

Towards the General Assembly of the Visual Arts

**Report on the preparatory conversations,
June–September 2026**

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Visual arts organisations, artists and museums already frequently work together. But how does this collaboration take shape in practice? How can bridges be built between different actors? How can they strengthen one another? And how can art connect more closely with society?

In 2027, FARO and Flanders Arts Institute are organising a General Assembly of the Visual Arts and museums working with visual arts. In preparation for this, a series of conversations took place across Flanders between June and September 2026, bringing together different voices from the field to reflect on the future of the visual arts.

Starting from existing practices, relationships and structures, the conversations explored what is already working, where gaps and tensions remain, and what could be strengthened or developed in the future.

Across the different locations, participants reflected on the conditions in which artists and organisations work, the relationships between different actors in the field, and the possibilities for building a more connected, resilient and solidary visual arts landscape.

Ghent

Thursday 11 June, 18:00–20:00, Kunsthal Gent

Partners: Kunsthal Gent, S.M.A.K. and KIOSK

The first conversation of the series took place at Kunsthal Gent on 11 June and focused on what artists and institutions need in order to work meaningfully within an increasingly pressured cultural field. The discussion began from a relatively simple question: what do artists expect from institutions, and what do institutions and the wider field need in return?

A first tension emerged around access to institutions. While Ghent was described as a city with organisations willing to collaborate and support artistic projects, artists also spoke about a persistent sense of closedness when operating outside existing institutional relationships. One participant described certain organisations as valuable while still experiencing a boundary around becoming part of their programme. Another participant, coming from abroad, had experienced the opposite: collaborations had provided substantial institutional, financial and network support. The contrast highlighted an important distinction: institutions can provide strong support once a relationship has been established, while the routes through which artists enter those relationships can remain difficult to understand or access.

From there, time and trust became perhaps the strongest recurring themes of the conversation. Artists described the value of sustained periods in which to develop work without having to immediately produce a predetermined result. This contrasted with a working environment in which projects are developed under increasingly short deadlines and pressure to rapidly translate activity into exhibitions, visitor numbers, financial indicators or online visibility.

Importantly, institutional representatives recognised the same pressure. The acceleration described by artists therefore runs through the wider system: organisations themselves face compressed policy processes, application cycles, reporting requirements and expectations for measurable output. This led to a broader discussion about whether the field needs to deliberately slow down, accept that fewer things can be produced with available resources, and communicate more openly about what can and cannot realistically be achieved.

Yet slowing down immediately produced another dilemma. If institutions do less in order to work more deeply, this can also restrict access to the opportunities that remain. With limited resources and large numbers of artists seeking support, longer residencies, better working conditions and more substantial engagements can mean supporting fewer people. Participants therefore resisted treating slowness as a straightforward solution. The discussion exposed a structural tension between depth and access: organisations are expected simultaneously to provide sustainable conditions, fair remuneration and meaningful long-term relationships while reaching a sufficiently broad group of artists. This also raised a more fundamental question about what institutions are actually responsible for. Are arts organisations expected to support every professional artist? If not, how is access to limited money, space and institutional attention determined? Participants pointed to a mismatch between the large number of artists graduating from art schools and the much smaller institutional and funding infrastructure available to support subsequent careers.

The debate around fair practice made this tension particularly visible. Participants stressed that fair practice extends beyond fair pay. The *Juist is Juist* framework was discussed as a basis for negotiation: artists and organisations should establish expectations around remuneration, time, insurance, working conditions and responsibilities at the beginning of a collaboration. Transparency was considered particularly important because institutions and artists do not enter negotiations from equal positions. At the same time, participants acknowledged the difficult arithmetic created by limited budgets: improving remuneration and working conditions without increasing overall funding can result in fewer artists receiving opportunities.

This connected directly to questions of gatekeeping and transparency. Emerging artists described institutional opportunities as dependent on formal criteria as well as networks, communication skills and knowledge of how to approach particular people. Artists may be told to knock on institutional doors while simultaneously experiencing those doors as effectively closed. Participants therefore questioned whether the direction of movement could sometimes be reversed: institutions could more actively seek out practices, explain how decisions are made and create structures through which artists can participate in

shaping their policies. Artist advisory boards or think tanks were suggested as possible models.

At the same time, the discussion did not place responsibility exclusively with institutions. Artist-led organisation and peer support emerged as another important layer of Ghent's ecosystem. Participants described a strong culture of artist-run spaces, collectives and informal networks through which artists create opportunities, share resources and support one another. These structures can provide forms of experimentation and solidarity that institutions cannot always offer, although their own sustainability is threatened by rising rents and limited resources.

