IT SEEMS THAT THE RESIDENCY IS A STAPLE OF ARTISTIC CREATION. THE PROMISE IS OF TIME AND SPACE AWAY FROM EVERYDAY LIFE TO FOCUS ON ARTISTIC REFLECTION – BUT IS THIS PROMISE REALLY TRUE?

IN THIS TRANSCRIPT OF HIS TALK AT DANSEHALLERNE, ASHBULAYEV, DIRECTOR OF ONASSIS AIR, DRAWS ON A HOST OF VIEWPOINTS TO QUESTION THE RECEIVED TRUTHS OF THE ARTISTIC RESIDENCY. ARE ARTISTS BEING FORCED TO TRAVEL TO ACCESS GENERIC SPACES THEY WOULD PREFER TO HAVE ON THEIR DOORSTEP? HOW DO WE RECONCILE WORKING INTERNATIONALLY WITH OUR ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES, OR WITH A GROWING BACKLASH AGAINST GLOBALISATION? IS ‘INTERNATIONAL WORK’ A MEANINGFUL CONCEPT IF AUDIENCES ALL RESEMBLE ONE ANOTHER? IS IT TIME FOR A COMPLETE OVERHAUL?
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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This is a talk about the role of residency programmes and artistic research within the context of contemporary performing and time-based visual arts.

That might seem like a rather specialised and narrow focus, something that most likely the majority of people don’t really want, or need, to think about. But when I was researching this article, I was constantly asking myself whether what I was reading, writing and thinking about would be relevant, or at least interesting to, for example, a friend of mine who is a professor of ergonomics and an avid sailor, or my partner who is a visual artist herself but who chose not to go the usual path of creating and producing her work. And of course, then, whether it was truly interesting to me. Would I be interested to spend 30 minutes hearing about what I will be talking about?

Basically, I have started to question more and more the reasons why I do what I do, why I spend endless hours reading about existing models for supporting artists, about European or Brazilian or Greek arts policy, why I go through hundreds of announcements from e-flux, or obsess about making yet another residency programme in Athens that will open this coming year – and everything else that feels like it makes me who I am. Most of the waking hours of my adult life have been spent making, producing, and supporting contemporary performance and live art. So I am wondering: if I was
to take all of this away, what is left? What do I care about? What do I find urgent? Interesting? Fulfilling?

Twenty years ago I used to run a small black-box theatre space, Resistance Theater. It was made by several of my closest friends in the mid 90s, in the now gentrified area of Crown Heights in Brooklyn, in New York City. Looking back at those years, I believe that all I have learned about life, theatre, activism, community, friendship, arts policy, allegiances, fighting – basically all that makes me, me – was learned in that tiny space we ran for a few years. During those years I cared for so many causes. The Free Mumia activism campaign, and the Reclaim the Streets movement, and what was happening then in Chiapas, and the role of the WTO in late 90s, and LGBTQ rights. I cared and fought and protested and marched.

Twenty years later, I am slowly coming to the realisation that all of my previous, as well as fairly recent, identity politics are kind of becoming irrelevant. What I mean is that what I believe in, what I feel I represent, or the causes in which I believed, are rather miniscule and not very urgent if I compare them to the BIG issues. We all bloody know that if we don’t start a radical change of how we relate to our planet, we will all be screwed very, very soon. And we all know that if we do not radically change how our governments (representative democracies in best case scenarios) implement what we the voters reluctantly entrust them to do, we are going to enter into the irreversible neoliberal inferno very soon. To put it simply, I no longer care so much about what I am (gay or straight, or a minority, or an immigrant, or refugee), but I do think more and more about how I as a human, as a white man, as a curator, producer and arts professional, contribute to resolve the global issues beyond identity politics, beyond my identity as the epicentre.

And here comes the most blatant hypocrisy in relation to all I have been saying till now: I am standing in front of you after having flown on a red-eye flight from New York City, and having just arrived in Copenhagen a few hours ago. I will be in Copenhagen for less than 24 hours, and the only reason I am here is to give this talk. Before this I was in New York City, a place I lived for fifteen years, where my parents and old friends and colleagues still live, for only four days, and the only reason I was there was to assist with interviews for a position the Onassis Foundation, a foundation I recently started working for, is interviewing for. So no time seeing friends or family or even walking around a city that used be my home for many years.

