



# tracks

ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY

TRACKS \* ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY

How do artists and cultural workers deal with the diversity of our society? Spring 2007, the book Tracks was published: it followed the traces that twenty artists and arts organisations in Flanders and Brussels have left on their path.

A performance, an exhibition or a film is just the top of an entire iceberg.

One cannot achieve diversity on stage and a social mix in the audience without conquering a huge iceberg below the waterline, one which remains largely unseen by the audience.

Tracks is a book full of intuitions and methods for those who want to take the intercultural plunge.

This pocket book contains some excerpts from Tracks and offers a subtle description of intercultural competences in contemporary artistic practice.

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ARTISTIC PRACTICE IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY

An van. Dienderen, Joris Janssens and Katrien Smits

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## Preface

In 1987 VTi was born through the need to support and identify the ambitions of a new generation of artists in Flanders and Brussels; to document and investigate the context of this turbulent but artistically exceptional period; and to develop appropriate policy instruments for this burgeoning practice.

Twenty years on and the artistic and social context has radically changed. Initiatives that were played out on the fringes 'back then' we now see right at the centre. This must be due to a changing, intercultural society. Today the need to keep documenting, investigating and reflecting is just as relevant as it was then. For only in this way can we reach a better understanding of how the performing arts have evolved in Flanders, and where their strengths and painful areas lie.

In the spring of 2007 VTi presented two books as the culmination of long-term research trajectories. *Tracks. Artistieke praktijk in een diverse samenleving [Tracks. Artistic Practice in a Society of Diversity]* uses twenty intercultural stories from Flanders and Brussels to map out fascinating intercultural processes. The intercultural society is now a reality. Lots of people are seeking a new outlook, but it seems that there are no instant recipes for this. In this context it is important that valuable experience can be shared. *Tracks* sets out to make such a contribution. The book hopes to set intercultural trackers on the right path in an inspirational way.

The idea for *Metamorfose in podiumland [Metamorphosis in the Performing Arts Scene]* came about in 2005, when the Flemish Government made controversial decisions in the first round of the new Arts Decree. Our field analysis shows how radically the production of performing arts – and the policy developed by the Flemish community for this – has changed over decades past. Its

material will allow new position fixes for the sector and for the cultural policy.

We are now producing English language pocket books containing sizeable excerpts from *Tracks* and *Metamorfosen*. In the future we will open our research systematically in other languages. In December comes the English publication of the dance master plan - which VTi developed with help from the sector - the blueprint for an integrated dance policy for Flanders and Brussels. This is because 'metamorphoses' and interculturalisation are not confined to performing arts within the borders of Belgium. *Tracks* and *Metamorphoses* expressly confirm the internationalisation and interculturalisation of the performing arts per se. This alerts us to the possibility of protectionist reflexes and defensive responses and opens the way to dialogue.

These booklets are a tool which we are using to launch an international debate of our research results. We hope the experience we document in *Tracks* and *Metamorphoses* will prove inspirational to artists and cultural workers in other European countries. For, in all likelihood, these changes are not particular to Flanders and Brussels. In the world of the performance arts - an increasingly trans-national production domain - how do we deal with trends such as growth, individualisation, hybridisation, interculturalisation, and increasing international networking? Let us carry this talk beyond our country's borders, a subject raised expressly for discussion in both studies.

Ann Olaerts,  
Director of Vlaams Theater Instituut  
October 2007

**How** do artists and cultural workers deal with the diversity of our society? What is the importance of the cultural or ethnic background in personnel policy? By which channels do artistic projects and organisations reach a varied public? How does one programme artists of a 'non-Western' ethnic origin without putting them in a separate category? And how does one deal with one's own prejudices and views? The increasing diversity of our society raises a great many questions. There is a need for new ways of communicating and negotiating, and of watching, speaking and creating.

In April 2007, the book *Tracks. Artistic practice in a diverse society* was published, of which this pocket book is an extensive summary. Our study arose out of the conviction that a great deal of experience in dealing with the diversity of our society is being built up during artistic practice. It is precisely this type of experience we have focused on during our research. We would like to make this expertise accessible to everyone who may be able to draw inspiration from it. When describing these practices we have not concentrated on the end product: a performance, an exhibition or a film is just the top of an entire iceberg. One cannot achieve diversity on stage and a social mix in the audience without conquering a huge iceberg below the waterline, one which remains largely unseen by the audience.

For *Tracks*, we took the plunge. We found an inspiring deep-sea landscape swarming with innovative and inventive processes in Flanders and Brussels. They form the humus for productions that emphatically adopt a position in relation to the actual diversity in society. This way of working is inspired by the PhD research

carried out by An van Dienderen.<sup>1</sup> She writes that cultural studies should not only concentrate on analyses of finished products. She argues for anthropological fieldwork during creative processes, a type of research she carried out herself several times.