This fed into a broader call for spaces of experimentation without predetermined outcomes. Participants expressed concern that an increasingly output-oriented system leaves too little room for improvisation, encounter, failure and practices that do not fit established formats. Affordable studios and informal spaces have become harder to maintain, while research support often remains tied to particular institutional or academic frameworks.

The role of the audience complicated this further. One participant warned that discussions about the field can become overly inward-looking, with artists and institutions primarily discussing how to support one another while paying insufficient attention to the publics that cultural institutions also serve. At the same time, audience expectations can intensify the pressure towards constant presentation: exhibitions, openings, events and measurable visitor numbers are easier to demonstrate than research time or less visible artistic development. The discussion therefore revealed another balance to negotiate between supporting artistic processes and maintaining meaningful relationships with the public.

Finally, Ghent's strong emphasis on local networks was accompanied by concern about international mobility. One participant valued the capacity of local peer networks to provide stability and solidarity, particularly after COVID, but warned against allowing locality to become isolation. For artists working within a relatively small Belgian field, international exchange can become important once their work has circulated through the limited number of local institutions. Participants therefore called for renewed attention to residencies,

exhibitions, exchanges and networks abroad, while acknowledging that ecological concerns and changing cultural policies require different models of internationalisation than before.

Overall, the Ghent conversation revealed a field caught between the desire to create better working conditions and the scarcity that makes those conditions difficult to distribute. Artists ask for time, trust, financial security, transparency and room to experiment, while institutions themselves need time, resources and public engagement to provide those conditions. Doing fewer things more deeply may improve artistic processes but reduce the number of people reached, while doing more risks reproducing the acceleration and output pressure participants were questioning. The discussion therefore shifted attention from simply asking how institutions can support more artists towards a broader question: what conditions, relationships and structures allow artistic practices to develop sustainably in the first place?

Genk

Tuesday 23 June, 14:00–16:00, Jester

Partners: Jester, Z33, C-Mine and Vonk

The conversation in Genk took place on 23 June and was hosted by Jester in partnership with Z33, C-Mine and Vonk. While pointing to the richness of artistic practices, initiatives and spaces already present in the province, participants quickly raised the question of their limited visibility, both within and outside the region. Several participants described Limburg as a valuable place in which to develop an artistic practice. Affordable and available space, possibilities for experimentation, proximity to nature and neighbouring countries, and a certain distance from the density and competitiveness of larger artistic centres were all identified as advantages.

Some also stressed that this relative distance can allow artists to develop more independently from dominant artistic trends or institutional expectations. At the same time, this distance can become a limitation. Several participants described having had to leave Limburg, work elsewhere or establish themselves internationally before being taken seriously or finding further opportunities. The province was repeatedly positioned in relation

to Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent, where artistic institutions, museums, galleries and professional networks are more concentrated.

Some questioned whether Limburg should continue measuring itself against these centres at all, arguing instead for greater confidence in the particular qualities of the region and for strategies that strengthen what already exists locally. The discussion therefore revealed a tension between the desire to remain rooted in Limburg and the perceived necessity of looking elsewhere for visibility, recognition and career development. One ambition expressed was to reverse this movement by enabling Limburg-based artists to connect with opportunities elsewhere while also creating reasons for people and institutions from outside the province to come to Limburg.

Another central issue throughout the conversation was fragmentation. Participants repeatedly noted that there was insufficient awareness of what other artists, initiatives and organisations in the province were doing. Small-scale initiatives exist across Limburg, including outside the better-known cultural centres, but information about them circulates unevenly and could be more systematically collected or mapped.

This fragmentation was also perceived at the institutional level, with participants calling for stronger collaboration between organisations rather than each operating independently. Consequently, there was a strong demand for spaces and structures of encounter. Participants imagined a platform, network, artists' salon or recurring gathering where artists and cultural workers could meet, discover one another's practices, exchange knowledge and potentially develop collaborations.

Importantly, this was not necessarily imagined as another large institution. Several speakers emphasised the value of informal encounters, studio visits, peer-to-peer exchange and simply becoming curious about what others are doing. The need was therefore as much relational as infrastructural: creating a stronger artistic community by making existing people, practices and resources more legible to one another.

This question of connection was closely tied to professional support. Participants discussed difficulties accessing information about subsidies and navigating application procedures,

noting that artists who already know the system are more likely to benefit from it. The relatively low number of applications from Limburg was linked partly to this information gap and partly to the practical realities of artistic work: many artists combine their practice with other employment and cannot necessarily attend information sessions or networking events organised during working hours. Participants therefore called for accessible information and more practical guidance on issues such as funding applications.