I guess you can see the contradictions by now. I am saying my identity politics are waning in enthusiasm, and I am more and more
concerned, for example, with the global issues of environmental crisis, and yet I have just flown a shitload of thousands of miles, to give one talk that could have been pre-recorded or printed and read by you, and in New York to sit in a room and listen to interviews for which ultimately I was not so integral.

So I think that I need to be much more strict with myself. Strict about what I accept, or do not, for what reason, to what degree, and in the name of who.

What follows is my way to think about all this, about what we in this room do, and why and how we do it, through the reading and thinking I have done in preparation for this talk. So bare with me, because I will be mentioning and quoting quite a few people. And I don’t think there will be any prescribed solution, but hopefully some of these thoughts will give you a kind of sketch of what I, and many of my and your peers, are concerned with.

**TIME**

*Time.* I think we can all agree that one of the major societal problems we have created in the Western world is our alarming relationship to time. Or to be more precise, to our diminishing free time. And time, time seen as a resource, is what I think residency and artistic research programmes and spaces offer to artists, curators, thinkers, and scholars. And it seems to me that the notion of offering and thinking about time spent away from the burdens and responsibilities of production, is no longer a progressive concept, specific to the art world. My smartphone is supposedly smart because it offers me time-management tools. It saves time for me. There are thousands of lifestyle, fashion, gadget-like solutions that offer me a hope of carving out a bit of time to feel, to think, and to consciously exist in the immediate environment our bodies are in at a particular moment. And all of these ‘solutions’ seem to be decisively failing.

So one of the promises of an artistic research residency is to provide time and space for reflection. Reflection on methodology, practice, other cultures, different aesthetics, contextual and critical discourse with other participants, and other big notions we all don’t seem to find time for within the cogs of the contemporary art world and our lives in general.
And yet, a lot of artists are saying ‘bullshit’, and calling out the discrepancies in this promise of an artist residency to carve out some free time. Eleanor Bauer, an American choreographer and artist who has lived for many years in Belgium, got it spot-on I think when she wrote some years ago:

‘So we travel very far to make work inside of empty rooms that are not so different from the empty rooms in the city we just left behind, maybe a grey marley floor instead of a black one, maybe there is a big annoying column in the middle of it, but one thing you know for sure is that the view outside the window is different. And how does all that is outside that window change what is made? Or does it only manifest itself in our personal lives? How is one connected to the world while in the room of one’s own? If one puts the Mac of one’s own inside the room of one’s own, one becomes virtually connected way outside the window, but what about just outside the window? Do we care where we work or not? Can we think critically about the relevance of our presence in one place or another? Shall we challenge ourselves to include what is outside the window? Can we take hold of the international network and use it to our advantage instead of running around the globe chasing after the money and the space? Is it our obligation to move ourselves around all the time, as living breathing art objects or cultural ambassadors and messengers? Can we challenge the institutions to move more money than people every now and then?’

Another, more poetic perhaps, example of thinking with all that lies outside of the window of an artist studio, is from an artist I respect very much, Francis Alÿs, who for many years has lived in Mexico City. In 1997, Francis Alÿs made a work entitled Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing. Basically you see Francis pushing a giant ice block through the streets of Mexico City until it melts into nothing. In the beginning the weight of this giant ice slab is enormous, and a few hours later you see his body upright, playfully kicking a tiny pebble of ice after it has been slowly melted by the hot sun and friction on the asphalt. In his usual non-didactic way, what Francis Alÿs shows us is that sometimes all you need is a block of ice to experience your city, yourself in it, and all that exists outside of one’s own window.

