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/ INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

Work Is Always Elsewhere: Instituent Practices and the International Performing Arts Field

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Abstract

The article, which is a revised and expanded version of a chapter of the doctoral dissertation *Devising Institutions. Institutional practices in contemporary performing arts*, applies institutional critique as a perspective for reflection on modes of production and distribution of the international performing arts circuit. Based on an analysis of hypermobility as the prevailing political condition among artists and artworkers active in this field, the text introduces the notion of situated instituent practices as a tool to reflect those artistic approaches that challenge the prevailing modes of production and distribution. The examples of works by Sarah Vanhee and Benjamin Verdonck are presented as a gesture of 'active withdrawal' from the dominating working modes and rhythms that opens up for a political potential of the process of 'home making'.

Keywords: institutional critique; situated artistic practices; Sarah Vanhee; Benjamin Verdonck; Gerald Raunig

This article, a revised and expanded version of a chapter of the doctoral dissertation *Wytwarzanie instytucji. Praktyki instytucjonalne we*

współczesnych sztukach performatywnych (Devising Institutions: Institutional Practices in Contemporary Performing Arts)[1], applies institutional critique to reflect on the principles governing the international performing arts field and its circuit. Based on an analysis of hypermobility as the prevailing political condition of artists and producers of modern independent theatre[2] as part of international co-productions, networks an festivals, I introduce the notion of situated instituent practices as a tool to analyse those artistic practices that challenge the hegemonic modes of (co-)working in the international sphere. I am particularly interested in ways out of the dominant patterns of work and cooperation in the arts field and the possibilities of establishing another models. I understand instituent practices not only as a method of analysis, but also as a perspective highlighting the potential of political agency of these artistic practices that form an interesting answer to the exhaustion of the critical theatre. My starting point is that current social polarization and the nationalist turn (that we are observing in Poland and many other European countries, and that drastically cuts opportunities for the development of contemporary art and consequently, spaces that foster critical thinking), call for artistic practices that open up the space for envisaging, testing and experiencing various ways of building and maintaining social relations and engage working methods based on thinking-with and acting-with[3].

This reflection presented in the article is grounded in my curatorial practice, which I understand and maintain as a form of knowledge production. My main research tools are therefore participative, close observation, case study and co-research: methods that draw on involvement in the project in question and thinking-with its authors. I attempt to see the relational basis of performing arts as their strong political potential for seeking out new ways of gathering, building relationships, thinking (critically) together and

conceive models of collaboration. This very potential becomes particularly evident and interesting in the moment of negotiating the rules of getting together in every artistic project or gathering.

The first part of the text draws on the concept of instituent practices coined by Gerald Raunig, one of the leading thinkers of the third wave of institutional critique, juxtaposing it with the feminist notion of situated practices, i.e. practices grounded in a specific local, sociopolitical context, a given ecosystem, but also in the bodily experiences of participants. I then ask how situated instituent practices can be enacted as part of the hypermobile international festival circuit of contemporary performing arts in Europe and discuss selected artistic practices that redefine the dominating models of production in that field.

Instituent practices as situated practices

Gerald Raunig's notion of instituent practices draws on the concept of constituent power (analyzed by Antonio Negri[4], among others), i.e. power materialising in the process of establishing a new structure or order, when it is not yet frozen within its framework of rules. As Mikołaj Ratajczak and Jan Sowa write in the Dictionary of Terms that accompanies the Polish translation of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Commonwealth*:

> Constituent power is the power that establishes a new political and juridical order, the source of a constitution. Constituted power is the power resulting from the emergence of that order, acting on the basis of the constitution. Negri argues that modernity is characterized by insurrections leading to the development of constituent power, which then declines or is absorbed into the

> order constituted by it and thus neutralized (Hardt, Negri, 2012, p. 520).

Therefore, constituent power is captured at the moment of its vulnerability, but also of its potentiality; it is fragile, susceptible to influences, still open to various unforeseen and not-yet-invented solutions. Referring to this concept and advocating a renewal of institutional critique as a critical and political practice, Gerald Raunig observed:

> If institutional critique is not to be fixed and paralyzed as something established in the art field and confined within its rules, then it has to continue to develop along with changes in society and especially to tie into other forms of critique both within and outside the art field, such as those arising in opposition to the respective conditions or even before their formations. Against the background of this kind of transversal exchange of forms of critique, but also beyond the imagination of spaces free from domination and institutions, institutional critique is to be reformulated as a critical attitude and as an instituent practice (Raunig, 2006).

Raunig works on the assumption that there is no such thing as a space free from institutions and power relations, as they pervade, structure and shape all aspects of social life. Consequently, there is no space ‘outside’ institution (just as there is no outside of capitalist forms of labour and production in Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s concept). So the question of how to find a way out from institutions is pointless. Rather, it is vital to seize the moment when an institution is still in the process forming and negotiating; when its structure, working methods and relational models are still being developed;

when the decision-making process, the division of responsibilities and common reference points such as values and aesthetic assumptions are discussed, chosen and established.

Referring to Félix Guattari's reflections on the problem of institutionalization (every revolutionary movement loses its emancipatory potential over time and becomes institutionalized, enclosing itself in the structures established by it, even if its premises were completely different), Raunig notes that a 'progressive institution would be one which conducts – counter to the initially static quality of the term institution – a moving practice of organizing' (Raunig, 2004).

Movement means here a constant process of becoming, subjecting institutional practices to critical and, above all, self-critical reflection, expanding the group of interlocutors and co-decision-makers, carefully observing the changing context and reflecting it from different perspectives, and, most importantly, always asking the question why and for whom a work is being done. Opening up to questions and doubt and the related risks also entails a change in the pace of work (questioning the process requires time, but time and space in mind are needed first to articulate it) and, consequently, at least a partial withdrawal from the competitive race for the institution[5].

