, work by this small group of elite artists sold for a combined \$1.2 billion—44.6 percent of the \$2.7 billion total generated by all contemporary public auction sales worldwide. news.artnet.com/market/25-artists-account-nearly-50-percent-postwar-contemporary-auction-sales-1077026
- 2 Talking Galleries Symposium, Barcelona, 2018: The Future for the Art Market at the Mid-Level. youtube.com/watch?v=jnTOcHrFWB8
- 3 Does passion pay off? The socio-economic position of visual artists flandersartsinstitute.be/specials/socio-economic-position-of-the-artist
- 4 For the publication on the Flemish art market, national, international and worldwide Dutch, see: kunsten.be/kunsten-in-vlaanderen-brussel/publicaties/7926-de-vlaamse-kunstmarkt-nationaal-internationaal-en-mondiaal

Hilde Teuchies

Reclaiming the European Commons



Part three: Meanwhile, in the Commons



In a three-part essay, Hilde Teuchies uses her rich practical experience inside and outside European performing arts networks to reflect on a possible new future for culture within the European project. Previous editions of this magazine pointed out that both the European project and the way of working in the arts are under increasing pressure. The answer lies in a resolute choice for the reinforcement of culture and the arts in the European project. 'Not because they create jobs, not because they improve social cohesion, not because they are a catalyst for creativity and innovation, not because they contribute to our mental health, not because they are a tool by which to promote humanitarian values – but because of all the above and most of all because without culture, there is no (European) community. At European level, this implies that we need to transform culture into strong public policy and leave behind the weak amalgam of cultural policy decisions that the EU acts upon these days.' In the earlier part of the text, Hilde discussed the first two steps that need to be taken to create this strong European policy. Not only do we need to strengthen the place of culture within European policy, using the well-known political instruments, but we also need to address national policies on culture at the level of each member state. Through their cultural policies and their vital role in EU policy making, member states exercise crucial leverage. Simultaneously, however, and outside the established institutions, we need to create a European commons for cooperation, collaboration and exchange. Can this commons become an active testing ground for new ideas on societal models and a breeding ground for new EU priorities? This is treated in the third and final chapter of Reclaiming the European Commons.

Networking for the commons

While Europe awkwardly tries to free itself from the quicksand, and our own political institutions all too often get stuck in short-sighted decision-making, a counter-movement might well grow in an apparent no man's land – the public space between market and government. In all corners, and bottom up, a growing number of initiatives are exploring a new kind of democracy. They focus on strengthening active citizenship and putting a *commons* into practice. They aim to achieve a more direct form of participation and to offer a platform to more voices and more diverse voices. Supported by the

possibilities of the internet, they are exploring new models of cooperation aimed at sustainability, solidarity, “slowing down” and reflection. This concerns transversal practices that transcend and involve various social domains. Often, however, they start from the central insight that culture and also artistic practices are a crucial link in transition processes, as the foundation of current society and the space for imagining the future.

These practices are often very locally embedded. Transversal practices, after all, require embedding in local communities. But at the same time, many initiatives form a bridge to the supra-local and the international, for which there are many examples (see sidebar).

NETWORKING FOR THE EUROPEAN COMMONS

Since 2016, the *European Commons Assembly* (a coalition for solidarity and commons-based politics in the EU and Europe) has been offering a platform to countless local citizens' initiatives for exchanging good practices, proposals, open discussions and joint actions for concrete policy proposals for the European Parliament.

europeancommonsassembly.eu/

For over 10 years now, *European Alternatives* has been working on a different approach: “promoting democracy, equality and culture beyond the nation state”. As a widely supported movement of activists from all over Europe, it organises a rich variety of activities, research, festivals, publications, training, etc., in which art and culture play a leading role.

Topics include: Energy as a Common Good; Social and Solidarity Economy and Participation; The food commons in Europe: Relevance,

challenges and proposals to support them; The Urban Commons; Welfare commons as a fundament of work and social protection. ‘We empower individuals, civil society and social movements to act in a coordinated way throughout and beyond Europe to imagine, demand, and enact alternatives and influence decision-making. We believe that social and political change requires artistic and cultural engagement as much as other forms of engagement, fostering a renewal of society not limited to any one domain or sector. (...) The most urgent political, cultural and social questions can no longer be dealt with at the national level: we foster transnational citizenship to restore to citizens democratic control over our future.’

euroalter.com/what-we-do

DIEM25 is a recent political movement functioning according to the open-source and commons principle. It was started under the impetus of Yanis Varoufakis and a number of European intellectuals who advocate a radical turnaround for Europe across (left-wing) party boundaries.