But in order to do this, to take time and experience a new environment, a new culture, a new city, the food, the tempo, the light, the language, architecture, fashion, people, you need TIME. But it is not enough to just have time while you are in residence at some institution. What one needs is to pause all else that exists in the other place you just came from. The life, the studio, the practice, the people, the obligations, the institutional or funding requirements, the application deadlines for the next residency, and so many other to-dos you leave behind when you arrive in a residency programme somewhere – all these things do not stop, they rarely go on pause.
So what are we to do? In the essay ‘New Institutionalism Revisited’ Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger write about Charles Esche, one of the most established and outspoken curators and thinkers who was, and still is, busy rethinking what art institutions can and should look like. Kolb and Flückiger write: ‘Charles Esche perceived his role as curator at the Rooseum in Malmo? from 2000 to 2005 as an attempt to turn the art institution into a place where artistic work would create other forms of democratic participation and thus pave the way to a “reimagination of the world.” This ideal was apparent in the titles of Esche’s exhibitions: his first exhibition at the Rooseum in 2001 was entitled, *There is gonna be some trouble, a whole house will need rebuilding*, a Morrissey quote that points to the direction Esche wanted to explore in his new position, which he saw as a tool to explore the key question: “can art institutions be a useful democratic device [...] to install other forms of democracy than the ones we have?”

**WAVES**

What Charles Esche, and so many other brilliant curators and scholars associated with the institutional critique wave of the 1990s and 2000s were busy with was rethinking the role of our public and private art institutions – their responsibilities to society at large, and

of course to the artists who they are tasked to support. And right before that, one decade before, again in Central Europe, another wave of change took place: the Flemish Wave of the 1980s began with the artists themselves, and within one decade had proposed a re-imagination of what arts policy could look like. Of course the Flemish Wave was more limited in scope, due to the fact that they were dealing with a fairly small region of Flanders. But this tiny region has undergone what we now recognise as one of the most progressive examples of arts policy change in the performing arts in recent decades. And then there are examples of painful arts policy waves, such as the American case of the ‘NEA Four’ (90s performance artists Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes), whose proposed grants from the United States National Endowment for the Arts (the NEA) were vetoed and revoked by the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, John Frohnmayer, in June 1990, because of a comedy performance sketch that John Fleck did with a roll of toilet paper. The artists won their case in court in 1993 and were awarded amounts equal to the grant money in question, but in response the NEA, under pressure from US Congress, stopped funding individual artists. And perhaps the NEA Four sparked something positive: another wave of arts policy change that I experienced myself in the form of a vibrant down-town performance and theatre scene in NYC in the late 90s.

I truly believe that we are now overdue for yet another all encompassing, holistic, structural change in arts policies for Europe and beyond. We are almost two decades away from the birth of the European Cultural Commission, and the establishment of the first cycle of the EU Culture 2000 programme. Since then our daily life, our way of working, of living, of flying, of communicating, and perhaps of creating, has changed drastically. In 2000 the Internet was still in its infancy. Facebook, Instagram, Linkedin, Skype, Whatsapp, Dropbox, EasyJet, RyanAir did not exist. The notion of internationalisation in the art world was still very binary and simplistic. And yet today, in 2018, we in the art world are still functioning under the premises of this arts policy of twenty years ago. The EU networks, the EU funding priorities, the national funding assessments, and all we deal with on a daily basis as artists, curators and institutions, are functioning according to the world views of such a distant and different past.

So, what I believe is that it is about time for a revamp, a kind of starting from scratch. And I think that large sweeping changes can come from looking at very local initiatives, most of them self-organised by artists themselves. Because on the European level things are scarly
lethargic. For example, in a very recent interview, Walter Zampieri (the Head of the Cultural Policy Unit of the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission – damn it is a looooong name) was asked if culture is peripheral or at the heart of the European project? Zampieri’s answer: ‘The Gothenburg Communication after the summit of November 2017 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.’ So in 2017 it was the first time that our highest EU officials agreed that culture is important. Did it really need a whole summit to come up with this rudimentary realisation?