The notion of withdrawal will be particularly important here. Raunig's proposal foregrounds refusal, escape, retreat, desertion, exodus, 'the conceptual movement of flight,' thus rejecting the imposed operational rules, transforming and reinventing them: 'Instead of presupposing conditions of domination as an immutable horizon and yet fighting against them, this flight changes the conditions under which the presupposition takes place' (Raunig, 2006). Importantly, Raunig understands a withdrawal not as a

passive resignation but a refutation and change of the working principles; it is a ‘flight that is simultaneously an instituent practice.’ The moment of instituting a structure, a rule, a working model, is, to some extent, hijacked in order to try instituting it otherwise. Withdrawal would thus happen when one refuses to follow the dominating rules but continues to be involved by conceptualising and testing alternative rules or structures. The responsibility is therefore not given up, neither the agency is – even though the gesture of withdrawal might require a radical, temporary cut off current entanglements and relations. Withdrawal consist thus in challenging the hegemonic forms of instituting (‘that’s the way we do it!’) and reinventing them anew.

This way of thinking is rooted in Paolo Virno’s concept of exodus, where flight does not mean resignation or surrender:

> The term is not at all conceived as some defensive existential strategy – it is neither exiting on tiptoe through the back door nor a search for sheltering hideaways. Quite the contrary: what I mean by Exodus is a full-fledged model of action, capable of confronting the challenges of modern politics … Today, just as happened in the seventeenth century under the spur of the civil wars, a realm of common affairs has to be defined from scratch. … The political action of the Exodus consists, therefore, in an engaged withdrawal. Only those who open a way of exit for themselves can do the founding; but, by the opposite token, only those who do the founding will succeed in finding the parting of the waters by which they will be able to leave Egypt (Virno, 1996, p. 196)[6].

Building on the concept of exodus, Raunig advocates a refusal to submit to

the currently dominating institutional structures rather than a complete abandonment of them. The philosopher uses the notion of double parrhesia as the main argument for this course of action. In his interpretation, parrhesia is both political and personal, which makes it a double critical strategy: the former is an attempt at questioning the existing order, the latter involves self-critical reflection:

> What is needed here and now, is parrhesia as a double strategy: as an attempt of involvement and engagement in a process of hazardous refutation [of an order – M.K.], and as self-questioning. What is needed, therefore, are practices that conduct radical social criticism, yet which do not fancy themselves in an imagined distance to institutions; at the same time, practices that are self-critical and yet do not cling to their own involvement, their complicity, their imprisoned existence in the art field, their fixation on institutions and the institution, their own being-institution. Instituent practices that conjoin the advantages of both 'generations' of institutional critique, thus exercising both forms of parrhesia, will impel a linking of social criticism, institutional critique and self-criticism. …Here exodus would not mean relocating to a different country or a different field, but betraying the rules of the game through the act of flight: 'transforming the arts of governing' not only in relation to the institutions of the art field or the institution art as the art field, but rather as participation in processes of instituting and in political practices that traverse the fields, the structures, the institutions (Raunig, 2006)[7].

In Raunig's view, maintaining constant tension between the two forms of

criticism is the key to keeping the institution ‘on the move,’ in the process of becoming, which prevents it from being confined within its structures.

In this context, the introduction of instituent practices as one of the foundations of the (art) institution would imply the need to make the difficult decision to keep it in a constant state of becoming. It would involve a readiness for incessant self-reflection and an ability to problematize and question its own rules and working modes. But the point here is not to be constantly destroying what has been built, but to keep reflecting and keep the institutional frames open for various perspectives; to keep paying attention to how and were the institution is situated, to its ecosystem and relations with artists, visitors, neighbours, funders, humans, non-humans, geopolitical situation, transnational alliances etc. In other words, the aim would be to focus on the performativity of the art institution[8] and to tap its political potential. This way of thinking need not lead to programme inconsistencies or lack of stability. On the contrary, the idea would be to expand and firmly ground the institution in its ecosystem and create the best possible working conditions precisely through focusing on how and where it is situated. Which obviously requires a withdrawal from a model in which the main goal of an institution is to serve the ideas of the master figure. For there is no space for a constant monologue anymore nor enough patient listeners to bear it; what is needed urgently instead is a practice of active listening.

Hence I would like to propose to weave the concept of instituent practices and the feminist notion of situated practice, that is, a practice developed in a relationship of interdependence with its surroundings (i.e. the geopolitical, economic, environmental and social context). I refer here to the concept of situated knowledges by Donna Haraway who notes that

> the science question in feminism is about objectivity as positioned rationality. Its images are not the products of escape and transcendence of limits (the view from above) but the joining of partial views and halting voices into a collective subject position that promises a vision of the means of ongoing finite embodiment, of living within limits and contradictions – of views from somewhere (Haraway, 1988, p. 590).

In the arts field, the point would be thus to primarily involve close attention to the environment in which a given artistic practice is carried out; to note, observe and reflect the sociopolitical context, economic conditions, infrastructure (place of work, spatial characteristics, available tools), environment, human and more-than-human relations. Therefore, a situated instituent practice never focuses only the institution's program proposal but expands to its structure, modes of production, rules of collaboration etc.

This means that a situated instituent practice draws a particular attention to material conditions of artistic work: the resources that make it possible to carry out its activities. Resources are understood here not only as financial but also infrastructural capacities (availability of space, technical equipment), immediate social environment (neighbours), human (the institution's staff and collaborators) and more-than-human (the ecosystem in its literal sense).