diem25.org/

Connected Actions for the Commons is a group of six cultural organisations, brought together by the European Cultural Foundation, that work together at European level on themes they have already tackled locally: practice of the commons, public space, culture and economy. Participating organisations are: *Culture 2 Commons - Alliance Operation City*, *Clubture Network*, *Right to the City* - (Croatia), *Les Têtes de l'Art* (France), *Krytyka Polityczna* (Poland), *Oberliht* (Moldavia), *Platoniq-Goteo* (Spain) and *Subtopia* (Sweden)

culturalfoundation.eu/connected-action/

The *European Cultural Foundation* (ECF) itself occupies a special place as a private foundation. Since its founding in 1954, it has viewed culture as an engine of and vital ingredient for the restoration of post-war Europe. Over the years, it has kept a finger on the pulse and has often launched innovative and inspired ideas (Erasmus!) aimed at supporting civil society, cultural actors and artists, with this goal always in mind: making (pan-) European open, inclusive and democratic space. Today the ECF sees itself as an incubator that accelerates, catalyses and connects initiatives in this direction. It is difficult to overestimate the impact of its projects (for mobility, research, exchange, policy proposals, scholarships...) and long-running programmes like *New Narratives for Europe*, *Culture*, *Creative Communities and Democracy* or their programmes with countries bordering the EU.

Many initiatives are true laboratories that test what such a different society might look like. The sum of these micro-initiatives can be precisely the hotbed from which real change can develop: a rhizome growing throughout Europe.

Artists' initiatives

In the world of the arts too, we see countless initiatives emerging from the bottom up that are looking for a change. Certainly at the periphery of the institutionalised landscape, but increasingly also at established institutions, the need for a transition is increasing. There are truly countless examples of artists and art collectives looking for other types of practices and alternative working models. Often these are barely visible and very small in scale. They do not necessarily have the broader European framework in mind. But their potential is undeniable. Many initiatives are true laboratories that test what such a different society might look like. The sum of these micro-initiatives can be precisely the hotbed from which real change can develop: a rhizome growing throughout Europe.

The fact that artists and organisations are experimenting with new working models can be felt everywhere in Europe, certainly also in Belgium. Especially outside the mainstream institutions, artists are fiddling with existing formats and experimenting with new working models. Discontent with the dominant working models in the art system is often the starting point. There is increasing dissatisfaction with the way work and productions can be created and presented to an audience. The conditions for slowing down and deepening are not always present. The increasing workload implies that the scope for substantive deepening or artistic risks is sometimes small, that there are too few possibilities for a meaningful exchange with a diverse public, and that artists are forced to work under difficult circumstances. They are looking for an alternative to the rat race that forces them to scamper from one project to another...

'Sustainability' can mean different things in this context. There is of course the ecological interpretation. But it also concerns better socio-economic conditions for artists and art workers. It is also about new ways of working that make possible a stronger local and social anchoring.

Experiments in sustainability can lead to very diverse strategies and working methods, as the practical examples elsewhere in this edition also show. For example, there are artists who set up projects in which they consciously seek a slowing down. *Doing Nothing*, for example, was a practical study by the Brussels organisation FoAM that actively investigated what can happen when artists do *nothing*. This is just one example of the many artists' initiatives that explicitly thematise the conditions necessary for substantively meaningful work. Many artists are searching for the time and space needed to make

While Europe awkwardly tries to free itself from the quicksand, and our own political institutions all too often get stuck in short-sighted decision-making, a counter-movement might well grow in an apparent no man's land – the public space between market and government.

real connections with the public and with the surroundings in which their art is created. International mobility is indeed increasingly being called into question, also from an ecological point of view or from discomfort with the superficial buying behaviour of international festivals and houses... Monitoring these conditions means saying *no* to opportunities and invitations that jeopardise these conditions (for example, artists' residencies that are so short that forging local connections is impossible).

And how do we obtain a more meaningful interaction with a more diverse audience? Within current models for international co-production and presentation, in which works of art travel from *black box* to *black box* or *white cube* to *white cube*, this is not always possible. More and more artists are consciously opting for interaction with the public space, in order to increase or at least examine the social impact of their work. To mention just a few: Simon Allemeersch, Jozef Wouters, Maria Lucia Cruz Correia, Ief Spincemaille, Benjamin Verdonck, Benjamin Vandewalle, Yinka Kuitenbrouwer, Einat Tuchm and Gossie Vervloesem. Countless performances, installations, interactive productions and texts are about social themes. Artistic environments are the laboratory for experiments with social processes. Some artists seek the boundary between art and activism. Others connect with other domains such as science, technology or education. Still others take as the object of their art a critical analysis of European institutions (a.o. Thomas Bellinck, Lukas de Man, Filip Berten).

In short, social engagement is no longer incompatible with artistic autonomy. On the contrary, the question is: What can be the social added value of this artistic autonomy, in terms of meaning creation, knowledge development or the development of communities and (local) networks?

The city plays a crucial role in all of this, as a testing ground or laboratory. There, artists look for the heterogeneous, multilayered, multicultural reality of contemporary society. The city is not only a source of inspiration, stories and material. Such a city hides a wealth of creativity and is a meeting place for sometimes unsuspected partners in crime: various and diverse types of citizens, activists, urbanists, artisans and world improvers.

