

The underside of the iceberg Call for a revalorisation of art practices and institutions

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“Ooooh, Dutch theatre performance world, eat your heart out!”¹ On 14 February 2020, a post by Dutch artist Renée van Trier appeared in my Facebook feed. “Thank you, Arsenic, for this co-production, trust and respect for my art. Very happy to work with you and the great team. The Netherlands can definitely learn from this.” This enthusiastic quote demonstrates the “follow the artist” principle, which has been the consistent mission of the Arsenic since the 1990s and under its different directors, including Thierry Spicher, Sandrine Kuster and, currently, Patrick de Rham: hosting conditions were and are modified each time according to the needs of the artists. This open and curious attitude has meant that over the years the boundaries between different disciplines have become more permeable. The Arsenic, Centre d'art scénique contemporain²—defined as such from its foundation in 1989—is thus in line with the evolution of performing arts in Europe since the 1990s: breaking with the canonised idea of theatre to create interdisciplinary forms. Performing artists no longer make theatre or dance pieces, they also create performances, installations, guided tours, rock concerts, football matches, human libraries and even smartphone applications. Since the mid-90s, different generations of Swiss artists co-produced by the Arsenic, each with their own particular, sometimes offbeat style, such as Velma, Massimo Furlan, Gilles Jobin, Marielle Pinsard, Yan Duyvendak, Nicole Seiler, François Gremaud, Lætitia Dosch, etc., have enjoyed critical success abroad. Porosity between disciplines has become so commonplace that the funding commissions for theatrical and choreographic creation of the City of Lausanne and the Canton of Vaud merged on 1 May 2015, becoming the “Commission for the Performing Arts”.

This hybridity has also led to another way of working in the performing arts: a modular system has emerged in which temporary teams are assembled for each production. Most artists work together in different constellations and are hired on the basis of fixed-term contracts with various organisations. In this way there is less expense and more artistic freedom. However, there is a downside to this creative independence. Though the artist may well have become the neo-liberal worker par excellence—flexible, autonomous and with the capacity to anticipate,

¹ TN: Adapted from the original post, which read: “Ooooh Nederland Theatre Performance world, you can suck a point on this!”. The artist used a literal translation of the Dutch expression *ze kunnen er een puntje aan zuigen*.

² TN: Contemporary Performing Arts Centre

adapt and be sustainably productive—this emancipation often leads to precarity and insufficient social security. In its response to the *2021-2024 Cultural Message* of the Swiss Confederation, the Corodis (Commission romande de diffusion des spectacles)³ writes: “The precariousness of workers in the performing arts has increased over the last 10 years, and their prospects for occupational pension benefits are seriously affected.”⁴ Even if most artists and performing arts professionals in French-speaking Switzerland acknowledge that they have access to more means than in many other countries, we can nevertheless speak of “well-managed precariousness”, as Michaël Monney, administrator of the 2b company and touring manager for the Nicole Seiler company, puts it.⁵ While those who want to build an artistic career nowadays have the opportunity to carry out their projects, they must have a wide range of skills and knowledge, such as networking, fundraising, marketing, labour laws... Creativity is often equated with problem solving. And the competition has become stiffer: as there are more and more artists and companies in French-speaking Switzerland, available subsidies and co-productions are therefore spread thinner, each artist or company receiving less financial support.

Today's artists are all competing in the market with their accumulation of projects, as performance philosopher and theorist Bojana Kunst points out: “Project always denominates not only a specific term, but also a temporal attitude or temporal mode, in which completion is already implied in the projected future.”⁶ Artists and cultural workers therefore find themselves in an eternal state of projection; projects can only be completed if funding is secured, while the next projects are already being set up. To procure resources, performing artists in French-speaking Switzerland are heavily dependent on public and private subsidies and on co-production funding by subsidised organisations. In Lausanne, for example, companies can secure a three-year grant from the city and/or the Canton of Vaud, or funding per project. Budgets need to be supplemented with funds from the Loterie Romande⁷, Pro Helvetia—the Swiss Arts Council—and various private foundations in Switzerland. In addition, companies or artists can arrange co-productions with theatres and/or residencies. In this multitude of partnerships, as an artist it is not easy to maintain control over the circumstances and modalities of creation. Discussions that centre on the vulnerable position of the artist today therefore pertain not only to the socio-economic reality or power relations in the field, but also to the

³ TN: Swiss-French Touring Commission for Performing Arts

⁴ <https://corodis.ch/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/f21-2019-09-17-ofc-consultation-message-culturel-reponse-corodis.pdf>

⁵ Interview with Michaël Monney, 24 April 2020.