Obviously, careful observation of the local environment and the relations formed within it, exposing and problematizing the ways in which decisions are made, creating conditions for listening (especially to those voices that are not often heard), requires a great deal of time and can be emotionally exhausting. Moreover, these efforts might not bring an instant success and

surely they will not be easily marketable. ‘Active withdrawal’ thus means also giving up a strong position, a PR excellency, and to allow doubt, to take risks and to repeat questions instead. It does not necessarily mean a permanent weakening of the institution, but will certainly entail the need to look for new allies and develop a new constellation of support. A refusal to operate under the existing (market) rules and the dispersion of the current centres of power do not have to – and must not – be tantamount to a renunciation of agency. But they require a redefinition of effectiveness: grounding institutional agency in relations with partners and audiences rather than rankings; reformulating the principles of development (not growth but quality of relations); establishing a new mode of cooperation and practicing radical solidarity. Sometimes it would entail, for example, to be able to give up a part of one’s curatorial concept, choices and habits that might be dear to a curator, but that have to be put on hold for a moment, in order to open up the space for those who have, until now, had no access to the institutional resources. As a consequence, an institution transformed along these lines may not win another competition and rank among the top three, but it would be able to act thanks to a strong network of new alliances.

For the purposes of this study, I would like to propose an understanding of the institutional ecosystem at three levels:

– intra-institutional: as an institution’s mode of operation, analyzed from the perspective of reproductive labour, where ‘zero waste’ refers not only to sustainable use of material resources, but also to human resources and management of the energies, time, intellectual and emotional resources of its employees; this was the subject of the project Porozumienie (Agreement), carried out by Agata Adamiecka-Sitek, Igor Stokfiszewski and the author at

Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw in 2018 and 2019;

– local: as the grounding of an institution in a specific social, geopolitical and economic context, which I understand as establishing relations with its immediate environment: neighbourhood residents, organizations and institutions, the social and artistic fabric of a place, the current sociopolitical and economic problems;

– international: as an element of the complex global system of art production and a major influence on its framework, direction and development.

All of these elements make up the biotope of an institution: they form an integral part of it and help shape key participants and recipients of its activities, keeping it sustained and alive. An institution's biotope is what enables it to function; ignoring or misinterpreting its determinants leads to the implosion and atrophy of the institutional organism.

But what if the rules and pace of work on the international performing arts field disrupt the relations with other elements of the institutional ecosystem? If they undermine its stability because their demand for constant movement makes local rootedness impossible? Or, moreover, they require artistic practice to be conceived in such a way as to be easily relocated and adapted to a variety of contexts, and therefore, almost by definition, prevent it from being grounded locally? The contemporary international field of independent performing arts is shaped primarily by festivals, production houses and residency centres, interlinked in a network of co-production and cooperation, which increases the hypermobility of artists and curators. It involves constant travel for work, in pursuit of another residency, production or festival presentation, and preparations for a new project (i.e. research trips made by artists and curators) – appearing at conferences, teaching

workshops, engaging in collaboration with another artist, etc.

The hypermobility of creators, producers and curators of contemporary performing arts is one of the serious and widely discussed problems of this art field[9]. The genesis and consequences of the development of the European festival circuit were discussed by me elsewhere (Keil, 2017), so I will just reiterate here that the rise in festivals since the 1980s and 1990s is directly linked to the social and economic context of art production. In other words, it is a result of social, political and economic changes that have been taking place in Western Europe since the 1980s, and in post-communist countries since the 1990s, including the transformation of the industrial model of capitalism into a cognitive one, based on knowledge production, communication and mobility. The need to be constantly on the move increases precarious working conditions and dependence on market requirements (e.g. artists are forced to use a small, easily adaptable production format; performances with a minimal cast also work better), erodes bonds, giving only an illusion of new ones,and prevents regeneration[10]. Artistic practice, stretched between one project and the next, lacks continuity, focusing instead on the result and the end product. Mobility and flexibility are vital in this model, as is the constant readiness to move from place to place and from job to job; the ability to establish contacts and weave one's own network of interdependencies and influence (searching for collaborators, residencies and funds, building a network of relations with curators and those responsible for festival selection, etc.) On the festival field, and in the festival art-production model, the task of artists is to provide curators with ready-to-sell products, assessed according to their varying prestige (Keil, 2017, p. 43).

The nomadic, festival mode of work is exemplified well by Rok Vevar, a

Slovenian curator, dramaturge and dance scholar, who in 2009 described the pattern of his work in recent months as follows:

> So I was teaching at:
>
> – Festival of theatre reminiscences at Krakow
>
> – Baltic Circle in Helsinki which happened at the time of IETM meeting in Ljubljana (for which I co-selected a programme)
>
> – Teaching at these festivals opened up opportunity to teach young dance critic at the first Sofia Dance Week in Bulgaria
>
> – After that I went to Divadelna Nitra, a Slovak theatre festival to teach in FIT lab again
>
> – After coming home I had to prepare for East Dance Academy meeting with a short festival programme and for Exodos lecture about Slovenian dance and theatre scene in the 2nd half of the 20th century
>
> This year I attended:
>
> – One residency programme in Portugal, for one project that was presented two weeks ago in Linz (European cultural capital)
>
> – As a dramaturge I was co-mentoring two projects that were

> presented at a Riga performing arts for which I can't remember the name
>
> – I've just come from Kuopio in Finland were I attended one ANTI-Festival; this year's edition was on walking performances
>
> – Immediately afterwards I went to Zagreb at NDA meeting where we would every evening go to festival Platforma, then Perforacije
>
> – And now I am here at DISKURS 09 [Giessen, Germany – Ed.] (Vevar, 2010).

Importantly, such a working pattern tends to be reactive: the touring calendar and itinerary are developed in response to invitations, open calls and competitions, so they cannot be predicted much in advance. It has little to do with informed and strategic development of one's own path (unless an artist is in a position to pick and choose from offers). As a result, constant adaptability to new circumstances is required: the key factor is availability, which leads to a weakening of social and personal bonds. Of course, this working pattern is determined by the market conditions of the art production system discussed above – and puts the ones involved at a further disadvantage. Consequently, artistic practices have difficulties to be grounded in any local context and have an actual (even if only minimal) impact on it, which entails a loss of political agency.