Artistic processes therefore form the core of *Tracks*. With its wealth of documentation in the form of stories and observations, it offers glimpse behind the scenes of twenty-odd organisations in Flanders and Brussels. The journey took us to such 'untouched' areas as the prison in Merksplas, Dutch lessons for non-Dutch speakers in Ghent, living rooms in North Antwerp, rehearsals by performing artists Union Suspecte and Alain Platel, a young hip-hop crew in their recording studio, and neighbourhood consultation sessions held by KVS, the Flemish city theatre in Brussels.

For this intensive research we did not use a predetermined definition of terms like 'cultural diversity' or 'intercultural dialogue'. We maintained a bottom-up method and followed the traces that twenty artists and arts organisations have left on their path. The following question provided a guideline: how do they deal with the diversity of society, with its increasing differences in and between individuals and groups regarding beliefs, roles, interests, customs and habits, values, languages, opportunities, backgrounds, and views of their own past and future? Sometimes, we will use terms like 'to interculturalise' or 'interculturalisation', to stress that artists dealing with the diversity in society engage in an ongoing process which will change them in the course of proceedings.

Nowadays there are many examples of practices in the Flemish and Brussels context from which we can learn. We sought examples from various artistic sectors, both individual artists and

arts organisations, subsidised or not, from small neighbourhood organisations to major centres, in and outside the cities. It came down to making individuals and organisations visible from various positions and various situations. Practices that deal in an innovative way with the various aspects of art practices: expanding networks, 'casting' artistic staff, preparing a production, building up an organisation, setting up educational activities, discussing the notion of artistic quality, etc.

The stories in our book arose in close consultation with the artists and organisations. The fieldwork consisted of conversations with a hundred-odd cultural creators, following preparatory rehearsals, witnessing discussions, working our way into these creative processes in order to take the plunge with the makers, and so on. In an initial exploratory talk we examined together which current project we would follow up and from what angle. We also requested an active contribution to the written matter by making notes, collecting writings by other parties, and keeping impressions and observations.

In this book, we will briefly present the trajectory of *Tracks*. First, we will sketch the methodology and present the twenty artists and organizations who participated in the research. Next, we present one of our twenty case studies. The story about the 2006 edition of KunstenFESTIVALdesArts, the annual international arts festival in Brussels, is complemented by an impression by Ho Tzu Nyen, one of the artists in this programme. Last, there is an extensive reflection on the challenges encountered by artists and organisations who want to interculturalise, and on the qualities successful processes have in common.

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1. An van Dienderen, *Production Process as a Site of Critique. Ethnographic Research into the Mediated Interactions during (Documentary) Film Productions*. Doctoral thesis, Ghent, 2004.

## 5 fields of research

In order to give structure to our research, we grouped our questions into five clusters which we called 'fields': 1) networking, 2) employment, 3) artistic recruitment and interactions during the creative process, 4) themes, repertoire and canon, and 5) audience. These fields became the five chapters in *Tracks*. They give the book a clear focus, but do not make for a simplistic account. They are intrinsically linked to one another: they are different aspects of the same creative processes. They constantly influence each other. So in practice it is not always possible to distinguish them from one another. These fields were nevertheless interesting research tools. When the project started they helped define the selection of case studies. During the fieldwork they were a searchlight that made it possible to ask focused questions and to zoom in on very real experiences, tips and suggestions.

### 1. NETWORKING

Networks put people and organisations in contact with each other. They help in finding new staff members and reaching new segments of the public. Sometimes they bring professionals together from several countries, even from the whole world. But people and organisations from the same neighbourhood, town or city often do not know each other. How can existing circuits meet? And in what way can this stimulate innovation and hybridization of art practices? For a number of organisations networking is an aim in itself: making new encounters and interchange possible is part of their mission. This applies without exception to the projects covered in the first section of our book:



- We tracked the KVS, the Flemish city theatre in Brussels that wants to be a platform for various communities living in the Belgian capital. To this end it seeks strategic alliances with a wide variety of partners: artists and intermediaries from Molenbeek or the Matongé district in Brussels, to Kinshasa.

[www.kvs.be](http://www.kvs.be)

- The City Mine(d) intercity network initiates and supports projects in constantly changing joint ventures with performing artists, grass roots collectives and other local players. Through urban interventions, they want to support the development of a theoretical framework for urban renewal. Doing so, it wants to develop a more well-founded urban policy in Brussels, Barcelona and London.

[www.city-mined.org](http://www.city-mined.org)

- We discussed the work of the annual 0090 Arts Festival in Antwerp. It is intended to be the intermediary link between two separate circuits: the Flemish arts sector and artists who are in one way or another connected with Turkey. They do not easily find their way to stages in Flanders and Brussels, and 0090 wants to bridge that gap. Doing so, 0090 wants to counteract stereotypical images about Turkey. 'Turkey has a lot more to offer than pita and baklava,' 0090-founder Mesut Arslan says.