Institutionalisation and translation to policy

Often small or artist-established initiatives are the triggers for such change. A lively no man's land exists in various cities in Europe from which new initiatives are bubbling up from below. Do these initiatives also seep through to the established institutions? Sometimes, but often not. The permeability of the walls of the institutions is not the same at all times and places. Things are not too bad in Flanders and Brussels, certainly compared to many other European contexts where the division between standard institutions and the independent sector is much more rigid. Institutions of course are less flexible than small-scale artists' initiatives. At the same time, the number of established organisations and institutions is growing within which work on transition and transformation is being done with conviction, one more drastically than the other. Some focus on embedding in the city. Others concentrate on reducing the ecological footprint. Still others are working hard on rethinking institutional models or internal structures, and creating working conditions tailored to people. The transition projects and processes that are set out in this way are all important searches for depth, connectivity with citizens, sustainable art practices and social embedding. Art institutions are also becoming increasingly active in local citizens' initiatives and transition networks.

What we wrote above about the *commons* projects applies *mutatis mutandis* to artists' initiatives. Their goal is often hyperlocal, but international knowledge and experiences are frequently used. Many projects and initiatives have been set up in close collaboration with artists and colleagues from other European countries and with the support of Europe. Via European networks and collaboration platforms, artists and cultural actors find each other and combine insights and bundle forces into committed reflection and research projects that develop new and better scenarios for the future. Through a practice of exchange and knowledge sharing, the sharing of open-source solutions, the *commoning* of ideas and experiences, they reinforce local initiatives and push the transition forward across borders.

It is in support of this combination of driving forces and innovative practices that Europe could play an important role in the future. Much more than is currently the case, a successor to Creative Europe could support these platforms and

networks in their solidary search for sustainable solutions.

This brings us back to the two pillars of a possible new Creative Europe programme, as I outlined in the previous part of this text. A first pillar supports what bubbles, bottom-up, from the *commoning* practice of larger, long-term collaboration platforms and networks. This guarantees that a multitude of voices are heard and that experiences, good practices, innovative insights and fresh ideas are shared to the maximum. Ideally, a second pillar of this possible successor to Creative Europe would focus on policy preparation work aimed at anchoring art and culture in Europe's society, and would enable the circulation of these transition proposals towards the various echelons of EU institutions and institutes

This is a pure win-win for Europe. It supports environments where citizens reflect together on the kind of society they want. It strengthens the involvement of citizens in the European project of the future. It broadens the potential for creative solutions.

This opens perspectives beyond the tired defeatism that you sometimes hear concerning the European project. By bringing our influence to bear, we as artists and cultural actors can make the difference and give Europe a push in the right direction. A precondition for this is that space is created for innovative practices and proposals, more than is currently the case. In the area of policy, openness to the bottom-up process is crucial, as is porosity between the different policy domains. But it is also essential that the institutions abandon their stiffness and make room for imagination; that what emerges from the artists' studios and city laboratories more easily finds its way to the established organisations and to the policy chambers at all levels. And back. This requires openness and a desire for dialogue, on the part of all.

Conclusion

In my triptych on the place of culture in Europe, I made a somewhat rough analysis of the problems in the difficult relationship between Europe and culture, and the gaps in the policies of the national member states. In this piece, we examined the new energy that arises from the bottom, in the free zone. This makes me hopeful. It is not an optimism that comes from a naïve belief in the power of the base. I draw hope from the realisation that the call for a change is swelling everywhere. And that the patience of citizens with the slowness of policy is gradually being exhausted. My optimism also comes from a stubborn belief in the power of art. Not necessarily as a political force, but as the source that feeds the 'dismeasure': the critical view that questions the consensus in society, and thus opens the way for change. The fact that the disruptive power of art works slowly and indirectly is an advantage. It provides for perspective and thoughtfulness. But it is the humus that enriches the insights and triggers the change-makers. It is the humus that Europe desperately needs today. Which is why I wrote this plea for opening up cultural institutions, for fostering transverse initiatives, for nurturing the no man's land between market and government, for letting in a multitude of voices, for openness to the unexpected...

What strategies should we as cultural actors use to get Europe back on track? This remains a topic for continued discussion. But that which philosopher/activist Szecko Horvat presents as principles seems to me to be a clear compass:

No retreat — you fight from within

No opposing technology — use it smartly

Know the system — make it work for you

This is a pure win-win for Europe. It supports environments where citizens reflect together on the kind of society they want. It strengthens the involvement of citizens in the European project of the future.

Simon Delobel

Trampoline

A picaresque adventure

As a Frenchman in Belgium, I work in Dutch or English every day. To me, everything that I experience here quickly feels international, compared to what I would be able to do in France. As a Frenchman, moreover, the notion of 'universal' seems much more interesting to me than the notion of 'international'. I sometimes have great doubts about everything that is or pretends to be international. When I began to travel through Europe in order to acquaint myself with larger and smaller art institutes, my disillusionment was considerable: work by the same artists was everywhere. When I travel today, I like to visit exhibitions of local artists, something that I cannot see anywhere else. Something local can be universal: this strikes me as much more interesting than being international.

Trampoline is *picaresque* adventure, a project that grew out of nothing, with no resources, no capital. As a young gallery owner, you sometimes receive advice or comments from people who are influential in the art world. For example, there was a collector who let it be known that he would support the gallery, but I had to show certain foreign artists whom he considered interesting. A commercial success story does not immediately interest me. I would sooner create the right conditions in order to realize new projects by inspiring artists.