The role of institutions was discussed critically in this context. While some speakers emphasised artists' own agency and the need to organise, invite one another, create spaces and build audiences themselves, others warned against placing responsibility entirely on individual artists. Institutional recognition, advocacy, production support and access to infrastructure can substantially affect an artist's ability to develop a sustainable practice. Several participants therefore called for organisations to become more attentive to artists already working locally, including those who have not yet received recognition elsewhere, and to collaborate more actively with one another.

Overall, the discussion suggested that the challenge for Limburg is less an absence of artistic activity than a lack of connection, circulation and visibility around that activity. Participants described a landscape made up of numerous "pockets" of artists and initiatives that could become stronger through greater mutual awareness, the sharing of resources and knowledge, sustained institutional support, and stronger connections both across the province and beyond it. The ambition was therefore not necessarily to reproduce the cultural infrastructure of Brussels, Antwerp or Ghent, but to build a more interconnected Limburg ecosystem in which artists can remain, develop their practices and gain visibility without first having to establish themselves elsewhere.

Mechelen

Tuesday 23 June 2026, 18:00–20:00, De Garage, Kunsthal Mechelen

Partners: Kunsthal Mechelen and RADAR

The conversation in Mechelen addressed the conditions of artistic practice, collaboration and accessibility within the local arts landscape. The discussion began with the personal

experiences of artists before moving towards broader questions of representation, institutional responsibility and the infrastructure needed to sustain an artistic community.

The opening exchange addressed the importance of rest, experimentation and periods of inactivity, alongside the difficulty of maintaining an artistic practice while earning a living. Irregular income, the need for additional employment and the absence of conventional payslips were mentioned as obstacles extending beyond the cultural sector, including access to housing. The discussion also questioned the assumption that artistic work must generate income to be considered professionally legitimate, as well as the tendency to position artists as separate from society.

The question of diversity and representation brought another dimension to the discussion of access to opportunities. One participant described Mechelen's artistic landscape as predominantly white and difficult to access for artists of colour, identifying Kunsthall Mechelen as one of the few spaces offering opportunities to artists from different backgrounds. The intervention highlighted the role of social capital in accessing institutions and platforms, where personal networks, educational credentials and established ideas about what constitutes legitimate artistic practice can determine who is recognised and supported. Artists of colour were described as facing additional barriers, including limited representation, the categorisation of their work and expectations shaped by predominantly white institutional perspectives.

The exchange also revealed differences in how these barriers were understood. Some participants initially related these experiences to the difficulties encountered by emerging artists more generally, while others emphasised that racial and cultural background can fundamentally shape the opportunities available to an artist. This raised a broader question: when artistic opportunities, resources and visibility are already limited, who gains access to them, and whose work is recognised and supported? The discussion also touched on gender inequalities and concerns that funding cuts and changing political priorities could undermine progress towards greater diversity and inclusion.

Questions of representation extended to the relationship between contemporary artists and heritage institutions. Participants questioned why established artists are often repeatedly

presented, while younger or lesser-known practitioners struggle to gain visibility. The exchange drew attention to the choices institutions make about whom to exhibit and how they might create more opportunities for living artists within programmes traditionally focused on historical collections. The need for greater mutual understanding between artists and organisations also emerged, particularly concerning their respective working conditions, responsibilities and institutional constraints. Making time for dialogue and exchange was considered an important step towards more meaningful collaboration.

Another concern was the development of a local artistic community. Participants observed that artists from Mechelen often establish their practices and networks in larger cities such as Antwerp and Brussels, where they encounter more opportunities and professional connections. Local grassroots initiatives were discussed as attempts to counter this movement by creating accessible platforms where artists can meet, collaborate and experiment. Such initiatives were valued for their openness and flexibility, allowing activities to emerge from the interests of participants without predetermined formats or expectations. Maintaining this kind of community-building nevertheless remains difficult without stable infrastructure. Participants expressed a need for shared spaces that could accommodate different practices and provide continuity beyond temporary or nomadic activities.

The availability and use of existing cultural infrastructure were also discussed. Participants questioned whether buildings and event spaces could be made more accessible through shared use, and whether available facilities were sufficiently visible as places open to independent initiatives. The lack of flexible spaces was seen as a limitation for artists seeking to develop projects outside established institutional formats. Mechelen's relatively small scale can facilitate direct contact with organisations and local authorities, but participants also described how opportunities sometimes depend on reaching the right person at the right moment. This again highlighted the role of social capital, particularly in accessing resources and support, and raised questions about transparency and the consistency of opportunities available to different actors.

