



Self-organisation of Artists

FROM: BUZZWORD TO: REVOLUTION?

SELF-ORGANISATION, COLLECTIVE ORGANISATION, ARTIST-LED PROJECTS, ARTISTS IN CHARGE – ARE NEW INITIATIVES THAT RETHINK OUR MEANS OF ARTISTIC PRODUCTION THE FIRST SIGNS OF A REVOLUTION, OR IDEALISTIC MEASURES THAT CAN NEVER SCALE?

JORIS JANSSENS OF FLANDERS ARTS INSTITUTE TAKES A CLOSE LOOK AT THE EXAMPLE OF FLANDERS – FIRST BY CALLING BACK TO THE FLEMISH WAVE OF RADICAL CHOREOGRAPHERS AND THEATRE-MAKERS THAT EMERGED DURING THE 1970S AND 80S, THEN BY EXAMINING A CONTEMPORARY FIELD THAT IS INCREASINGLY DEFINED BY NETWORKS, CO-PRODUCTION AND INTERDEPENDENCY. LIFE FOR ARTISTS MAY BE GETTING HARDER, BUT SYSTEMS THAT SHARE RESOURCES, RISK AND INFRASTRUCTURE COULD BE THE KEYS TO A STABLE FUTURE.

**DANSE
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The Innovative Leadership Network (ILN) is a Nordic cross-disciplinary platform focusing on the development of artist-led initiatives in the contemporary choreographic performing arts. The network establishes a cross-disciplinary exchange between artistic activities (choreography), universities (academic research) and the market (from production to presentation spaces). ILN aims to provide a framework to question classic models, tackle old-fashioned interdependences, and rethink practices in the performing arts value chain.

Gathering thirteen partners from seven countries, the network works towards enabling artists to become leaders, developing innovative methods for residency and research activities, as well as developing new ideas in relation to institutions, advocacy, fundraising, audience engagement, presentation formats, communication strategies, entrepreneurship, and sustainability.

The platform proposes fruitful exchanges between Nordic and European artists, researchers, and creative workers from the field through a programme of networking events, lectures, thematic workshops, and open seminars taking place from April 2018 to October 2020. Regular online publications will feed reflection and build cross-sectoral knowledge.

INL is one strand of an ambitious Artist's Research Lab and Residency Programme developed by Dansehallerne and its international partners.

For more information, please contact Programme Coordinator Yohann Floch: yohann@dansehallerne.dk

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Lately, there has been a buzz around artist-run or artist-led initiatives, around self-organisation and self-governance, cooperation and collaboration among artists... Certainly, there are many initiatives and experiments in this domain, set up by artists and arts workers. There has also certainly been a lot of discourse, reflection and talking *about* these kinds of collaborations, as this is a topic that is frequently dealt with in publications and during symposia and conferences.

But performing artists have always worked together... so, what's new? What does all this talking really mean? What is this increased self-awareness about collaboration a symptom of? Are these the survival strategies of people working in precarious circumstances? Or might they be a 'weak signal' of a profound system change?

In this article¹, I will have a look at some of the diverse collaborative working models developed by artists working in Flanders, Brussels and the rest of Europe. I will start by sketching some of the collaborative strategies developed in Flanders in the eighties – where an ecology for the contemporary performing arts was created bottom-up and almost from scratch. Next, we will briefly see how this ecosystem has developed since then and how some pressures have built up. Lastly, there will be an overview of some recent experiments and strategies. The aim is to try to grasp and understand the motivations behind these strategies, as they can be seen as different approaches to create more sustainable working conditions for artists, or as different starting points for organising trust and solidarity in a changing ecosystem.