Another gallery owner once advised, 'You have to work together with that gallery in Los Angeles, and then you can do something together at a fair.' In itself, that is attractive advice, but it is in my view a further reinforcement of American power over the art market. It seems more exciting to me to choose unpredictability. That is what I try to do with Trampoline. As a picaresque enterprise, Trampoline is in a sense also critical: the gallery tries to escape the well-oiled system.



An artist once told me that the Trampoline programme was not international enough. In the meantime, we are showing work by artists from the Congo, Iceland and Austria. If a foreign artist is in Belgium, and can use Trampoline's space, that is an option. I worry about artists who are being forced to write success stories. What is left after you have worked through the entire list of big museums and well-known curators? Consider Jan Vercruyse, who died a few weeks ago. He achieved it all, his work is exhibited and collected in the whole Western art world, and then everything is all very silent. It gives the impression that in our spectacle society, the lights are constantly being shone on new figures.

The model of professionalization in the artworld is also problematic. In it, artists have to live from their artistic activities in order to be taken seriously. This often results in making products instead of creating works of art.

At this point in time, I do not want to earn my living from Trampoline. I have other work and try to create an exchange with my work as a gallery owner. I try to work alternatively. I do not want to claim that Trampoline is an alternative for the aforementioned well-oiled system. I do not believe in that. I only want to say that I continue to question myself and my work at the individual level.

Ils Huygens Z33

More time, fewer topics, sharper choices

In the past, like most art organizations, we at Z33 worked with themed projects, with one distinct exhibition project following another. These consisted primarily of a number of new productions, exhibited existing works, a catalogue or publication, and also included an associated programme with films, lectures, debates and/or workshops. Each time, we started out afresh with preparatory research, searching for partners in producing and presenting works for projects that involved considerable advance investigation, but would only attract interest for a period of three months (the time when the exhibition was open and all external communications were concentrated).

At Z33, because we primarily work around topical scientific or social themes, each exhibition demanded a great deal of investigation in advance, not only concerning the artists, but also the study of the theme itself. The relatively short period of time of actually presenting the project and all its associated programmes to the public made it difficult to develop long-term, deep trajectories with artists, our public and partners. Both local and international partnerships were constantly changing, and were focused on the specific product

(coproducing, organizing the exhibitions, collaborations for lectures, and so on) and less on the bringing together of diverse parties around a given theme. Finally, successive projects are excellently tuned to presenting a concentrated theme and distinguishing yourself in the international art scene, but what does the project actually set into motion, socially and/or artistically?

This commodification, which is

closely linked to the institutionalization of art organizations worldwide, is diametrically opposed to what we at Z33 want to do, which is to work in a multidisciplinary and sustainable fashion with socially relevant themes on the basis of long-term research, and sharing the concrete expertise, skills and instruments that evolve from these with our audiences, researchers, curators and artists whom we bring together around these themes.

Consequently, for some years now, we have internally been working on longer-term research themes, with which we can develop and build exhibitions, publications and partnerships, as well as long-term affiliated programming, extending over several years. Investigating a theme by way of specific projects lends itself to delving more deeply into one or another sub-theme, within the broader subject matter. In terms of working method, the process is much more sustainable and longer-lasting, because partners, artists and the public can more fully develop their vision and/

or participate in different, thematically related projects, in different phases and at different times, all within a larger research theme. It also allows us to make many more connections between the projects, the artists and the researchers.

Working for longer periods of time on fewer themes presupposes making sharper choices and working on them for longer periods of time. In addition, the roles of the organization and the curator also change, from making exhibitions to coordinating processes of co-creation and active participation of diverse players and audiences from both inside and outside the country.

Working with local and international partners for extended periods of time raises different questions about sustainability: the ecological footprint of long-term international projects becomes greater. It creates a challenge in involving local aspects right from the start and connecting both local and international tools and knowledge. It is much more difficult to keep the partners together in order to jointly determine the output and participation than in the case of individual, autonomous exhibitions. Moreover, the diversification of the interaction with the public is a challenge both for that public and for government, which is accustomed to traditional, quantifiable and consumable output.



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Phillip Van den Bossche

Mu.ZEE

Starting from hyperlocalities

The significance and evolution of meaning in art is an open and dynamic process, but it is constrained within institutional value frameworks that are determined internationally and primarily by the West. Most museums collect works of art and study them based on the established (Western) canon of art theory and exhibit them on the basis of that knowledge. The Mu.ZEE collection primarily comprises Belgian art from 1850 to the present day, and we have chosen to break open those frameworks by way of working with and around the concept of 'interpretation'. Today, it is a challenge to bring art objects into relation with both professionals and larger audiences with diverse backgrounds, from whom highly divergent narratives and perspectives develop, which have to be connected with one another, brought into context and interpreted anew. Those diverse narratives and perspectives can be found both here, in our own local environment, and in other countries. We need to step back from the international bubble of kindred minds who share those fixed value frameworks around

the world, and instead set out from specifically local contexts, both in Ostend and in other countries where the artists or curators with whom we work are based. I call these 'hyper-localities'. We are not tossing aside the vertical knowledge of our museum and its collection (Belgian art from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, with its specific history and environment of Ostend, Flanders): from the specificity of the collection and its context, we are opening our doors to a broad world of social issues and hyper-diversity of cultural frames of reference. In order to realize these diverse interactions with the collection, Mu.ZEE primarily works with a range of partners, including artists, communities, universities and schools.