⁶ Kunst, Bojana (2013), ‘The Project Horizon: On the Temporality of Making’, in Petrešin-Bachelez, Nataša (Ed.), *Manifesta Journal #16: On Regrets and Other Back Pages*, Amsterdam: Manifesta Foundation, p. 112.

⁷ TN: The Swiss-French Lottery

artistic consequences of the way this system works, reckons sociologist Delphine Hesters.⁸ In short, under the guise of the artist's independence, the art world is particularly at the mercy of the neo-liberal value system.

Sarah Thelwall, a consultant in the non-profit sector, outlines four types of values in the visual arts: artistic, intrinsic to the objects and ideas commissioned; social, the process by which art is valued within the art ecosystem; societal, the broader social value made tangible through the public, education and participation; and finally, fiscal, which ranges from the initial costs of producing the artwork to its sale value on the primary market, followed by its resale value on the secondary market.⁹ In the context of performing arts, we could attribute to the latter value the artist's employment and salary, their commercial representation and revenue. Above all, fiscal value is a gauge of the "success" of an artist in our Western and neo-liberal society: the path of an artistic career is still expected to be linear and constantly rising. Moreover, investment and return, attendance figures and the number of published reviews are easier to express in measurable units than, for example, the justice, beauty, innovation or intelligence of an artistic work, as sociologist Pascal Gielen explains.¹⁰ It is therefore time to question this value system, as Sarah Thelwall proposes in *Size Matters*. In this study, Thelwall describes how a number of small visual arts institutions in London produce a lot of value, but this only becomes palpable ten to fifteen years after the initial "investments".¹¹ These institutions are working with artists who are not yet recognised and are developing new methods of organisation—therefore taking a lot of risks. However, it is not these small institutions that benefit from the immeasurable value that their work creates, but rather the large institutions, which pick out artists at a later stage, appropriating methods supported and created by others. This observation can be extended to other artistic fields and other geographies in Europe—including Switzerland. Such deferred value deserves to be taken into account, and the interdependence of the artistic ecosystem—among artists, institutions and cultural policy—would benefit from being much more clearly defined.

This is the "underside of the iceberg" to which Patrick de Rham, director of the Arsenic, refers: "Those activities which are unrecorded and invisible, yet vital to the development of many cultural and social projects."¹² Sarah Thelwall calls

⁸ Hesters, Delphine (2019), *D.I.T (Do It Together): De positie van de kunstenaar in het hedendaagse kunstenveld*, Brussel: Kunstenpunt, p.72. (In her study, Hesters analyses the position of the artist in Flanders and Brussels.)

⁹ Thelwall, Sarah (2011), *Size Matters: Notes towards a Better Understanding of the Value, Operation and Potential of Small Visual Arts Organisations*, London: commonpractice.org.uk, p.24.

¹⁰ Gielen, Pascal (2013), 'Institutional Imagination: Instituting Contemporary Art Minus the Contemporary, in Gielen, Pascal (Ed.), *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, Amsterdam: Valiz. p. 27.

¹¹ Thelwall, Sarah (2011), p. 28.