The relationship between grassroots initiatives and municipal structures was another concern. Participants acknowledged a degree of openness towards new cultural activities, but also described how administrative requirements, expectations of measurable returns

and the conditions attached to support can conflict with the experimental nature of artistic projects. Adapting an initiative to existing frameworks can place pressure on its artistic autonomy, particularly when access to spaces or financial resources depends on institutional approval. Limited opportunities for project funding were also identified as an obstacle to continuity, leaving emerging initiatives with few possibilities to develop beyond individual projects. Participants consequently called for greater flexibility and trust from local authorities to allow artists and organisations to experiment and develop their practices over time.

The discussion also addressed how decisions concerning cultural support and infrastructure are made, and whose perspectives are represented in these processes. Questions were raised about the composition and accessibility of local consultation structures, particularly in relation to the diversity of artistic practices and communities they are expected to represent. Kunsthall Mechelen's approach to broadening participation through diverse programming, a pluralistic advisory structure and engagement with audiences beyond conventional exhibition spaces was also discussed.

The conversation in Mechelen highlighted how access to opportunities remains uneven, particularly when resources and platforms are already limited. Beyond the need for more accessible spaces and sustained support for local initiatives, the discussion raised questions about who gets to participate in the artistic landscape, whose work is given visibility and how institutions and local authorities can respond to these inequalities.

Antwerp

Friday 3 July, 18:00–20:00, Out of Sight

Partners: Kunsthall Extra City, Out of Sight and Lichtekooi

The conversation in Antwerp, held on 3 July at Out of Sight, centred on the relationship between large institutions, smaller organisations and artist-run initiatives within a cultural landscape facing increasing financial and political pressure. The political debate surrounding M HKA and the uncertainty over its future provided an important and tangible context for much of the discussion. At the same time, it opened up a broader conversation

about how different actors within the Antwerp art field relate to one another and what solidarity between organisations operating at very different scales might concretely mean.

Participants repeatedly returned to the question of how a small-scale organisation employing one or two people can be compared to a major institution, and whether collaboration can genuinely strengthen the wider ecosystem without reproducing existing hierarchies.

The precarity of smaller organisations was an important point of discussion. Participants described organisations operating for years from one project subsidy to another, often sustained by very small teams whose members combine several jobs. This makes long-term planning difficult and leaves organisations vulnerable to relatively small changes in funding or personal circumstances.

At the same time, policy increasingly expects organisations to contribute to objectives such as participation, diversity, multi-voicedness, collaboration and care. Several participants pointed to a contradiction between these ambitions and the resources available to realise them: a diverse field requires a diversity of organisations, yet many of the smaller structures contributing to that diversity remain structurally fragile.

Against this background, the situation of M HKA became a central point of discussion. The museum had recently been confronted with proposals that would have fundamentally changed its status, including the possibility of losing its museum function and collection. Although these plans were subsequently revised, M HKA is now expected to demonstrate its added value for the broader arts and heritage ecosystem. This prompted a wider discussion about the role a museum can play within the artistic ecosystem surrounding it. Representatives of the museum acknowledged that this relationship could be developed further and explicitly invited participants to reflect on what that role might entail. At the same time, they stressed that M HKA cannot be expected to solve structural problems, such as the financial sustainability of grassroots organisations, that ultimately require responses at the level of cultural policy.

Participants noted that support from a major institution could take several forms. The presentation and acquisition of work by artists connected to Antwerp were among the most frequently discussed, but participants argued that such engagement should be structural rather than confined to occasional projects or smaller peripheral presentation spaces. M HKA pointed to its existing acquisition budget for Antwerp-connected artists and its ongoing engagement with local practices, while others responded that these activities were insufficiently visible or communicated. The disagreement therefore concerned whether support existed and how visible, sustained and structurally embedded that support was within the museum's programme.

The discussion of M HKA's collection developed this question further. Participants questioned why more of the museum's collection is not publicly visible and emphasised the symbolic importance of acquisition by a public museum. Museum representatives explained that the collection contains more than 6,000 works and that limited exhibition space constrains how much can be shown at once. They also stressed that the collection is activated through temporary exhibitions, research and loans alongside permanent display. The exchange nevertheless revealed differing expectations of what a public collection should do: whether its primary responsibility lies in collecting, preserving, researching and circulating works, or whether greater emphasis should be placed on making publicly acquired works continuously visible and accessible.