The history of the collection is also connected to the colonial past. Every collection is ideologically determined and developed. How does a museum of modern and contemporary Belgian art deal with that? At Mu.ZEE, in collaboration with the Universities of Ghent and Florida, Gainesville, for example, we are working with the

archives of Papa Mfumu'eto 1er, a Congolese artist. We produced new work by Sammy Baloji, who lives and works in Brussels and Lumumbashi, for Documenta 14 in Athens. We ask ourselves what our collection could mean in Congo. Museums and (art) collections are in fact Western concepts from the 18th century. In other cultures, how do people think about collections, and what does the confrontation with our understanding of collecting mean in exhibitions? These are questions raised in the exhibition, *A Conversation between Collections from Kinshasa and Ostend*. We have also visited the Congolese community in Ostend in order to ask how they look at art and collections from both Flanders and Congo.

In 2016, I began working with the Belgian artist Eric Van Hove, who lives and works in Marrakech, and who shares his studio with ten local craftsmen who produce their own work there, as well as working with Van Hove on his works of art. One of the most extensive projects is *Mahjoubba*, an electric motoped consisting of both crafted and 3D-printed parts. Mu.ZEE is also a partner in an international think tank centred around Van Hove's studio, focusing on such issues as 'art and the crafts', ecology and sustainability,



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and the reframing of economic transactions between South and North, East and West.

The role of

private foundations

in supporting
independent
culture



Dirk De Wit

We are living through politically and economically turbulent times. The rights and welfare of citizens in Europe and elsewhere are coming under pressure, the gap between rich and poor is widening, authoritarian regimes serve the interests of a few, transnational institutions for solidarity and peace are being called into question, and intercultural dialogue is viewed as a threat by a new wave of nationalism. Many people take a stand by launching initiatives to promote solidarity and a sustainable society. Such initiatives are often independent art and culture projects aimed at creating meaning and promoting local development. At a time when governments are reducing their role – or worse, when they adopt a repressive attitude towards autonomous civil initiatives and independent culture – these independent cultural initiatives enjoy increasing support from philanthropists. The majority of independent cultural initiatives, particularly in eastern and southern Europe – and beyond – are not supported by the government but by individuals, businesses and philanthropic foundations. This is the case in such places as central and south-east Europe, Ukraine, Turkey, Russia, the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and elsewhere.

Can the alliance between philanthropy and independent culture help make the global economy, and national and transnational politics, more sustainable, and if so, how? On the one hand there is a need to redistribute the increasing wealth of a small minority and to invest it in society. On the other hand, philanthropy helps to tackle what an unsustainable economy – upon which philanthropy is usually based – helps to cause.



Philanthropy is about private initiatives that benefit the common good. It often involves donations of money or goods to improve the lives of the underprivileged around the world in domains such as education, culture, health, development, human rights and social inclusion. Modern philanthropy emerged in the 19th century as civil society began to take over the role previously played by the church. In the 20th century the state began to take responsibility for the care of the poor through social legislation, which led to the establishment of the welfare state after the Second World War. From then on, philanthropy played a complementary role alongside that of the government and civil society, and it supported initiatives in countries where there was little or no government. Modern philanthropy is also linked to the process of decolonization and development on other continents, and to the post-war conviction of establishing peace among peoples by spreading prosperity.

Philanthropy can take various forms. Sometimes it involves individual donations. In a number of cases, a private equity fund manages the personal wealth of an individual, family or company according to a certain vision of welfare and development. In other cases, a fundraising trust is set up by individuals, politicians and/or businesspeople to raise money for civil projects that the founders think are important and that are lacking in society. Each philanthropist seeks a project or initiative that closely aligns with his or her passion, ambition, expertise and life story. What they all have in common, however, is their independent and private statute, and their desire to channel private resources for the common good. Thanks to their independence, private foundations and funds are flexible and usually operate transnationally, through generally with a clear focus on particular countries and regions.

Different types of foundations based on initiator, resources, vision and form

Equity funds or foundations are driven by the personal wishes and convictions of the founders in the fields of art, culture and society. They often start with a private cultural centre and/or art collection, and activities then systematically expand. Sometimes they also invest in artists (for example by commissioning work, offering artist residency programmes, or establishing artist archives), in public activities (through education and advice) or in research into art and society.

In most cases, these foundations become more professional over time. They appoint a board and consult advisors. Their daily management develops a long-term strategy, based on a mission and vision, to ensure objectification and transparency in relation to what the foundation does and for whom. The founders themselves generally continue to provide inspiration, but they remain at arm's length from the actual functioning.