¹ This text is based on a lecture I gave in Copenhagen, during a meeting of the Innovative Leadership Network, on 21 April 2018. The lecture itself was based on earlier lectures and material published elsewhere. The 'Flemish Flashback' chapter is partly based on 'W.A.T. (Working Apart Together) The collective organisation of artistic practice within the performing arts' (by Sofie Joye, Nikol Wellens and myself), a text originally distributed in a 2014 publication by Flanders Arts Institute on artist-run organisations, and 'History and Science Fiction of Performing Arts Networking (1981-2068)' (<https://blog.kunsten.be/history-and-science-fiction-of-performing-arts-networking-1981-2068-fc2b2b526acb>), a lecture I presented at the Producers Network Meeting and Forum (West Kowloon Cultural District, Hong Kong, May 2016). The material about current collective strategies in self-organisation was developed during the work Delphine Hesters and I did to prepare and follow-up 'Doing it Together', a lecture/workshop we gave at the IETM plenary in Bucharest (spring 2017). In order to prepare that workshop, we published some insights (<https://blog.kunsten.be/history-and-science-fiction-of-performing-arts-networking-1981-2068-fc2b2b526acb>) on the Flanders Arts Institute blog, and some of the subsequent insights we gained lead to our publication of 'DIT (Do-It-Together): Tracing collective answers to the precarious position of artists in Brussels' (in a book about culture and creativity in Brussels, edited by Eva Swyngedouw E.A.). This text contains samples and excerpts from all these publications. This means that the text in itself is a collaborative enterprise: it quotes the work and the words of my colleagues Delphine Hesters, Sofie Joye and Nikol Wellens and was based on the valuable input of the people quoted, and the documentation of colleagues at Flanders Arts Institute who manage data collection and archiving.

FLEMISH FLASHBACK

'VIRTUALLY FROM NOWHERE AS IF BY MAGIC'

When you look at the manner in which performing artists organised themselves in Flanders in the 1970s and 1980s, you see that at that time there was a certain diversity in ways of working. There were larger city theatres that functioned as ensembles presenting repertory theatre in their own venues. In smaller cities, smaller ensembles focused on presenting topical texts on stage. And then alongside these there were many smaller companies that made productions and toured the cultural centres that had been built throughout Flanders since the 1960s. Almost all of these structures – funded by the Theatre Decree of 1975 – consisted of a relatively stable core group of creators and performers, with a more or less strictly defined distribution of tasks.

Interesting for us are the evolutions that took place outside the theatre system which existed in Flanders at the time, as a new generation of performing artists came to the fore that did not fit within the framework of the Theatre Decree. Today, some of these creators – such as Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker (Rosas), Jan Fabre (Troubleyn), Jan Lauwers (Needcompany), Wim Vandekeybus (Ultima Vez), and Alain Platel (Les Ballets C de la B) – play at the world's most prestigious venues. It was mainly for artistic reasons that they could not work within the prevailing system: dance and interdisciplinary work had no place in the Theatre Decree.

It is important to stress that these artists emerged almost out of nothing. As the critic Pieter T'Jonck wrote: 'Contemporary dance emerged virtually from nowhere as if by magic in the early 1980s.' At this time, there were hardly any policies for contemporary performing arts. For instance, in 1985, 98% of the Flemish budget for dance went to the Royal Ballet; 2% went to a contemporary dance company (Rosas) and a festival (Klapstuk, Leuven).

'EVERYONE POSES GREAT TRUST IN THE PRODUCTIONS OF OTHERS'

This remarkable artistic scene came about from bottom-up strategies. There were a number of collective strategies being used by cultural entrepreneurs who worked together to support the work of these emerging artists. Different functions in the ecosystem were tackled simultaneously.

First, artistic production. The way these emerging artists established their practice is interesting from today's perspective. They worked via co-productions, with partners in Belgium and abroad. To organise their practice, artists and arts workers worked together closely and developed new, collective forms of organisation. For instance, the non-profit SCHAAMTe vzw was established in 1978 to provide financial and organisational support to diverse performing artists (including Josse De Pauw, Jan Lauwers and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker).