The continuous movement of artists, researchers, curators and producers clearly affects the ecosystem of the art institution: on the one hand, the constant exchange of people, their practices, ideas and experiences is a source of novelty, lifting the institution out of the rut of conventional

thinking and keeping it open to what is yet unidentified and unexpected. We can see this situation as a form of maintaining the ecosystem's biodiversity, a quality necessary to foster its development.

But, if we follow this line of thought, we will soon realize that many of these new elements do not even seep through to the ground on which the institution rests and which sustains it (and includes its everyday practices, reproductive labour and relations with its immediate surroundings). While mobility is valuable, hypermobility, occurring at increased speed and split into numerous short trips, disrupts the institution's ecosystem, allowing it no time to trace, identify and adopt new elements. For how can one understand the context of an artist's work or establish a genuine, long-term relationship of exchange with her or him, if one doesn't even have time for an unhurried, meaningful conversation? These trips, on which it is impossible to see anything but the airport-hotel-show-hotel-airport route did not actually differ much from shopping; they relied on the consumption of finished products, exploited human and non-human resources and left a high carbon footprint, offering little in return (except, of course, a possible invitation to a festival that will allow you to stay in business). The negative experience of participation in the international performing arts circuit was addressed by the artist Sarah Vanhee:

> I am convinced that artists have fobbed off their pioneering, leadership role into what I would call negative internationalization. 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 a kind of pulled-apart, detached cosmopolitans (Vanhee; Van Imschot, 2018, p. 36).

The pace of constant travel thus weakens one's voice and ability to influence reality. For how can you really affect it if you are a one-time visitor, for a duration ranging from a few days to a few weeks, and where the geopolitical context is incidental (resulting from the location of the production house or festival that provided a room or studio that could just as well be elsewhere)?

This was identified as a major issue by the RESHAPE project[11], on which I worked as a facilitator in 2019-2021 with a group of artists and curators from Europe and the Mediterranean on developing new forms of contemporary trans- and postnational practices. And while it took us a long time to grasp the multitude of tools, needs and factors that each of us brought to the group and to discuss our understandings of such fundamental concepts as politicality, agency, institution and practice, we all quickly agreed that the terms 'transnational' and 'postnational' are (from our very different perspectives) not particularly apt in thinking about contemporary art practices. On the one hand, they emphasize movement, presupposing the value of mobility as a fundamental condition of contemporary work in the arts while ignoring its negative ecological and political consequences; on the other, while this juxtaposition allows us to envisage activities across national and regional borders, it also deftly sidesteps their true, political dimension, experienced by those who are forced to apply for a visa.

From the perspective of our group, composed of art workers with vast experience in international cooperation, mobility, crucial to some of us for political and economic reasons (lack of funding options in the local context), could only be sustained with a change in its basic principles. As we wrote in the course of the project:

> Trans- and postnational artistic practices have been shaped by the context of self-congratulatory hypermobility, which includes the commodification of otherness, a trend towards the homogenization of artistic work, resulting in the creation of a creative monoculture, but also exclusion through the imposition of hyperlocality. What are the dialogues between nomadic artists and the temporary communities they inhabit, and what conversations they can never have? In our search for the other, did we give ourselves a chance for a true encounter? Or did we create 'otherness' in response to specific expectations? To what extent did that process lead to a restriction of diversity and a homogenization of expression? Who was actually given the possibility to travel? Who was invited and who was not? Who was excluded from this privilege? … In a situation where I get lost on my travels, when I no longer really know where I am and there is no connection to my surroundings (human or non-human), the self becomes the only stable point of reference. As a result, we run the risk of radical self-orientation, losing the ability to establish deep relationships with others[12].

Significantly, the life- and workstyle shaped by hypermobility is problematic both from environmental (high carbon footprint) and political perspectives, which, as always, are closely linked. The phenomenologist, political

philosopher and ecological scholar Michael Marder has brilliantly analyzed these implications, debunking the myth of the nomad:

> The nomads who leave wastelands behind them and make deserts grow are not this or that group of marginal populations, following an escape route from sedentary lifestyle; they are all of us at our environmentally irresponsible worst. They (we) remain faithful to the historical-ontological notion of the human, the anthropos of the Anthropocene, who lives on the earth as though it were already a desert (the 'green desert' of the Amazonian rainforest, as the Brazilian dictatorship coded it in the middle of the last century, or the blue desert of the ocean) and, in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, facilitates the actual desertification of the world. This human, revelling in the feeling that he or she has no determinate place in the midst of beings, passes on the face of the earth as a hurricane, unattached to any specific shape, structure or form of being. …Each place, if not the placeness of place, is a way station, a drive-through, that through which one passes in one's peregrinations and, in passing, empties it, vacates and evacuates it, on the way to another, equally abused locale (Marder, 2016, p. 498).

The international performing arts field, where festivals are a major factor, has another crucial political consequence: it reinforces geopolitical, class and wealth divisions. Accordingly, there are those who are free to move and those for whom another journey means arduous, often humiliating and sometimes futile efforts to obtain a visa; those who can choose to travel and those who are forced to do so; those who move at will and those who have

been violently displaced from their places of residence by political, social and economic circumstances; lastly, those who are mobile enough and available to travel efficiently, who have access to education (including an opportunity to learn foreign languages) and well positioned art schools which make it easier to get noticed and join various networks, and those who cannot gain entry into the performing arts market – and to which, in consequence, they remain invisible.