From this emerged the broader question of solidarity. The threat to M HKA had mobilised organisations and individuals across Antwerp, including people who had previously felt distant from the museum. Participants saw value in this collective response, but also questioned why solidarity tends to emerge primarily during moments of crisis. Smaller organisations noted that their own disappearance rarely generates the same sense of urgency, despite their importance to the diversity of the ecosystem. Several therefore called for solidarity to become proactive rather than reactive: larger institutions could publicly advocate for smaller organisations, while organisations of different scales could develop shared positions towards policymakers.

At the same time, participants were cautious about treating collaboration as a substitute for adequate public funding. Organisations cannot indefinitely absorb new responsibilities

around collaboration, participation and ecosystem-building without corresponding resources.

A related concern was that collaboration could unintentionally reinforce vertical hierarchies, with smaller organisations increasingly placed under the umbrella of larger institutions. Participants proposed another understanding of diversity: a field composed of many autonomous organisations and voices operating at different scales, rather than diversity concentrated within major institutions. Strengthening the ecosystem would, from this perspective, mean preserving this plurality rather than concentrating activity within a limited number of larger structures.

Several concrete possibilities for a more reciprocal ecosystem emerged from the discussion. These included sharing expertise, collections, archives, infrastructure, communication channels and international networks; developing longer-term collaborations between museums, art schools and smaller organisations; collectively communicating Antwerp's artistic programme; and creating recurrent spaces in which actors across the field could meet. Participants particularly stressed that large institutions possess networks and forms of visibility that could help Antwerp-based artists and smaller organisations circulate internationally.

Overall, the Antwerp conversation portrayed a rich but increasingly fragile ecosystem in which a central question is how power, resources and responsibility circulate between actors operating at very different scales. The discussion did not produce a single definition of institutional responsibility, but pointed towards more reciprocal relationships between museums, art schools, established organisations, smaller structures and artists. Structural collaboration, mutual visibility and the sharing of resources and networks were identified as possible ways of strengthening these relationships, while participants maintained that solidarity and collaboration cannot replace sustained public investment.

Waregem

Friday 4 September, 14:00–16:00, Park Baron Casier

Partners: NICC, Be-Part and Flanders Arts Institute

The conversation in Waregem took place in the *REFUGE* pavilion, an artistic project created by artist Ives Maes and designer Samyra Moumouh at the initiative of Be-Part. The discussion focused strongly on what it means to develop an artistic practice outside Belgium's dominant artistic centres. Participants described West Flanders as home to artists, collections, cultural organisations and individual initiatives, while also pointing to gaps in the infrastructure connecting them. Being “off-centre” was described as both an advantage and a disadvantage: it can create freedom to experiment away from the scrutiny of larger centres, but can also mean smaller audiences, reduced visibility and weaker connections to wider professional networks.

A central concern was therefore the absence of sufficient critical mass. Participants pointed to gaps in the regional ecosystem, including fewer higher arts education programmes, shared workplaces and studios, residency structures, galleries and informal meeting places capable of attracting artists and encouraging them to remain in the region. Artists may originate from West Flanders but continue to gravitate towards Ghent, Brussels or Antwerp because these cities offer denser professional communities and more opportunities for exchange. At the same time, participants resisted the idea that artists should simply relocate in order to develop a viable career. Some described deliberately returning to West Flanders and successfully building practices there, while still experiencing a smaller professional support network.

This was closely connected to a recurring feeling that artists working outside the major centres are perceived differently. Participants described experiences in which being based in Kortrijk or elsewhere in West Flanders appeared to position them as “local artists,” even when their practices and exhibition histories were international. In discussions around Flemish funding, some artists felt that work outside Antwerp, Brussels or Ghent required additional explanation or defence. Participants with experience in assessment committees nuanced this perception, stressing that location should not determine artistic quality, while

others acknowledged that certain disciplines and practices outside the main centres may require greater advocacy within those structures.

The response proposed most consistently was collaboration. Participants suggested that smaller organisations, municipalities and initiatives could increase their capacity by pooling resources, audiences and infrastructure. Existing collaborations between West Flemish triennials and between organisations creating shared accommodation for longer residencies were cited as examples of what becomes possible when organisations combine capacities they would not possess independently.

Yet collaboration was understood as more than a succession of projects. Participants repeatedly distinguished temporary cooperation from durable relationships. Sustainable collaboration requires people to know one another, meet regularly and understand one another's practices and constraints. It also requires transparency: organisations need to be willing to discuss their ambitions, resources and limitations rather than protecting their own institutional territory out of fear of competition. The aim would therefore be to create a regional ecology in which collaboration develops through sustained trust.