The management of this association was largely in collective hands. Next to the artists themselves, there were managers/organisers such as Hugo De Greef. Different resources were shared, encompassing management support (production, touring, international promotion and networking), but also infrastructure. The group bought a building in Brussels, where they installed rehearsal rooms, and where shared technical and administrative facilities were housed. There was strong economic solidarity amongst the artists: they shared international contacts, and the revenue from one artist's tour was used to temporarily finance another's new production. The text of a press conference from 1982 is revealing about SCHAAMTe's financial solidarity mechanisms:

- 'One of the important and exemplary elements of how SCHAAMTe works, is the financial management of all activities. The revenues from all members go [into] one bank account, the expenses are taken from the same bank account.
- Of course, everybody at any time can make use of the available money, while it is not being checked whose money it is exactly. However, a meticulous accountancy makes it possible at any time to check the financial situation of each group.
- This way, it is possible to mount a production while the artist does not have the money; one works with the money that is available. Budgets are being made in this respect, taking into account everyone's needs and with the possibility to recuperate the money once the project is finished and ready to be staged.
- This might sound irrelevant. *However it is [not], since everyone poses great trust in the productions of others and is willing to take risks without being directly involved in the artistic product.*
- This gives a clear and important example of how we work and the idea of the organisation. As you can see, this is more than — and different from — what is expected from a regular theater management office.'²

² <https://blog.kunsten.be/schaamte-vzw-the-primordial-artist-run-organisation-1978-1987-8092faa8c7fe>

‘THE WORK STRUCTURE ALSO DETERMINES THE WORK’

Other ‘functions’ in the performing arts ecosystem were also tackled collectively: co-production and presentation (via the emergence of co-producing venues, which we call arts centres), as well as documentation, research and advocacy, and international networking. In this way, the conditions for contemporary performing arts changed. The Flemish government followed, and while budgets increased slowly but surely, new policy frameworks were developed. The Performing Arts Decree of 1993 opened up to contemporary performing arts and interdisciplinary work. It anchored the Flemish Wave of the eighties in the funding system. Support from international networks, festivals and venues also created production capacity and touring opportunities.

For the topic at hand it is interesting to highlight how artists responded to these changing conditions. Many of the ‘eighties generation’ quickly developed their own structures, tailored to the demands of their work. In 1988, SCHAAMTe vzw merged with the Kaaitheater festival to become a producing and presenting organisation. By then, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker had founded Rosas and Jan Lauwers had created Needcompany. The structures they set up marked a paradigm shift in the way Flemish theatre organised itself. In the words of Marianne van Kerkhoven (1946-2013), an influential dramaturg who also critically guided the work of this generation, at that moment a ‘situation was reached in which it became possible to give professionalism not only a social but finally also an artistic interpretation’:

‘One of the main levers for this was the awareness that the work structure also determines the work, and that the way one wishes to work is not only an expression of the artistic credo, but at the same time also presupposes a position in society, a “way of being in the world”. [...] Artistic freedom means allowing the options taken in the creative work to penetrate to all parts of the structure in which one creates. Which means, among [other things]: determining how, where and when you want to work and with whom, determining how you want to interact with your audience, determining how you want to talk with your (co)producer, determining how, where and why you want to play somewhere, determining what the accents will be in promoting your work, etc. This perspective views and treats the theatre company as a whole. The organisation, as an expression of the creative work, must therefore have the same flexibility as the creative work.’

In other words: artistic autonomy not only concerned what you presented on stage, it was also linked to all the conditions related to organising the artistic practice. These conditions will impact, directly or indirectly, the work that you can make. That was the basic principle at the time.

Today, many performing artists feel that this principle has been lost. It is precisely against this background that we must situate the renewed interest in self-organisation.

FLEMISH FAST FORWARD: A CHANGING ECOLOGY

Indeed, previous research by Flanders Arts Institute has shown that the position of performing artists in relation to artistic production has changed significantly. *Growth*, *interconnectedness* and *individualisation* are key terms. Our Performing Arts Database (<http://data.kunsten.be>) keeps track of all performing arts productions in which Flemish organisations were involved.