A FLEXIBLE ETHOS

A few years ago I participated in a symposium, Reframing the International, organised by Flanders Arts Institute. One of the speakers was an artist, Pieter De Buysser. His talk struck me for its level of self-reflection, admission of complicity, and honesty. Pieter said: ‘Things [in today’s arts policy] have shifted rapidly. From critical and edgy movements attacking corporate capitalism and neoliberal globalisation, they’ve turned into unification movements behind the flag of a nation. What do the Arts have to do with that? Nothing. Anyone who thinks the Arts can do something efficiently is being as ridiculous as a chicken that flies over the soup in which she will be cooked. But nevertheless, what the Arts can do is to call things by their name. Not the way they are, but the way they should be. And by giving them a new name, we are giving them a new world. Nationalism is to politics what incest is to ethics. But let’s face it and let’s name it: all over the world people are rallying against globalisation, while in the arts we’re gathering in nice buildings to discuss how to further globalise. That’s what these international networking events offer; they are meant to enable the arts to move around freely, looking for an expanding market for our products – this is what chases us all over the planet. Always hunting for new contacts, new networks, new opportunities. This, according to Karl Marx, describes the successful life of the bourgeoisie. A large majority of people in the Arts are aware of the very urgent need to

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start with other daily practices, but the ecological footprint of an international tour and presentation is enormous. We all know that. But we really want to travel. But we can certainly commit ourselves to finding more responsible ways of doing it.3

Jeroen Peeters, a writer, dramaturg and performer also living and working in Belgium says it in another way:

‘The idea of the artist or cultural professional who engages in the production of meaning on behalf of many conflicts with social and ethical issues about environmental justice. The consequences of the climate crisis will, after all, first and primarily affect the world’s poorer regions. In our excessive mobility, how long can we close our eyes to that? […]

Residencies offer an opportunity to retreat, to work without everyday interferences or too many distractions. On closer examination, travelling to distant places for these residencies is perhaps not that useful, because the same circumstances can also be found closer to home. Choreographer Martin Nachbar notes, “Once the novelty of travelling and of being-elsewhere has worn off and working abroad has become a habit, then the side effects come to the fore and signs of fatigue appear. Especially when the research isn’t bound to the place of residence, there’s no reason why one couldn’t do the research at home.” 4

Jeroen Peeters asks, ‘What would slower travel, for example by train, produce in terms of experience and embodied knowledge?’ His proposal is a flexible ethos for international mobility, in which ‘travelling less and differently means always considering whether or not an overseas or out-of-country trip is worth the effort, actively refusing invitations, and in principle taking the train for international journeys and flying only as an exception to the rule’. In addition, he seeks out ways of ‘fattening out’ an engagement, in order to remain in a given place for longer and to be able to undertake different interactions (performance, post-performance discussions, workshops, being able to experience a city and so on), or expanding a tour with different performance venues.

Another view on the same issue is from Albert Bartlett (1923-2013), an American physicist who specialised in the study of the exponential function in mathematics and was at the same time also a specialist in population growth. Bartlett refers to the idea of ‘sustainable growth’ as a contradiction in terms. “Smart growth” destroys the environment. “Dumb growth” destroys the

3 From the talk ‘Hello Aunt Cécile, hello police officer: welcome and join in’ given by Pieter De Buysser as part of Flanders Arts Institute’s research and development project Reframing the International: www.kunsten.be/dossiers/internationaal-samenwerken-2/rtifacts/7568-hello-aunt-c-cile-hello-police-officer-welcome-and-join-in
4 From the talk ‘Transition Exercises for a More Sustainable Mobility’ given by Jeroen Peeters for Reframing the International: www.sarma.be/docs/3265
environment. The only difference is that “smart growth” does it with good taste. It’s like booking passage on the Titanic. Whether you go first-class or economy, the result is the same.  

Taru Elfving, curator, research and director of Contemporary Art Archipelago (CAA), who I will be quoting quite a lot today, wrote in the essay 'Residencies and future cosmopolitics' that 'Residencies are also plugged into the intensified international art world circulation today that has led its discourse and community to be always simultaneously everywhere and nowhere.'