In this respect, community itself was described as a form of infrastructure. One artist reflected that the most durable outcome of a residency was often the people encountered through it, beyond the artwork or research produced there. Those relationships could continue generating exchanges and opportunities long after the residency had ended. Participants consequently suggested connecting visiting residents more deliberately with local artists through meetings, introductions or informal forms of mentorship. Relatively modest interventions could, in this way, help temporary artistic programmes contribute to longer-lasting regional networks.

The discussion nevertheless revealed a gap between the desire for community and the mechanisms through which it is actually produced. Artists described a lack of dedicated meeting places and professional support structures, while existing initiatives do not always reach the people for whom they are intended. Professional events organised during working hours, for example, can exclude artists who combine their practice with another job. Participants also discussed the limited uptake of a regional networking platform despite an

acknowledged need for precisely this kind of connection, suggesting that creating a tool is insufficient if artists do not know it exists or cannot integrate it into their working realities.

Communication consequently emerged as a structural issue. The later discussion around Be-Part made this particularly visible. During the discussion, changes in local policy that would affect Be-Part's future operation and budget were raised, yet several artists indicated that they had barely heard about the situation. Institutions may therefore experience a lack of solidarity from the artistic community, while artists cannot mobilise around circumstances they do not know about. Solidarity, in this sense, depends first on information circulating through the field.

This broadened the conversation from networking towards collective advocacy. Participants questioned who speaks when a smaller organisation or an individual artist comes under pressure. Comparisons were made with the visibility generated when larger institutions are threatened, raising the question of why solidarity becomes less audible as organisations become smaller and less prominent.

The question of artist participation within institutions generated more disagreement. Some participants questioned whether artists need to be formally involved in institutional decision-making at all, arguing that institutions and their directors have their own responsibilities. Others pointed towards models ranging from artistic working groups and guest curators to artists serving on boards or acting as temporary critical interlocutors within museums. The discussion therefore did not converge on a single governance model, but suggested that artist participation can take multiple forms, from informal consultation embedded in exhibition-making to more formal representation, provided that the purpose of that participation is clear.

Another important theme concerned public visibility and cultural mediation. Participants questioned how contemporary visual art can reach audiences beyond its existing professional circles without reducing artistic complexity or becoming purely commercial. Television, cultural journalism and criticism were discussed as infrastructures through which wider publics have encountered art. Several participants lamented the decline of sustained arts coverage and, particularly, of serious art criticism, which they regarded as a means of visibility, critical feedback and cultural mediation.

The Waregem conversation repeatedly resisted the idea that solutions must come exclusively from the Flemish level. While participants identified structural inequalities and funding pressures, they also returned to what could be built regionally with the resources already present: shared infrastructure, networks across West Flanders, relationships between local artists and visiting residents, institutional partnerships, communication channels and places where people can meet. Precisely because networks are smaller, participants suggested that people can sometimes find one another and mobilise more quickly than in larger cities.

Overall, the discussion portrayed a fragmented regional field that already possesses many important actors and resources but lacks sufficient connective tissue between them. The challenge therefore lies in connecting artists, organisations, collections, residencies, audiences and municipalities strongly enough that working outside the major centres does not also mean remaining outside the networks through which artistic careers, visibility and solidarity are built.

Brussels

Friday 11 September, 10:00–12:00, Argos

Partners: Argos, Level Five, RendezVous and Flanders Arts Institute

The Brussels conversation, which took place in the Salon of RendezVous during Brussels Art Week, began with the city's particular position within the Flemish visual arts landscape. While Brussels was described as a highly fertile, international and multilingual artistic environment, its actual functioning does not fit easily within the administrative and linguistic structures through which culture is governed and funded. The city was repeatedly characterised as an in-between space, connecting Flemish, French-speaking, local and international artistic communities. Yet organisations working within this environment are required to demonstrate how they position themselves specifically within the Flemish field, even when their artists and programmes are already strongly connected to Flemish institutions, museums and educational structures.

This difficulty was linked to the fragmentation of political and administrative responsibility in Brussels. Cultural organisations receive support through different communities and

municipalities, while the Brussels-Capital Region itself does not hold the same cultural competences. Participants argued that this division does not correspond to how audiences or artistic communities actually experience the city: internationally and locally, organisations are generally perceived simply as part of Brussels. Some therefore questioned whether regional competences such as employment, infrastructure and territorial development could be mobilised more effectively, and called for stronger coordination between the different authorities involved.