¹² Interview with Patrick de Rham, 24 April 2020.

these the “intangible assets”¹³: the list could include, for example, individual and organisational expertise and experience, research skills, network, hospitality... In addition to funding—co-production amounts ranging from 10,000 to 25,000 francs (including performances)¹⁴—the Arsenic mostly makes available to artists assets that are less visible to a larger audience: rehearsal space for six to nine weeks, overseen by the technical team, and access to the stage two to four weeks before a premiere. There is a lot of freedom during these rehearsal periods, explains Patrick de Rham: he stresses that he does not want to supervise the pieces. He sees his role more as that of a host, someone who encourages the artists to do what they want, who asks questions, but keeps expectations modest. A key value is trust: the Arsenic takes risks, even if the work is emergent and sometimes “the vocabulary to describe these new practices is missing at the time.”¹⁵ To do this, the Arsenic has been able to forge a pact with the public, who trusts the institution to discover artistic projects, according to Patrick de Rham.

Further proof of this trust, the Arsenic’s relationship with most artists spans “a medium- to long-term period”. This is important, since meaningful connections are only possible if there is enough time and space to explore them, which is not always the case in our artistic field, where working constellations change all the time and projects follow one another at high speed. However, many artists today are adopting other ways of creating and presenting their work. The Arsenic has therefore also integrated more informal moments of sharing in its programming: works-in-progress or end-of-residency presentations, performative installations, in situ projects... These correspond to a change of direction to which many artists can attest, according to Delphine Hesters: instead of delivering finished individual works, they are rather developing sustainable artistic “practices”.¹⁶ This sustainability is also reflected in the relationship with the artists who are in residence for three years (currently: Claire Dessimoz, Pamina de Coulon, Maude Blandel, Audrey Cavelius and Gregory Stauffer), who have their offices at the Arsenic, next to the management’s office. They can knock on the door at any time to ask questions, says Patrick de Rham.¹⁷ This unstructured porosity also extends to the other associated artists: the Arsenic team gives them administrative advice, helps them to put together funding applications and budgets, finds theatres for them to tour to... Moreover, the Arsenic is home to Les Urbaines and La Fête du Slip, among others, but the premises are also used by an association that provides

¹³ Thelwall, Sarah (2011), p. 6.

¹⁴ This is one of the current debates in the field of the performing arts: theatres co-produce plays when in fact, these are pre-purchases. The Corodis has created a glossary on this subject: <https://corodis.ch/corodis/lexique/>

¹⁵ Interview with Patrick de Rham, 24 April 2020.

¹⁶ Hesters, Delphine (2019), p 59.

¹⁷ Interview with Patrick de Rham, 24 April 2020.

assistance to sex workers in the neighbourhood, as well as the EPFL and the EVAM. Hospitality, the basic principle of collaboration that equalises the balance of power between organisers and guests, is therefore a very important value at the Arsenic. Here, the activity is concentrated in the foyer, as many of the artists can attest to: every lunchtime one can share a meal with the other occupants of the building. It is “an exchange based on difference”, says Patrick de Rham, “the difference between diverse artistic families, both local and international, and between people from different socio-cultural backgrounds”.¹⁸

These few examples show that we should develop ways to measure a greater variety of values delivered by arts institutions and artists. In the history of institutional critique—in a multitude of texts and lectures—the ecosystem of the art institution has been analysed, and a wide variety of theoretical hypotheses for the future have been proposed, but these rarely take the form of concrete scenarios. So, what can we do? Art researcher Rachel Mader makes an interesting appeal, proposing to recognise “molecular politics”: changes in hegemonic structures are a protracted process in small, meticulous steps.¹⁹ Our future analyses of the art ecosystem—in which artists, cultural workers, institutions and other partners are interdependent—would therefore do well to make us all aware of these molecular steps and to trace the impact of the values associated with them. As Pascal Gielen says: “Being an artist is not an individual fate, such as proclaimed by entrepreneurship; artists should be able to fall back on collective structures of solidarity.”²⁰

¹⁸ Interview with Patrick de Rham, 24 April 2020.

¹⁹ Mader, Rachel (2013), ‘How to move in/an institution’, in *Oncurating.org – Issue 21: (New) Institution(alism)*, Zurich: ZHdK, p.40. (In her text, Mader refers to Oliver Marchart.)

²⁰ Gielen, Pascal (2013), p.30.