**RETREAT**

In the same essay, Taru also writes about residencies in their classical sense, viewed as a ‘retreat’. ‘Retreat as an act of withdrawing from what is difficult, dangerous or disagreeable; a process of receding from a position or state attained; a place of privacy or safety; and a period of group withdrawal for prayer, meditation or study. Retreat refers thus to a place and a time but also to an act.’

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5 Bartlett, Al, ‘Regionwide Planning Will Make the Problems Worse’: www.albartlett.org/articles/art1998sep05.html
Taru goes on:

‘We need to ask: what do these engagements do and leave behind? Who and what do they serve? Can they have any local impact or global effects beyond the value production in the sphere of the international art world? What does it take to live up to the promise of residencies as retreats – from the pressures of production and even of political persecution; for artistic development rather than mere networking and CV-building; for cross-cultural dialogue and collaborations rather than “site-specific” productions for global circulation that exhaust local communities as resources? [...]’

Travel may not always mean long geographical distances. Retreat may then be a withdrawal from some kind of action and interaction, not necessarily literally retreating from the centre – from cities or structures of the art world – but radically challenging the very notion of the centre – through retreat from traditions of thought or habitual patterns of practice.’

Benjamin Verdonck, another incredible artist and human, also speaks of his view on challenging how the centre and periphery appear: ‘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 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. Aren’t subsidies also 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.’

Rósa Ómarsdóttir, a choreographer and dancer, speaks of peripheries through the notion of second-hand knowledge. She describes second-hand knowledge ‘as the game of Chinese whispers, when 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. 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.’

7 From Benjamin Verdonck’s ‘personal statement’ published as part of Reframing the International: www.kunsten.be/dossiers/internationaal-samenwerken-2/rtifacts/8860-personal-statements-2
8 From Rósa Ómarsdóttir’s ‘personal statement’ published as part of Reframing the International: www.kunsten.be/dossiers/internationaal-samenwerken-2/rtifacts/8860-personal-statements-2
Another thought that touches on the contradictions of what artist residencies offer and demand, comes from another artist I love and respect very much, Sarah Vanhee. Sarah writes: ‘I am convinced that artists have fobbed off their pioneering, leadership role into what I would call negative internationalisation. You are presumed to be exceedingly flexible, preferably young, always ready to travel, with no family and not too many commitments. In short, you must cultivate the illusion that you can cut all your connections, that at any moment you can cut yourself off and become a totally cut-out figurine. It is being sold and promoted as an attitude of boundless freedom, but what is really behind it is an ideologically motivated demand for extreme flexibility, which makes your existence vulnerable and precarious. I think it makes us incredibly weaker, because it turns us into kind of pulled-apart, detached cosmopolitans. Our travelling is not so very different from that of an economic migrant who is forced to travel out of necessity. It makes everything very fleeting and temporary. It detaches us from our own environment, given that it is difficult to maintain friendships and relationships in the places where we live. And that is also not possible in those other places we travel to. Internationalisation does allow for the expansion of relationships, for making friends and sharing a discourse across borders, but at the same time, it conceals a great danger for the political dimension of art and of being an artist.’

'HERE' AND 'THERE'

And then I am always faced with the issue of who has access to all this infrastructure. Hicham Khalidi & Dirk De Wit said that, ‘Here and there are closely interrelated and identity is something plural. These relations are loaded with colonial histories and feelings of superiority.’

Taru Elfving asks:

‘Who can travel? Who can choose to not travel? For what reasons, by what means, with what cost? This all has to do with access – to movement across geopolitical borders, to material resources as well as knowledge and discourse, to funds and support structures, to time and space. The increasing inequality of access has become obvious also within Europe, but it is amplified manifold in the global circulation. International artist

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residencies can offer safe spaces for hospitality, generosity and sharing rather than ever-increasing competition for survival. They also make us question what it means to be offered temporary residence today. This comes with promises, possibilities and responsibilities. After all, many do not have the privilege to be hosted and given residence while also being able to return back home when the time is up. To be a resident calls for us to think of how to be other than a tourist consuming novel experiences and environments, or an explorer in search of new resources to extract, or an introvert hermit momentarily retreating to elsewhere. How can (artist) residencies offer safe spaces and escape routes as temporary retreats from political tensions, market forces, or patterns of thought? […]

What does it mean to be mobile at the time of enforced migrations, reinforced borders, growing xenophobia, escalating climate crisis, and mass extinctions? Who has access to global circulation? How and what processes of value production does it take part in? Who and what do travel and, for example, ‘networking’ actually serve? What is the cost of being on the move – ecologically, socially, personally, intellectually? When and how can travel be considered sustainable?  