Some examples:

- *Gulbenkian Foundation* started in 1956 at the bequest of Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian, a wealthy British businessman and philanthropist of Armenian origin, who played a major role in making the petroleum reserves of the Middle East available for Western development. The foundation has a museum in Lisbon which hosts his private collection and promotes initiatives in the arts, charity, education and science throughout the world from its offices in Lisbon, London and Paris.
- *Stiftung Mercator* was founded in 1996 by the Schmidt family (Germany, Switzerland), which has donated a substantial amount of its own assets to the foundation, which works on four themes: Europe, integration, climate change and cultural education. Stiftung Mercator develops activities in Germany, Europe, Turkey and China.
- *Kamel Lazaar Foundation* was established in 2005 by the Tunisian financier and philanthropist, who lives in Switzerland. The foundation possesses over 1000 works of art, representing various styles of modern art in the MENA region. It has expanded its activities to include the production and support of artistic and cultural projects in the MENA region, and become increasingly involved in projects linked to heritage and education. Kamel Lazaar has offices in Geneva, London and Tunis.

- *Izolyatsia Platform for Cultural Initiatives* in Ukraine started as a private collection created by the entrepreneur Luba Michailova in the 1990s. The foundation was set up in 2010 as a non-profit and non-governmental multidisciplinary platform for exhibitions and residencies with the aim of contributing to cultural and social change, first in Donetsk, and later in Kiev.

Other private foundations espouse a more outspoken social, political and community vision and believe in societal change through culture and education.

- George Soros is a Hungarian-American investor, business magnate, philanthropist, political activist and author. He supports progressive and liberal political causes and dispenses his donations through his foundation, the *Open Society Foundations*. He provided one of Europe's largest higher education endowments to the Central European University in Budapest and supported an open civil society in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall. His extensive funding of political causes has made him an enemy of European nationalists.
- The *A.M. Qattan Foundation (AMQF)* was founded in 1998 by Abdel Mohsin Al-Qattan, a Palestinian businessman who was involved in social, charitable, developmental and political work. He bequeathed a quarter of his wealth to his independent foundation active in the fields of culture and education, with a particular focus on children, teachers and young artists. The foundation operates mainly in Palestine, with some interventions in Lebanon.

Fundraising foundations and trusts are the result of collective initiatives by wealthy citizens and/or businesspeople aimed at boosting the local cultural scene and the role of culture within civil society.

Some examples:

- The *Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV)* was founded in 1973 by seventeen businessmen and art enthusiasts who gathered under the leadership of Dr. Nejat F. Eczacıbaşı, with the aim of organizing international arts festivals in Istanbul to ensure a high-quality offer of arts and culture.
- The foundation *Anadolu Kültür*, founded by individuals from art and business and civil society in 2002, has a slightly different and complementary vision on the role of culture in civil society in Turkey. It believes that cultural and artistic exchange helps develop mutual understanding and dialogue and overcome regional differences

Can the alliance between philanthropy and independent culture help make the global economy, and national and transnational politics, more sustainable, and if so, how?

and prejudices, and that culture elicits a discussion of citizenship, identity and belonging. *Anadolu Kültür* has also supported the foundation of cultural centres. *Diyarbakır Arts Centre* was founded to support the production and sharing of art outside large cities and develop culture and art projects with regional artists. *DEPO*, cultural centre and platform for debate, supports collaboration between artists, civil society institutions and cultural institutions from Turkey, the Southern Caucasus, the Middle East and Balkan countries.

Some private initiatives invest directly in art research, production and distribution where there is a lack of cultural policy and grant schemes offered by the government. *The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC)* is an example of an independent initiative that funds artists, art professionals and organizations in the fields of cinema, performing arts, literature, music and visual arts and facilitates cultural exchange, production, research and cooperation across the Arab world and globally. It is funded by foundations, individual donors and ministries of foreign affairs of Western countries.





In places where the government is more repressive, one must tread carefully: a private foundation must develop a solid relationship with the government and engage with foreign institutes and embassies.

Private foundations in Western countries also promote prosperity and welfare, and they complement government policy or work together with government bodies.

Some examples:

- The *European Cultural Foundation* (ECF) was set up in 1954 by figures that included Robert Schuman, Denis de Rougemont and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, who believed in culture as a vital ingredient in Europe's post-war rebuilding. ECF supports cultural exchange and creative expression across Europe because culture inspires people to create democratic societies. ECF is funded in part by the BankGiro Loterij and the Lotto.
- The *Prince Claus Fund* was established in 1996 in recognition of Prince Claus's dedication to culture and development. The fund creates opportunities for connection and exchange and stimulates cultural expression, primarily in Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Eastern Europe. Prince Claus Fund is supported by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Dutch Postcode Lottery, and private individuals and corporations.
- In Belgium, the *King Baudouin Foundation* promotes a better society through change and innovation and increases social cohesion in Belgium and Europe. The foundation focuses on poverty and social justice, philanthropy, health, civil engagement, talent development, democracy, European integration, heritage, sustainable development and development cooperation. The foundation

manages various private funds and stimulates effective philanthropy by individuals and corporations.