When looking at development over time, we see different trends: since the eighties, the number of productions in our database has grown annually (x4) and the number of artists working in these productions has grown as well (x3). More and more, these artists and organisations collaborate on a project-by-project basis, with international horizons. At the start of the nineties, more than 80% of the productions in our database were simply developed by one organisation. Today, more than 70% of the productions are co-productions by different partners – occasionally up to twenty different organisations! – of which most are international co-productions.

These are indicators of a profound system change. The production modes in the entire sector of the performing arts have changed. There is an increasing degree of networking and interdependency through co-production between organisations. Producers seem to work less and less in a vacuum. 'Connect and collaborate' – within an international network – appears to be the catchphrase. Subsidies are no longer exclusively mobilised to make and distribute productions. They are increasingly considered as a tool in the search for – domestic and/or foreign – partners and co-producers.

While these shifts certainly create a number of opportunities for artists, there are also downsides. Throughout the late nineties and early 2000s – by which time the number of artists had already grown substantially – it became quite clear that the 1980s ideal (each artist with his or her own company) was attainable for only a very small number of people. Today, we see a diversity of career models. Some artists do still work on a permanent basis in structurally funded organisations, but most operate on a more insecure project-by-project basis.

Strategies to support the work of artists under these changing conditions shifted as well. The typology of supporting structures began to diversify, and, partly as an answer to the critique that the arts centres offered less space for experimentation and development, more workspaces and arts laboratories (e.g. Les Bains::Connective, Nadine, and Workspace Brussels) were founded to fill the gap. In the first decade of the 2000s, several alternative management bureaus were launched, for example Margarita Production, Caravan Production and Mokum (Margarita Production and Mokum later merged to become Hiro). These structures were embraced relatively quickly by Flemish arts policy and received structural arts funding. The artistic workspaces and alternative management and production offices not only came into being in order to meet the needs of new generations of artists, but also contributed to the boom of the performing arts community in the late 1990s and the 2000s. Many performing artists in Western Europe are highly mobile and active in different cities and countries. For many of them, Brussels serves as a temporary base from which to work and travel. For some, it became their home.

To sum up, within a relatively short space of time, there was both an influx of international artists who worked flexibly, and the emergence of several new types of organisation aiming to meet their artistic needs. Over the past twenty years, an important development in the institutional field has been that of the functional specialisation of (generally small) structures which make things possible for artists in a dense and collaborative network. In this way, a large part of the performing arts sector began functioning as a 'modular system'. Together, the existing arts organisations form a 'kit' of support facilities (for artistic research, production, management, sales, reflection, etc.), where a suitable constellation or combination is sought around each artist and each project. The catchphrase in the quest for suitable collaborations here is 'tailor-made work'.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE THE ARTISTS?

'MAKING A LIVING IN A SYSTEM THAT DEMANDS THIS KIND OF FLEXIBILITY'

These developments put pressure on the principles of artistic autonomy and organisational development put into practice by the eighties generation and made explicit by Marianne van Kerkhoven. The 'artistic freedom' of the 1980s – with its aesthetic and social dimensions anchored in structures based around the oeuvre of one artist – is a pipe dream for many makers. If the premise is that the working structure determines the work, this means that artistic freedom is compromised in a situation where artists are dependent on a growing number of intermediary organisations. In a lecture entitled 'Reflections of a Grasshopper', in addition to touching on the positive, performing artist Diederik Peeters outlined the negative aspects of the life and work of job-hopping freelance artists:

'I have performed a lot, created a lot, travelled a lot and learned a lot – and it was damn fun. But in the meantime this freelance 'shredder' is getting on in years and after a good fifteen years of young and promising flexibility he has gradually become tired of his own 'availability'. Perhaps in the end, that's something more suitable for fresh young spring chickens. (And anyhow, this job-hopping is nothing more than a way of making a living in a system that demands this kind of flexibility.) But in fact it substantially hinders my view on a perspective for the future. Just try and build up something while skipping back and forth from project to project. Instead of reinventing and proving myself for every project time and again, today I have the desire to sink my teeth into my work. I desire, in other words, a better balance between this damned flexibility which is demanded of me all the time, and a minimum of continuity and stability.'