And then there are reasons for going to, or perhaps staying in, places that offer plurality. Sarah Vanhee says that she ‘always felt better in spaces where there is plurality, where there is not simply a single perspective or background. I have an intuitive distrust of environments that are too uniform. I find them suffocating and uninspiring. For me, internationalisation has nothing to do with expanding your action radius beyond the limits of the city or the country where you live, but with a recognition of what is plural and international within that city or country, in short, within your own environment.’

And Sarah continues, saying: ‘… my work can take place within the phenomena of arts centres and theatres that are internationally interconnected. But that also means that I can be on stage in Brussels, then Timișoara, and Tallinn, and that, every time, I am standing before a kind of same, predominantly ‘bobo’ (with bohemian values and leading bourgeois lives) audience. The geographical location does not make much difference. It is not about geography, but about demographics, about the question of which population groups you can or cannot appeal to… For me, it is much more interesting to work for an extended time at a single location, in an arts centre, or in a tiny village, than to be in front of audiences that are supposedly international, but are in fact interchangeable.’

Pier Luigi Sacco, a thinker who was one of the first ones to relate the word culture with the word economics, says: ‘... 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 mechanisms of urban gentrification. 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.’

Between 2015 and 2018, I decided to put a self-imposed restriction on myself, to not work for any institutions. Now that this time is over and I am again working for and with institutions, I do realise how liberating it was to speak on behalf of myself, or those I found the urge to speak with. But I think my responsibility is to accept the fact that in order to make any kind of possible structural change, it is impossible to ignore institutions. And yet how I work with institutions is to a great degree up to me to decide. There are strategies, already known and yet to be discovered, that can be used to push our institutions to become more humane, malleable and responsive. Again quoting Taru Elfving when she explores slowing down as one such strategy: ‘Slowing down may then actually be an acceleration or intensification of our critical and creative capacities of response – of “response-ability”. It calls for experiments with forms and formulations of community, collectivity, and co-existence that work to break with institutional hierarchies...’ 

And Sarah Vanhee gives another strategy: ‘There is some violence in the relations the art institution produces and we have grown used to it. Staff working for the institution seem to be constantly fighting: fighting for money, fighting to be original, fighting to get things done in time, fighting to defend the place of art in society, fighting for audience, fighting for legitimacy which often means fighting for the pretension of being unique, which often means fighting with other institutions. The people working for the institutions feel like they do everything for art and the artists. Meanwhile the artist feels like she’s the last one on the ladder. The one who has to hold up her hand and be happy if she gets something. Paradoxically, the main reason these art institutions exist and their core function is supposed to be supporting artists. What if we would pause for a moment and re-think this function: to support artists? How does the institution do that? If I say there is a violence in the relations the institution produces, I don’t solely mean the above mentioned collective suffering, I also mean there is a fundamental political question about how this support takes place, mostly in the form of “offering” and “giving”. Because maybe the artist does not want to “receive” certain things but could suggest herself how she would like to be supported by the institution. Not only to be able to practice her art in a good way, but also to support how she thinks this art could resonate with the world. Hardly ever has any art institution asked me what I would need. As an open question. Not in the sense of what I need in terms of studio or technical means...

or budget... No. What do you need as an artist to be able to perform your artistic practice now in this world, and how could we work on this together? How would it be if we stop thinking of the institution as a brand, but consider it as a tool, a device for usage? There are some good examples in that direction, I had the luck to experience some. The relations change when projects can develop through an open, eye-level dialogue instead of a giving-and-taking directed to filling out streamlined formats. But more often, when I challenged the institution to work as a tool it turned out to be very difficult, because most institutions struggle to function outside their usual patterns.'