In Western Europe, foundations are also established by political parties with a clear vision of society.

One example:

- The *Friedrich Ebert Foundation* was founded in 1925 and is named after Germany's first democratically elected president. It is committed to the advancement of both socio-political and economic development in the spirit of social democracy, through civil education, research and international cooperation. The *Friedrich Ebert Foundation* has offices and projects in over 100 countries. More recently, the *Heinrich Böll Foundation*, linked with the Green Party in Germany, fosters democracy and human rights, takes action to prevent the destruction of the global ecosystem, advances equality between women and men, secures peace through conflict prevention in crisis zones, and defends the freedom of individuals against excessive state and economic power.

A selection of foundations online

gulbenkian.pt
stiftung-mercator.de
kamellazaarfoundation.org
izolyatsia.org

opensocietyfoundations.org
qattanfoundation.org

iksv.org
anadolukultur.org

culturalfoundation.eu
princeclausfund.org
kbs-frb.be

fesdc.org/about/friedrich-ebert-stiftung
boell.de

annalindhfoundation.org

Other foundations are initiatives of various governments to reach common goals.

One example:

- Euro-Med Ministers of Foreign Affairs agreed in 2004 to create the Anna Lindh Foundation, which is co-financed by the 42 countries of the Union for the Mediterranean and the European Commission. Apart from specific projects in education, culture and media and a network of over 4000 civil society organizations, ALF advises decision-makers and institutions on an intercultural strategy for the Euro-Mediterranean Region.

Foundations develop a range of activities such as supporting innovative research, implementing research findings, third party financing (grants), capacity building, networking, advocacy and policy advice.

In some cases, the arts and culture are at the core of the mission, and they are linked to broader topics such as capacity building and education. The arts and culture are seen as spearheads and as tools to reach other goals.

What is the relation between philanthropy, civil society and (trans)national politics?

From a Western European perspective, the welfare state promotes the prosperity and welfare of people at home and abroad. Philanthropy positions itself as complementary to government policy. Governments sometimes make use of private foundations or of independent non-governmental cultural initiatives to achieve their goals for culture and civil society. With the rise of neoliberalism and the accompanying reduction in the role of the government, the role of philanthropy and private initiatives is encouraged through tax incentives. In Anglo-Saxon countries, there is a longer tradition of encouraging personal donations and private initiatives through tax incentives.

In non-Western countries, cultural policy usually consists of supporting cultural centres and national heritage, with little or no support for contemporary production and presentation, and without any vision of art and culture as dynamic processes for empowerment and local community development. Citizens, company directors and civil-society organizations launch their own initiatives in the domains of culture and community and raise the necessary funds.

Civil society and independent culture are coming under pressure today in many countries Europe and elsewhere, owing to a combination of nationalism and authoritarian forms of government. Independent culture is viewed as a threat or even an attack on traditional culture and so called national values. Civil initiatives and independent culture are more and more controlled by the government and are sometimes intimidated by false accusations of mismanagement, defamation, espionage or even terrorism. As a result, the networks that link independent cultural initiatives, which are vital for their existence, are impaired. For example, the government of Victor Orban in Hungary has attempted to prohibit foreign universities in an attempt to close the Central European University of George Soros.¹ Also, the chairperson of the foundation Anadolu Kültür, Osman Kavala, was arrested by Turkish police in 2017 and has already spent months in prison, like tens of thousands of other citizens.² Foundations and funds attempt to maintain their independence by locating their head offices in countries with a stable regime: Kamal Lazaar in Geneva/London, AFAC in Lebanon, Open Society Foundations in New York, A.M. Qattan Foundation in London, and so on. In this way, private foundations are able to continue their activities by carefully choosing their public discourse, sometimes highlighting more 'neutral' cultural activities in their communication or by operating behind the scenes to protect the project leaders they are supporting. Other foundations choose a more direct and open approach, which often leads to prohibition of activities.

Recent tendencies & challenges

The accumulation of wealth in the hands of a few is increasing all the time, also in countries where civil society is coming under pressure like for example in Egypt, Russia, Turkey or some countries in Africa. How can that wealth be invested in society through private foundations that support civil initiatives and independent culture? Can private foundations encourage governments to develop policies to stimulate this investment?

At the same time, wealthy individuals like to invest in art, build up collections, open private museums, and support major art projects of international stature, which bear little relationship to citizens and questions concerning community development. It is a challenge to make such individuals sensitive to the issues facing society and to encourage them to embrace philanthropy.

The EU, its member states and other countries place culture more in the centre of their external relations; not as a form of promotion or showcasing, but on account of the civil values of culture as an engine of development, community and dialogue between nations. These cultural values are often in line with the aims and values of private foundations and funds. As a result, ministries of foreign affairs and cultural institutes such as the British Council and Goethe Institut increasingly collaborate with these private foundations and funds.³ Even though strong ethics have to be taken into account concerning where the money supporting foundations is coming from, such collaboration can enhance the position of independent culture and civil society in certain countries. In places where the government is more repressive, one must tread carefully: a private foundation must develop a solid relationship with the government and engage with foreign institutes and embassies, or open tensions will mean that collaboration and support will have to be more circumspect and, in some cases, remain under the radar in order not to jeopardize independent cultural initiatives. Authoritarian regimes often view cultural collaboration from the EU and its member states as geopolitically motivated to destabilize their countries. Moreover, values such as freedom of expression and equality between men and women are viewed as a threat to national values.