That dream of a stable art practice is far off for many artists. It presupposes a sound socio-economic position and depends on the organisational framework and relationships that the artist develops. Having sufficient time (and income) to develop an artistic vision and practice, efficiently structuring multiple activities, receiving wages for work, building up social security rights, and establishing continuity and a supportive network are all crucial. The combination of an increasing number of jobs and projects, however, does put pressure on one's own artistic development. Less time and space is available for 'autonomous' art creation, in personal situations increasingly characterised by hyper-mobility, social insecurity and precariousness.

In 'Freedom and Frenzy', a keynote speech about the transnational careers of contemporary performing artists (2016), curator and producer Ash Bulayev presented some illustrations of the reality in which a lot of performing arts live and work today. Here I quote just the examples of Maria Hassabi and Trajal Harrell, both artists who up until recently were considered NYC-based artists, working within contemporary dance practice.

'In the past few years, both have chosen to leave NYC and to relocate to Europe. A decision that was not taken lightly, for in Maria's case, NYC has been her home and community for over twenty years. Right now both Maria and Trajal are essentially art nomads, calling Belgium, France, Greece and [the] US their temporary bases. Both of these artists are objectively successful in their field, with major commission[s] and presentations all over the world. Neither of them have any structural funding from any of the countries I just listed, nor any institutional association. They are not attached [to] or supported by any theatre or production house for [any] extended period of time, and their production model is spread over multiple continents with a patchwork (a very successful one indeed) of co-productions, commissioning, residencies, and private and public funding. If described to an outsider their professional lives and tempo are truly manic, illustrating [the] life of a freelance artist.'

In conclusion, Bulayev said: 'There are bleak realities behind the façade of some performing and visual artist's successful international careers: the manic, frenzied life, the insecurity and fear of hyper-mobility and residency- or studio-hopping. What are some of the strategies to have more sustainability in artists' working conditions? Band-aid solutions might be short-sighted. It is time for a radical re-imagining of the system.'

Indeed, that is a current thread in many experiments and reflections about the self-organisation or self-governance of artists. First, there is the explicit framing of strategies to *create more sustainable working conditions*. Second, the hope or the wish that these experiments are not mere survival strategies, but might herald a new profound paradigm shift, making the position of artists in the field more sustainable.

PAVING THE WAY FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT?

‘A RADICAL REIMAGINING OF THE SYSTEM’

But how can this be achieved? What will this bright, new, alternative system look like? How to start a paradigm shift? This might at first seem complicated, since strengthening the position of artists in a changing ecosystem can be regarded as a ‘wicked problem’. But there is also an opportunity here to look at some of the models used in other domains when reflecting on sustainability or the need to transition. This is what, to take one example, ‘The School of System Change’ – an organisation that helps companies, organisations and sectors to develop strategies and change processes for a more sustainable future – has been working on. We can see how they approach matters, and then try to translate this to our own ‘wicked problem’.

How do you change a system? A first step is that you make a *system diagnosis*. This in itself is never simple, as when dealing with ‘wicked problems’ it is always difficult to define or pinpoint the issue, since by definition there are as many perspectives as there are stakeholders. You need to unravel the system as a whole. That is a first step.

But a good diagnosis is not enough. The next step is to *develop a strategy* after considering a range of options. Tackling everything at once never works; an integral approach is desirable but crippling. It is advisable to deliberately pick one approach, and then to work incrementally. Just do it.

The third step is *innovation*: the design of new practices and new work models. ‘Wicked problems’ do not just ask for the application of existing, technical solutions. They also demand change in terms of values. A culture change, you could say. That is why, the fourth step, collaboration and engagement is important. You never solve a system problem alone. The turnaround can only come when there is a diversity of perspectives, to tackle the wicked problem. Lastly, *leadership and learning* can help to upscale experiments and ultimately shift values.