One current example of an institution that reconsiders their relationship to how it supports artists is Netwerk Aalst, currently directed by Els Silvrants-Barclay and Pieternel Vermoortel. In their first mission statement they write: ‘How to manage this integral approach to mediation and support on an institutional level is the challenge we have chosen to engage with for our first two-year programme. We are launching a two-year episode centred on six artists (Pedro Barateiro, Ghislaine Leung, Daniela Ortiz, Imogen Stidworthy, Jozef Wouters, and Andros Zins-Browne) with whom we will collaborate in search of a flexible institutional arrangement capable of responding to their needs and ambitions. To paraphrase the artist Myriam Van Imschoot: we would rather not start from a position of precarity (which, to be clear, is a reality, albeit a relative one) but from the need for a new “ethics of richness”. How can we forge new and concrete alliances between artists and institutions based on equality, generosity and reciprocity? And in this way arrive at a definite redistribution (of resources, participation and responsibility).’

I truly believe that more and more artists and institutions are realising that our current arts policy system is not functioning as it should. That it is not considering those people – the artists, that is – that it is tasked to support. Nor considering the audiences and communities which artists work in and with – the audiences and communities which institutions are themselves meant to embrace. And I believe that the examples of radical re-imagination and of people actually doing something about our institutional inadequacy come from artist initiatives and self-organised institutions such as PAF in France, Green Park, and the original Embros space in Greece, or Macau in Italy, and Arte Flora in Columbia, and many, many others.

17 From the Netwerk Aalst mission statement, written by Els Silvrants-Barclay and Pieternel Vermoortel: netwerkaalst.be/medias/1508427213-image-1508427213532.pdf
Even though I am now working for a large, private institution, I still believe that the only way we will critically reimagine and create a responsible, responsive, malleable, useful arts policy for artists and the communities which artists work in and with, is through empowering and entrusting both artists and audiences to guide and constantly challenge our institutional policies. We need to get away from the multi-year priorities of arts funding policies that end up being there for decades. For years now there has been a new movement in mostly tech industries, based on the Agile Manifesto. Instead of having long-term goals and plans, many tech companies are now implementing management strategies such as Scrum, which emphasise short-term response planning, and malleable and adaptable management methods. I am not suggesting we start transplanting management styles of the tech industry, but I do think that our current arts policies, European, national, and most of the time local, are not responsive and responsible enough to exactly those people who they are meant to support. I think we need a radical shift in our arts policies. And for me it is so, so clear: empower the artists to make decisions for institutional and governmental arts policies. And then implement those ideas and needs. And let’s stop confusing the need for long-term, structural support for artists, or the concept of basic income for artists, with institutional stagnation because of an inability to adapt fast enough. Institutions can do both, support artists in a long-term and responsible way, while at the same time remaining adaptable and responsive to the changing needs of artists. Both are possible.

Ash Bulayev

Ash Bulayev has worked for 20 years as a curator, producer and artist at the intersection of contemporary performance and ephemeral visual arts. From 2012 to 2015, he was the curator of contemporary performance at EMPAC (New York, USA), launching and presenting works by artists such as Ant Hampton, Eve Sussman and Simon Lee, Kris Verdonck, Ellie Ga, Rabih Mroué, Xavier Le Roy, Lisbeth Gruwez, Ralph Lemon, Clement Layes, Wojtek Ziemilski, Julien Mayor among others.

He is currently Director of Artistic Research: (Inter)national Artist and Curator-in-Residence Program and will develop an inaugural artistic research program and new facility in Athens, as well as implement a new artistic research fellowship programme. The AiR and CiR programmes (slated to be fully functioning by 2019) aim to create a place and a program (Onassis AiR, CiR & Fellowship Program), situated within the mission of the Onassis Future Initiative, in which artists, makers, curators, producers, critics and other cultural and art workers would be able to consider artistic practice broadly and bravely, and where they could build sustainable ways of working that would stay with them long after their affiliation with the Onassis AiR & Fellowship Programme.