Despite its high concentration of artists and institutions, the city's density does not necessarily translate into accessibility or sustainability. Participants described constant pressure on affordable studios and presentation spaces, as well as strong competition for existing opportunities. One artist, for example, described needing a Brussels presentation as a condition of funding but discovering that a project space available through a former residency was already booked until 2031. Temporary residencies and workspaces provide important support, but participants questioned what happens afterwards, particularly as artists move repeatedly between short-term programmes without necessarily reaching more stable working conditions.

Access to this dense ecosystem can also depend heavily on networks. Participants described relatively separate circuits shaped by language, education, residencies and personal connections. Brussels therefore presents a different form of fragmentation from regions where artists struggle to find a network at all: here, many networks already exist, but they do not necessarily intersect or provide equal access to resources and opportunities.

Within this context, artist-led initiatives and communities were described as increasingly important forms of support. Participants spoke about workspaces and artist-run structures that provide physical infrastructure, networks, knowledge and community. At the same time, these structures can themselves be highly precarious. Participants pointed to the contradiction of artists and artist-led organisations taking on responsibility for supporting the wider field while lacking structural support themselves.

At the institutional level, representatives stressed that organisations themselves operate within funding frameworks that shape what they can prioritise. Presentation institutions, for

example, may be evaluated on artistic quality, audience reach and visibility without necessarily receiving resources specifically intended for long-term artistic development. This raised a broader question around “*care of the artistic ecosystem*”: if institutions are increasingly expected to care for the wider artistic ecosystem, participants questioned whether responsibilities that also belong to cultural policy are being transferred onto individual organisations.

This question of responsibility also led to a discussion about collaboration and resource-sharing across the field. Participants discussed the sharing of infrastructure, knowledge, administration and networks, as well as stronger relationships between organisations operating at different scales. Yet collaboration was not presented as a solution in itself: it requires time, labour and resources and cannot simply become another responsibility imposed on already precarious actors. The discussion therefore returned to the need for greater coordination between artists, institutions and the different public structures responsible for supporting the field.

Overall, the Brussels conversation portrayed an artistic ecosystem that is simultaneously dense, international and structurally fragmented. Unlike contexts where the primary challenge is creating sufficient artistic activity or connection, Brussels already possesses an extensive ecosystem. The difficulty lies in sustaining it: ensuring access to space and opportunities, supporting artist-led structures, creating continuity beyond temporary programmes, and developing funding and governance structures that better correspond to the multilingual and interconnected reality of artistic practice in the city.

Cross-analysis

Read together, the six conversations reveal shared concerns around visibility, access, infrastructure, institutional responsibility, collaboration and solidarity. What differs considerably is the form these concerns take depending on geography, artistic density and institutional context. The discussions also raise questions about how opportunities and resources are distributed, and who is able to access them. They therefore reveal a series of interconnected local ecosystems operating under different conditions.

Locality and artistic ecosystems

One of the clearest differences between the conversations concerns the impact of geographical position and artistic density on the challenges faced by the field. In Limburg, a central concern is connection and visibility: artistic activity exists, but remains dispersed and is not always sufficiently visible within the region or beyond it. West Flanders presents a related situation, but the discussion shifts towards critical mass: how can dispersed artists, organisations, infrastructure and audiences be connected strongly enough to sustain a regional ecosystem? In both conversations, the gravitational pull of Brussels, Antwerp and Ghent is apparent, particularly in relation to professional networks, visibility and career development.

Mechelen presents some of these concerns on a smaller urban scale. Participants described artists establishing their practices and networks in larger cities, while local initiatives seek to create opportunities for collaboration and community-building. The discussion also raised questions about the availability of shared spaces, access to municipal support and the role of informal networks in determining who can develop projects locally. The city's relatively small scale can facilitate direct relationships, but these do not necessarily translate into equal access to resources and opportunities.

Antwerp and Ghent begin from a different position. Here, artistic and institutional density is already relatively high, and the questions consequently shift towards how an existing ecosystem functions. In Antwerp, the discussion centres on the circulation of power, resources and responsibility between organisations operating at very different scales, while in Ghent questions of access, gatekeeping, time and the distribution of limited opportunities become particularly important.

Brussels further complicates a straightforward centre-periphery distinction. Its ecosystem is exceptionally dense, international and multilingual, yet this density does not eliminate scarcity or precarity. Instead, participants described pressure on space and opportunities alongside a different form of fragmentation: networks, institutions and artistic practices cross linguistic and administrative structures that do not necessarily correspond to how the field actually functions.