These divisions are also evident in the tendency of artists to substitute rail for air travel: this solution, increasingly common in the European art world and certainly the most sensible in terms of reducing carbon emissions, contains an element of class, social and colonial distinction. Since, for example, a three-day train journey from Brussels to Istanbul remains a luxury for many: the economic barrier (high train fares), family status (looking after a child or other family member), and precarious working conditions (involvement in too many projects at the same time and the need to juggle multiple commitments) simply make it impossible to extend the round trip to six days. And they exclude artists from outside Europe[13] and such regions as South-East Asia, where the rail network is less extensive (an issue raised by Fu Kuen-Tang, dramaturge and curator, artistic director of the Taipei Arts Festival in Taiwan, during Creation of Dance Work, an online discussion held by the European Dance House Network on 8 September 2021[14]).

At the same time, while the international performing arts field requires urgent changes, it cannot risk being completely closed. The fundamental value of the exchange of thoughts, experiences and practices at a transnational level seems obvious: the exchange creates the conditions necessary for diversity, gives access to new and unexplored contexts,

provides artists and their audiences with tools of mutual support and solidarity, and facilitates collaboration and development. Secondly, the conservative and nationalist turn that has become so pronounced in recent years in many European countries must be counterbalanced by a strong and open international network of support, collaboration and solidarity. That is why we cannot afford to abandon the infrastructure facilitating the presentation of international shows: paradoxically, for all its entanglement in market mechanisms, the same infrastructure can be an instrument of political change.

This is particularly the case for artists and art workers who cannot receive state funding for their work: because there is no public funding system for the arts in their local context (as in the United States) or because their practice is regarded by the country's government as subversive, overly critical and, in extreme cases, hostile or dangerous (as in Brazil under the rule of Jair Bolsonaro). A good example is the work of the Mexican collective Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol which, as its co-founder Luisa Pardo admits, is supported to a large extend through cooperation with Western festivals[15]. Another case in point is the practice of the acclaimed Brazilian artist Lia Rodrigues, whose annual world tours allow her to support her company as well as a small independent arts centre operating in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro – for her and her collaborators, the collapse of the festival system would mean not only a serious risk of going out of business, but also the loss of political agency and the ability to introduce changes in her own community.

So how can artistic, curatorial and research practices be rooted in performing arts in such a way as not to limit the perspective to the artists' own community? How can we rethink mobility and transnational cooperation

so that they strengthen the local ecosystem rather than exploit its already meagre resources only to meet the market requirements of competitiveness and prestige? Is it possible to take over the concept of being rooted from nationalist discourse where it serves to divide people into those who ‘are from here’ and those who have come from elsewhere, reinforcing xenophobia?

One of the proposals developed by us as part of the RESHAPE project was to follow the philosopher Sara Ahmed’s idea and to attempt to create a home as a space of political commitment in temporarily inhabited places (Ahmed, 1999). Ahmed points out that what migrants have in common is neither a shared past (which is different in each case) nor the ontological experience of migration (the loss of a home), but an uncommon estrangement. It is this state and the various ways of experiencing it that can serve as a possible ground for a common cause and collective action.

Ahmed provides a valuable insight by proposing to understand home as a space based on affect rather than belonging or origin. The philosopher unpacks the phrase ‘to feel at home’ to reflect what the feeling of being at home actually involves. Here, the creation of home would depend on the possibility of a lived experience of locality. In this sense, Ahmed points out, home is closely linked to our body as a tool that enables our contact with the environment; it becomes, in a way, a ‘second skin’. Home would thus be an important element of our subjectivity, but in terms of affect rather than the place of origin or residence. The process of creating and inhabiting a home, liberated thus from ethnic or national concerns, would allow the status of home to be expanded into the experience of movement:

> The immersion of a self in a locality is hence not simply about

> inhabiting an already constituted space (from which one can simply depart and remain the same). Rather, the locality intrudes into the senses: it defines what one smells, hears, touches, feels, remembers. The lived experience of being-at-home hence involves the enveloping of subjects in a space which is not simply outside them: being-at-home suggests that the subject and space leak into each other, inhabit each other. To some extent we can think of the lived experience of being at home in terms of inhabiting a second skin, a skin which does not simply contain the homely subject, but which allows the subject to be touched and touch the world that is neither simply in the home or away from the home. The home as skin suggests the boundary between self and home is permeable, but also that the boundary between home and away is permeable as well. Here, movement away is also movement within the constitution of home as such. That is, movement away is always affective: it affects how 'homely' one might feel or fail to feel (Ahmed, 1999, p. 341).

Home so conceived can also be a space in between, an interval, a gap; it can also be a form of passage through a given area. In this perspective, it could be built in the process of moving, in the 'in-between' space that is not grounded in individual or collective memory or family ties; the construction of home does not have to follow the lines set by nationality or family roots. In this context, artistic practice can be rooted 'elsewhere,' outside one's place of residence, and the process would occur primarily on the level of conscious observation and affect. This is precisely how agency can be regained in transnational performative practices; how a nomad can at last turn into an ally. As we noted in the course of the RESHAPE project:

> In our professional experience as nomads, we had to learn how to make a home and how to feel at home. It is not about the family home, but home as the place where you do your political homework, in the sense proposed by Sara Ahmed: so the point would be to create homes. Because some of the political work cannot be done without being rooted at home[16].

A world tour in one's own city

In this context, I want to examine two artistic practices that are interesting examples of situated instituent practices and attempt to redefine the international performing arts field: works by Sarah Vanhee and Benjamin Verdonck. They are both Flemish performing artists of high international position who, at one point in their careers, decided to (temporary) limit their presence in the festival circuit to pursue projects in the local community. Verdonck stopped touring abroad for one season; Vanhee changed her pace of travel, reducing the number of trips in favour of focusing on grounding locally her project Bodies of Knowledge. Importantly, both of them are geopolitically and economically privileged artists for whom the decision to work locally or internationally is (still) a matter of choice.