SHARING RESOURCES: FIVE FORMS OF CAPITAL

On this model, a system shift towards new and more sustainable ways of working in the performing arts may already be happening. System diagnosis is what we have done above, and its also what many artists and arts workers have been doing over the last couple of years, during all those conferences and publications on precarity, the position of artists in the artistic ecosystem, and collaborative strategies. What is even better: there is not only reflection and research, there is also action. So many individuals, organisations, artists and art workers from across Europe are responding with a multitude of initiatives, spanning special funds for artists with families, artist lobbying groups, alternative currency systems, space sharing platforms, fair practice labels, and more.

So, are these examples of self-organisation of artists heralding a system change? I don't know. But it might be a start to have a look at existing innovative models to see the strategic choices being made there and check which systemic issues they are addressing. As indeed, throughout these experiments different strategies can be seen to share different kinds of resources or – if you like – different forms of 'capital'.

- **Sharing economic capital.** A number of initiatives are aimed at *creating more sustainable (economic) working conditions for artists*. One can think of the alternative organisational models developed for instance by artist-run organisations such as L'Amicale de Production, SPIN, Anyone, Jubilee or others who share resources and economic capital. There is also an increasing number of online peer-to-peer platforms (which also share non-financial resources, such as rehearsal space).
- **Sharing human capital.** Other initiatives are aimed at *strengthening the 'peer space'* where artists meet and exchange. Think for instance of residency spaces such as Jan Ritsema's Performing Arts Forum, or locally based artist networks such as State of the Arts in Brussels. 019 in Ghent is an artist-run exhibition, performance and work space occupying a former welding factory in Ghent, supported by the city. These spaces, territories and networks have an empowering effect on artists because experiences are exchanged amongst like-minded people dealing with similar situations.
- **Sharing intellectual capital.** Know-how is also being exchanged and developed. Many artist-run organisations are not only vessels for producing artistic work; they also set up research activities, and organise workshops and debates about the position of artists in the field and of flex workers in society. Take SPIN, for instance: they organise debates, workshops, research and other reflective activities aimed at peers and a wider audience. In Caveat!!! and other projects developed by Ronny Heiremans and Kathleen Vermeir (who co-run the aforementioned Jubilee), the working conditions for artists are being dealt with and discussed.

- **Sharing symbolic capital.** The results of these exchanges are sometimes also published and distributed in the broader field in order to raise awareness about the position of artists in the field and – more broadly – the position of flex workers in society. Raising awareness, visibility or recognition is the aim of different artist initiatives, ranging from campaigns, such as the Engagement Arts website (a campaign against sexism in the arts) or Art Leaks, to advocacy organisations such as the Koalition der freien Szene in Berlin.
- **Sharing social capital.** A totally different strategy for strengthening the position of artists is to move out of the artistic domain and pair up with partners from other fields. This of course is nothing new. In Brussels, several artists, arts workers and artist collectives have over the past decades experimented with setting up projects in collaboration with, for example, social organisations, trying to have an impact on very specific localities and to find resources and meaningful exchange outside of the art world. In recent years, we have seen a renewed interest for artists to step out of the artistic sphere and connect with a diversity of citizens and organisations, in order to create spaces or territories where new urban dynamics and interactions can develop (such as the non-profit Toestand vzw). Co-creation with the community is what K.A.K., a local artists' alliance in Brussels, has been doing for a number of years. With her ongoing project Espacetous, Einat Tuchman aims to initiate the exchange of skills in a Molenbeek neighbourhood via artistic processes and scenographic and dramaturgical interventions.

BUZZWORD AND REVOLUTION?

So, what will be the impact of all these experiments and initiatives. Are 'artist-run' or 'self-organisation' buzzwords? Yes, they are: there is indeed a lot of discourse and reflection about how we work together. But our perspective on system change helps to keep our hopes up: this appears to be one of many strategies to strengthen the position of artists in a changing ecosystem. Will this in the end lead to a revolution, the 'paradigm shift' anticipated by so many artists and arts workers operating in difficult, even exhausting circumstances? We'll see! System change takes a lot of time. But all initiatives can make a difference.

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