Geography and density therefore shape the conditions under which artists and organisations operate without producing a simple opposition between centre and periphery. Greater density can provide more institutions, networks and opportunities, while also producing competition, barriers to access and unequal distribution. Lower density can limit critical mass and visibility, while sometimes allowing greater proximity, experimentation or possibilities for regional mobilisation. Across several conversations, artists also described the importance of looking beyond their immediate local environment for professional networks, recognition or opportunities. What matters across these different contexts is where cultural infrastructure is located, how artists and organisations can access it, how resources circulate through it, and how local practices connect to wider professional networks.

Conditions for sustainability

Across the six conversations, connection emerges as a recurring need, although what needs to be connected and for what purpose varies considerably. It may involve making dispersed practices visible to one another, creating sufficient critical mass, opening access to institutional networks, connecting organisations operating at different scales, or building bridges between networks that already exist but do not sufficiently intersect. Grassroots initiatives and shared spaces also emerged as important ways of bringing artists together, providing opportunities for experimentation and developing local artistic communities. Calls for “more networking” or “more collaboration” are therefore insufficient on their own. The more relevant questions are what kind of connection is missing, between whom, and what that connection should make possible.

Across the conversations, this question also develops into a concern with continuity. Participants repeatedly moved beyond individual projects, residencies, exhibitions or subsidies to ask what happens between and after them. Smaller organisations struggle to plan beyond project funding; artists can move through temporary residencies and workspaces without reaching greater stability; and professional development may require repeatedly moving between different networks and contexts. Independent and grassroots initiatives can similarly struggle to sustain their activities without accessible spaces, flexible support or the resources needed to develop beyond individual projects. At the same time,

relationships created through residencies, peer networks and collaborations can outlast individual projects and become an important form of infrastructure in themselves.

The recurring concern is therefore whether existing opportunities contribute to sustainable trajectories. The conversations point towards a need for conditions in which practices, organisations, relationships and knowledge can develop and accumulate over time instead of repeatedly starting again with each individual project.

Solidarity, access and shared responsibility

A final question connecting the six conversations concerns who is responsible for sustaining these ecosystems. Artists are encouraged to organise themselves and create networks; institutions are expected to support artists; larger organisations are asked to share resources and visibility with smaller ones; and public authorities are expected to provide the conditions within which this can happen.

None of the conversations places responsibility entirely with one actor. Instead, they repeatedly expose the limitations of doing so. Artists cannot compensate for insufficient infrastructure through self-organisation alone. Institutions can contribute to the development of their surrounding ecosystem but cannot solve structural funding problems themselves. Smaller organisations cannot continually take on additional expectations around participation, collaboration and care without corresponding resources. Artist-led initiatives, meanwhile, can provide crucial forms of support while remaining precarious themselves.

The Mechelen conversation added a further dimension to this question by drawing attention to the unequal distribution of opportunities within the field. Participants questioned how racial and cultural background, educational credentials and personal networks influence access to artistic platforms and institutional recognition. The exchange also revealed differences in how these barriers are understood, particularly whether the difficulties encountered by artists of colour can be compared with those faced by emerging artists more generally. These concerns extend the question of institutional responsibility to the

criteria through which artists are selected, represented and supported, as well as whose perspectives are included in decisions concerning cultural resources and opportunities.

This also complicates the recurring call for collaboration. Collaboration can strengthen the field through shared infrastructure, knowledge, networks and advocacy, but it requires time and resources of its own. Participants therefore repeatedly distinguished structural collaboration from forms of cooperation that simply redistribute existing scarcity or ask already precarious actors to take on additional responsibilities. The discussions also suggest that access to networks and collaborative opportunities cannot be taken for granted, particularly when participation depends on existing relationships or institutional recognition.

In this context, solidarity depends on collective responses in moments of crisis as well as on information circulating, people knowing one another, spaces for encounter, access to shared resources, and organisations having sufficient stability to support others. The form this takes differs locally, but the underlying concern is shared.

Across the six conversations, the challenge appears to lie primarily in the conditions through which existing artistic activity can become sustainable and mutually reinforcing. Those conditions cannot be identical everywhere, nor can they be considered independently of who has access to them. The conversations point towards strengthening local ecosystems according to their particular needs while improving the circulation of knowledge, resources and opportunities within and between them. In this sense, solidarity involves responding collectively when individual actors come under pressure and creating the conditions through which different parts of the field can remain distinct while becoming better able to support and reinforce one another.