Both artists decided to withdraw (even if it is only temporary) from the international festival field in order to turn to their local context and, just as important, towards the audiences who are neither associated with the art community (a considerable part of festival spectators) nor are regular theatregoers. Their exit from the festival circuit is, in a sense, also an exit from the art market, a step possible, paradoxically, only because they had had an opportunity to secure a strong position in it beforehand. Their

personal and professional experiences, which have led them to take a different direction in their careers, are thus similar, as is the way they challenge the dominant working model of Belgian performing arts institutions which, however experimental, have to follow the pace of conducting rehearsals resulting in the form of a production, shared with the public; meet attendance targets, participate in networking and international co-productions, prepare festivals, etc. Both projects analysed below require a change of that pace and both are relatively challenging financially, if you look at the ratio of the preparation costs (especially in the case of BOK) to the number of spectators who will be able to see the outcome. On top, both are not easy to promote as a festival hit.

In the season 2020/2021 Benjamin Verdonck decided to complete a world tour in his own city, Antwerp. The tour lasted from 1 September 2020 to 30 June 2021. This meant that Verdonck cancelled most of his foreign trips that season and concentrated on working in the local context. It was possible because he is one of the artists supported by Toneelhuis, a local production house, which was also responsible for producing the project. So, in his case, the decision to forgo festivals did not mean the loss of funding.

For several months Verdonck moved about the city’s squares, streets and housing projects with miniature theatres in a box which had been a part of his artistic practice for years. Verdonck combines work with objects and storytelling, and each of his performances is intended for a specific audience. His Antwerp shows were seen by the audience gathered in a given venue, passers-by, neighbours and residents met along the way. It did not mean a radical change of his aesthetics: the sets and objects used by him had gradually shrunk to the size that made it possible to carry them in a small suitcase or backpack. As he said in 2018:

> In the past I did a lot of projects in the public space, often bigger projects for lots of people. After about 15 years I felt that these kinds of projects no longer made sense. I had the feeling that I couldn’t scream louder than the billboards that screamed around me. So I decided to go in another direction, i.e. as small as possible. That way you can infect or infiltrate the public space. I developed a number of miniature theatres that I can take with me in a box on the train or on my bike. I play these shows everywhere, both in more institutional contexts and in the so-called public space. When you travel from place to place internationally, you discover a lot, but there is also a whole world to discover in the city of Antwerp. Next year I am planning a world tour in Antwerp, and I will try to play in as many different places in Antwerp as possible (Verdonck, 2018).

The implementation of the project was slightly delayed, as a result of which, ironically, it began in the pandemic year, when travelling was not possible anyway. But the idea for the project and the decision to carry it out had come earlier, before it occurred to anyone that international festivals would have to cancel their programmes. During the strictest lockdown in the autumn of 2020, Verdonck performed for housebound inhabitants, appearing in front of their doors and windows and sometimes on balconies, with the help of a ladder or crane if necessary. He even put on shows for people queuing at a local shop. As he wrote:

> I have the suspicion that all of the cities
>
> in which I usually show my work, the whole circuit,

> can be found in this city.
>
> an exercise in not giving in to the idea
>
> that you have to be everywhere simply and purely
>
> because you can be everywhere.
>
> developing a knack for accidentally
>
> having useful encounters and making discoveries.
>
> a licence to be free, perhaps,
>
> continually moving between
>
> studio and city, city and theatre, theatre and studio (Verdonck, 2020).

Importantly, while the artist stayed in the local context, he did not give up the curiosity about the transnational relations, but redirected the focus of his explorations from trips far beyond his surroundings to the multicultural community of Antwerp, neighbours who are usually underrepresented and often are not perceived as part of the local art field.

Sarah Vanhee's Bodies of Knowledge moves much more slowly than Verdonck's miniature shows. It is a months-long alternative school project based on mutual learning, for the exchange of knowledge that is often repressed, underrepresented or excluded from the dominant public or

academic discourse. It is usually a lived, embodied knowledge, grounded in experience, affect and daily practice. The project is typically set in a small tent (with a capacity of twenty people), which Vanhee describes as a 'semi-nomadic classroom,' situated for a few months in a Brussels location. The tent first appeared in the Anderlecht district between September and November 2020 as part of the Kunstenfestivaldesarts; from September to December 2021 it operated in Square Jacques Brel in the city centre and meanwhile has various versions resulting from the process of introducing new lockdowns and adapting to social distancing rules. There was BOK a pied, a form of peripatetic school, taking place during the walks (only 2 people only: one sharing their knowledge, the other listening) or BOK-telephone, within which the conversation would happen over phone.

I happened to attend a 'full version' of BOK that took place in the tent in Brussels in 2021. For four months, every Saturday the tent was open to the public who came to attend lectures and talk to the people who had been invited to participate in the project over the many months of work of BOK team (including Sarah Vanhee, Damla Ekin Tokel, Flore Herman, Nouha Mhamdi, Nadia Mharzi and Johanna Polge). The process of team work in a given locality is key: it aims at building connection and mutual trust with local communities, neighbourhood residents and passers by and identifying the ones ('the bodies of knowledge') who might like to share their knowledges. Trust is crucial here: most of 'the bodies' have often little experience in public speaking and are rarely connected to any official educational institution. Many of them have never appeared in public settings as the ones to take the floor. That is why the carefully maintained process of listening is key. Usually, one conversation is not enough: there is a recurrent series of talks with the potential 'body' before they decide to show up in the tent (and still there is no guarantee they will). The spatial and dramaturgical

arrangement of the space is of particular importance. The hexagonal tent holds twenty chairs and pillows arranged in a circle, there is no podium or stage. Each meeting follows the same precise yet simple structure. At the beginning, a member of the BOK team welcomes the participants and briefly describes the principles of BOK:

> Upon entering and co-creating this space, let's consider:
>
> BOK is a place for listening as much as for speaking.
>
> We respect that not everyone is used to taking the floor in public.
>
> We're trying to challenge the usual dominant order of speaking out in society.
>
> Different languages might be used, so let's try to translate.
>
> We won't tolerate any form of violence or discrimination.
>
> This is an alcohol- and drug-free zone.
>
> Out of respect, we try to stay for a full session[17].