In anticipation of a sustainable economy and open society politics, various forms of wealth redistribution remain essential for the development of civil society, whether through the government or through private initiatives if the government fails to take action, or through collaboration between both.

1 [nytimes.com/2018/02/28/world/europe/ceu-hungary-soros.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/28/world/europe/ceu-hungary-soros.html)

2 culturalfoundation.eu/library/ecf-arrest-of-osman-kavala-setback-for-cultural-collaborations and [anadolukultur.org/en/announcements/who-is-osman-kavala/406](https://www.anadolukultur.org/en/announcements/who-is-osman-kavala/406)

3 MORE EUROPE – Culture in the EU's External Relations is a public-private consortium (Goethe Institut, Institut français, British Council, European Cultural Foundation and Stiftung Mercator) which consists of foundations, civic networks and national cultural institutes, and is a cultural civic initiative with the objective to highlight and reinforce the role of culture in the EU's external relations.

About the contributors

Dirk De Wit is head of visual arts and international relations at Kunstenpunt/Flanders Arts Institute. He worked as a freelance curator for Palais des Beaux-Arts Brussels, Centre Pompidou and Kunstenfestivaldesarts, was co-director of STUK in Leuven, set up a new institution for art and media Constant, was artistic team member of Brussels2000 and director of BAM.



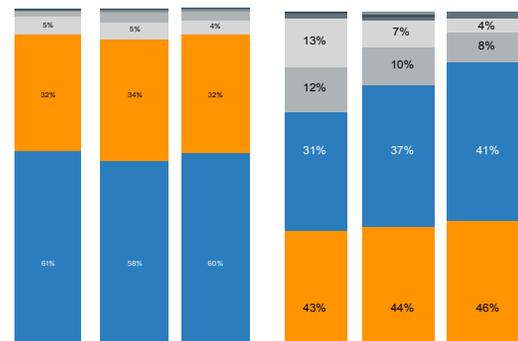
The role of private foundations

Nico Kennes is responsible for the international support of pop, rock, hiphop & electro acts from Flanders at Kunstenpunt/Flanders Arts Institute. Having a background as a music journalist, he also contributes to the research and analysis carried out by the institute. Nico is also a musician in Barely Autumn, an alternative indie rock formation he founded two years ago.



*Nothing ventured nothing gained.
The International in Teun Verbruggen.*

Simon Leenknecht is researcher at Kunstenpunt/Flanders Arts Institute. He has an all-round research interest, working on analyses of the fields of visual arts, performing arts and music in Flanders and Brussels.

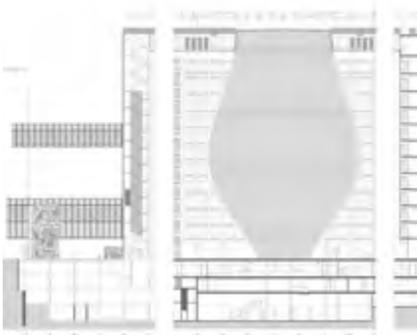


A Portrait of the Artist as a Traveller

Pier Luigi Sacco is Professor of Cultural Economics, IULM University Milan, Senior Researcher, metaLAB at Harvard and visiting scholar at Harvard University. He is a special adviser to the European Commissioner for Education and Culture.



Post-millennium tension. Contemporary art at a crossroads



Culture in Europe's external relations policy

Karl Van den Broeck is a journalist. He is editor-in-chief of Apache, a news site for investigative journalism. He is also the coordinator of Agora, the department at BOZAR - Centre for Fine Arts organizing debates and conferences.



Meanwhile, in the Commons

As first co-ordinator of IETM, co-founder of the European Forum for the Arts and Heritage (now CAE), cultural actor involved in the European Cities of Culture and many years as manager for several artists and arts organisations, **Hilde Teuchies** has a long-standing experience in European cultural co-operation, cultural policy and networking.



Being on the move. A conversation with Bárna Sigfúsdóttir.

Tom Van Imschoot makes a living out of speech and writing, in all possible forms. He's a critic, essayist and loves working in theatre and visual arts. He teaches literature at LUCA School of Arts, where he also supervises several artistic research projects. Recent (co-)publications: *Woorden worden werken. Schrijven onderweg naar een eigen taal* (2017, Grafische cel, Ghent) and *Legendes van de literatuur. Schrijvers en het artistieke experiment in de jaren zestig* (2017, Academia Press, Ghent).

Looking at this list of contributors, we observe a clear lack of diversity. We need to make sure this doesn't happen again and step up our game, acting more upon what we know (and what we talk about on an almost everyday basis here at Kunstenpunt): the urgency to represent a variety of voices.

**Trends, stories & reflections
on new ways of working internationally in the arts**

A magazine by Kunstenpunt/Flanders Arts Institute