Then the moderator briefly introduces the individual whose story we are going to hear and gives the floor to him or her. The meetings are held in French or in Flemish, sometimes in English. If a participant does not speak a given language, the spontaneous translation between the participants is organised. When the lecture or story is over, the host opens up the space to

questions from the audience, reminding them of the applicable rules:

> If you want to speak, try to formulate a question or comment rather than an opinion. Before you speak, look around to see who else is here, who has not spoken yet and who may not be often heard in public debate[18].

Each session is about fifty minutes long and is followed by a break. The programme of each open day usually lasts several hours and is known a few weeks in advance. When I attended BOK (23 October 2021), the programme included ‘A meditation exercise in listening to yourself and the world,’ Valérie’s story about ‘A polyamorous relationship, or how to experience love beyond hierarchies,’ a lecture by Saidou entitled ‘Mauritania, a country of six communities and a thousand poets,’ and a lecture by Awatif, the founder of Job Dignity, a project combating the homelessness of women in Brussels. BOK hosts arrange the programme in advance, ensuring a multitude of topics, voices and perspectives. The speakers are sometimes accompanied by friends or family, and sometimes they come alone.

A set of questions suggested by the BOK team and expanded in the course of the project is used to choose the topics and identify the individuals willing to share their knowledge and practices. So far, a list of ninety-six questions has been compiled; the first twenty are given below:

1. How to survive and live with little money?

2. How do you decide when to obey authorities and when not?

3. How to use our hands for healing?

4. How can I dare to speak up?

5. How to do commerce in an ethical and sustainable way?

6. How to be less afraid?

7. What could you teach you didn’t learn in school?

8. What can we learn from our dreams?

9. How can I listen more and better?

10. What are interesting alternatives for representative democracy?

11. What rituals and practices do you know for mourning?

12. What would ethical housing look like?

13. How to live an erotic life?

14. What should we never forget from the past?

15. How to dare to say no?

16. What are useful open source applications?

17. How to have more pleasure in life?

18. Who’s your heroine?

19. How to resist power abuse?

20. Who taught you something you couldn’t have learned at school, and what?[19]

As the BOK team declares, questions are one of their main tools for extracting the knowledge that is absent from everyday discourse and dominant educational institutions.

Bodies of knowledge is primarily a practice of listening: to the knowledge that might seem trivial or negligible in a different context, voices that have no chance of being heard in public; views that challenge the dominant order, experiences that offer an alternative to academic knowledge and are often rooted in contexts remote from the Belgian one. This is another instance of creating transnational bonds in one city or even a single district. As Vanhee wrote at the beginning of the project:

Bodies of knowledge is a place for people to learn from each other.

Things one usually does not learn,

told by voices who are not always heard,

from different parts of society and the world.

> In BOK we try to exchange knowledge that could potentially nurture a more just and humane society.
>
> It’s a room for listening, questioning, connecting.
>
> BOK welcomes life experts rather than professional authorities (Vanhee, 2019).

I see both projects in question as examples of ‘active withdrawal’ from the current model of international production in performing arts. I believe that the artists’ decisions and actions are important instances of situated instituent practices, developed as a result of careful observation of the local context while ensuring the maintenance (and establishment of new) transnational relations. Both Vanhee and Verdonck challenge the fundamental rules of the international field of artistic practices: they propose a departure from one-timeness, eventualization and hypermobility in favour of interdependence, relationship building and listening.

Importantly, they were able to make this gesture because of their high and economically privileged position. First, they had been able to develop their careers through participation in international festivals, which contributed to their status and recognition in the local art community. Second, they were both supported by the local funding system for performing arts: Benjamin Verdonck is an artist affiliated with Toneelhuis, Sarah Vanhee completed BOK as part of her Ph.D. dissertation Bodies of knowledge – the public space as a forum for the exchange of repressed or underexposed knowledge, based on her artistic practice and research at the Antwerp School of Arts and the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts (ARIA).

Of course, intensive work with the local community or with the ones who are not frequent art creators or recipients is not a new activity in the context of performing arts either in Flanders or Europe. What makes both BOK and Verdonck's project special is their starting point: the perspective of artists active on the festival circuit who have decided to withdraw from the hypermobile frenzy and to focus on intimate encounters grounded locally and their deliberate strategy to challenge the rules of the international performing arts field. Their withdrawal from the circuit will likely be temporary, which does not lessen the significance of their gesture or deprive it of a political dimension. On the contrary, BOK will continue to be held, in other cities in Belgium and outside it, including Norway and the Netherlands. In this sense, the change of the festival model in the countries that will host BOK in 2023 and 2024 (the need to plan the budget differently and to re-allocate the time and attention of the festival team, the adoption of a longer time span for preparation, and the shift of the audience from spectators of a one-off event to partners in a long-term relationship), has already occurred. BOK is thus a situated instituent practice because it proposes its own institutional structure and work pace in place of the existing one; it formulates a working method that disrupts and occasionally turns upside down the customary modes and pace of work in the field of international performing arts. For such initiatives as BOK to be carried out, a thorough revision of the principles underlying the performing arts production system is required – at the level of subsidies and accounting for them, at the level of institutions (and methods of assessing their performance and reporting their expenses), and in terms of canon building (the hierarchy of artists is often based on the numbers of awards received and festivals attended). It is also necessary to change the basic principles of hosting project authors: to reduce the frequency of touring in favour of

longer visits, to facilitate links with the local art community and audiences, and build strong transnational alliances based on the affective creation of home and conditions for inhabiting it.

BOK is not the only project of its kind; quite the opposite: it remains part of the broader phenomenon of artistic practices that presuppose a much longer and intense working time on-site (compared to the standard rhythm of festival presentations) and rely on painstaking development of a relationship of intimacy with participants. Events of similar duration and level of intimacy with audiences are increasingly frequent on the international circuit, as exemplified by the work of Tania Bruguera and Ivana Müller (in particular Notes), numerous temporary schools run by artists as part of international theatre festivals (including Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Santarcangelo Festival, Dublin Theatre Festival, etc.). Will they become a model, copied and built on, like the projects of Rimini Protokoll and Jérôme Bel before? Will they be able to redefine the international performing arts scene before they turn into another product to which alternative proposals are necessary? As we already know, instituent practices are moving practices – this means that if they are fixed in the form of a model, they will lose the basis of their political agency. Perhaps they are more aptly described as working methods: a catalogue of ways of thinking with and being with audiences that will work only when they are carefully grounded in the local context. In this sense, they have a chance not to be locked into a universal model that can be adapted to any conditions; they are rather a methodology that always has to be updated, rewritten and fine-tuned in relation to the given ecosystem.

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Footnotes

1. The dissertation, written under the supervision of Professor Krystyna Duniec, at the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, was defended in February 2021 in Warsaw.
2. I mean theatre and dance that are produced outside the repertory theatre system: as part of production house programmes, international theatre networks and their co-productions

and contemporary art centres - or with the support of private foundations and agencies.
3. I refer here to the epistemo-ontological category of ‘thinking-with’ proposed by Donna Haraway and developed by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, which underlines that subjectivity always originates in relationality and interdependence with other subjects, both human and non-human. See Haraway, 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017.
4. Cf. Negri, 2009.
5. The two orders cannot be reconciled: their coexistence is precluded by the radical difference in the working pattern and the choice of areas of activity that need to be promoted: opening up to doubt and self-reflection requires strong emotional support; hence, an appreciation of reproductive labour which sustains work and regeneration. This does not mean, of course, that a 'moving institution' cannot go on to become a new, attractive model in the art market.
6. This understanding of the critical attitude is opposed by the Belgian political philosopher Chantal Mouffe. See Mouffe, 2008.
7. Here, flight does not mean an exit from society - Raunig notes that the concept of exodus or withdrawal in the context of art is often misinterpreted as an incentive to withdraw from the common, an affirmation of the artist working away in his studio. In fact, Virno argues the opposite: withdrawal from the existing rules of society within the framework of the state serves to strengthen a new form of political subjectivity: the multitude, because it allows this form to be constituted.
8. See, e.g., Vujanović, 2018.
9. See, e,g., the project Re/framing the international of the Flanders Arts Institute in Brussels: https://www.kunsten.be/en/research/internationaal-werken/re-framing-the… [accessed: 8.02.2022] ; international research and art project RESHAPE (Reflect, Share, Practice, Experiment), https://reshape.network [accessed: 8.02.2022]; international symposium The Fantastic Institution and Return of the Fantastic Institution, BUDA, Kortrijk 2018 i 2019, https://www.kunsten.be/en/now-in-the-arts/the-fantastic-institution/; https://www.kunsten.be/en/now-in-the-arts/the-return-of-the-fantastic-i… [accessed: 8.02.2022]; digital conference How to be together? Conversations on International Exchange and Collaborations in the Performing Arts, Tanz im August / HAU Hebbel am Ufer oraz Zürcher Theater Spektakel 2020, http://2020.theaterspektakel.ch/en/program20/production/how-to-be-toget… [accessed: 8.02.2022] ; Creation of Dance Work. Producing in different contexts, economies and conditions, European Dancehouse Network, Atelier, 2021, https://www.ednetwork.eu/activities/type/atelier [accessed: 8.02.2022].
10. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic put a sudden stop to the art production system, but it is not clear yet for how long. The artistic practices reflected in this text may be an indication of far-reaching changes, but they stem from ideas conceived before the lockdown.
11. RESHAPE (Reflect, Share, Practice, Experiment) was a transnational research and art project, bringing together European and Mediterranean artists, curators and institutions to jointly create new ways of working in the arts and innovative organizational models and reflect on concrete answers to crucial challenges related to the production, distribution and presentation of contemporary art practices. I worked as a facilitator of one of the project trajectories (Trans/Postnational Artistic Practices) and explored the theme of transnational artistic practices with a group art professionals. The group included Norway-based Slovakian artist and curator Martinka Bobrikova (she participated in the project as a member of the duo BobrikovadeCarmen); Barcelona based curator, researcher and artist

Pau Cata; Heba el-Cheikh, a theatre manager from Cairo; Prague performing arts curator Petr Dlouhy, co-founder of the Cross Attic collective; Skopje visual artist Gjorgje Jovanovik; Dominika Święcicka, a Warsaw curator and visual artist; Brussels-based curator and producer Marine Thévènet, member of the art collective L'Amicale, and Ingrid Vranken, a Brussels artist, curator and dramaturge. See https://reshape.network [accessed: 20.11.2021].
12. Material developed by the Trans/Postnational Artistic Practices group during RESHAPE workshops, previously unpublished.
13. A fact pointed out by Lázaro Gabino Rodríguez, co-founder of Lagartijas Tiradas al Sol, in his bravura reply to a letter by Jérôme Bel, a prominent French choreographer campaigning against air travel.
14. See Keil, 2021.
15. A conversation with the artist during the 40th Zürcher Theater Spektakel festival in Zurich in August 2019.
16. Unpublished material from a workshop held as part of the RESHAPE project.
17. A set of rules displayed inside the BOK tent.
18. Recreated from memory and notes after attending a BOK session.
19. See https://en.bodiesofknowledge.be/question-list [accessed: 11.11.2022].

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