[www.0090.be](http://www.0090.be)

- Last, there is a contribution by Mobassik, a young hip-hop crew on their way to recognition. They rhyme in French, Dutch, English and Swahili and fuse reggae, hip-hop, rumba, electro and a lot of other musical styles in a very natural manner: 'Mobassik is a plural and hybrid but expresses itself as a whole. We do not reflect on the African and/or European

elements we use. It's a natural and dynamic process.'

[www.mobassik.be](http://www.mobassik.be)

## 2. EMPLOYMENT

When it comes to the question of staff, a lot of organisations draw on familiar networks and use channels with limited reach. They would often like to pursue a varied staffing policy, but they are faced with several barriers. Good intentions are squashed by short-term efficiency. Sometimes you hear that there is a lack of candidates with the appropriate skills. The introduction of differences can lead to tensions, because changes in an organisation may provoke resistance. Nevertheless, there are practical experiences and – in the Flemish context – government schemes that offer points of contact. Which strategies contribute to a successful intercultural personnel policy?

- First, we examined two policy instruments. There is the possibility of submitting a 'Diversity Plan' to the Flemish Ministry of Work and Social Economics. Organisations that wish to interculturalise can obtain not only a small subsidy, but also guidance and expertise. We show how HETPALEIS, Antwerp's city youth theatre, made use of this opportunity.

[www.hetpaleis.be](http://www.hetpaleis.be)

[www.vlaanderen.be/werk](http://www.vlaanderen.be/werk)

- CORDOBA aims specifically for ethnic and cultural diversity: it is a project combining education and employment, and its objective is to introduce new know-how, networks and experiences behind the scenes at the cultural centres by bringing in ethnic members of staff. The diagnosis on which this is based is that 'they are white organisations, just like the majority of

cultural institutions in Flanders'. In our book we tell the story of Gerardo Salinas, who joined the staff of the Arenberg Theatre in Antwerp under the CORDOBA scheme.

[www.arenbergschouwburg.be](http://www.arenbergschouwburg.be)  
[www.cultuurlokaal.be](http://www.cultuurlokaal.be)

- The last word in this section comes from Ico Maly from Kif Kif, a website devoted to offering qualitative and correct news coverage of our intercultural society. It is an excellent example of how important the recognisability of staff, usually volunteers, is for the intercultural face of an organisation.

[www.kifkif.be](http://www.kifkif.be)

### 3. ARTISTIC RECRUITMENT & INTERACTION

Here we bring together a series of stories on casting and interactions in the rehearsal space. We fully immerse ourselves in the process of artistic creation. How does one opt for diversity in the way one recruits artistic people for one's project? And what effect does this have on the creative process?

- We tracked the preparations for *VSPRS*, the latest dance production the choreographer Alain Platel did for Les Ballets C de la B, based on the vespers of Monteverdi, and created together with a less evident cast of very diverse people.

[www.lesballetscdela.be](http://www.lesballetscdela.be)

- *Aywa!* is a daring project by the Brussels-based musicians of De Krijtkring. It interweaves rural Berber music with European jazz improvisation and contemporary musical writing. Six European musicians collaborated with eight Moroccan percussionists and singers by looking for a common musical

ground. Together they created a completely new hybrid musical spectacle, still infused with the power and intensity with which the Berbers play in their villages. It has toured in Belgium and Morocco.

[www.krijtkring.org](http://www.krijtkring.org)

- The third story is that of Els Dietvorst's 'Swallows'. This artist assembled an artistic collective in the Anneessens district of Brussels, using highly unorthodox recruitment techniques. Responsibility for all decisions, artistic and organisational, was put in the hands of this varied group. Their stories and desires were the starting point for this project, resulting in street performances, magazines, readings, videoloops, and even a full length feature film and an exhibition in Bozar, the Brussels' Centre for Fine Arts.

[www.fireflyfilms.be](http://www.fireflyfilms.be)

- The final example is Vox, a Brussels collective of media activists that entirely abolishes the boundary between maker and public. The aim is to make videos with 'another view on society'. Contrary to traditional media where information passes via several 'intermediates' operating as filters, Vox wants to give direct access to audio-visual tools to individuals and groups. Vox is a collective that exists in meetings that happen every first and third Wednesday of the month. These meetings are open for everyone.

[www.vox-video.be](http://www.vox-video.be)

#### 4. THEMES, REPERTOIRE & CANON

Increasing globalisation means that cultural contacts are becoming less dependent on geographical boundaries. Interaction between groups and communities are becoming more numerous and traditions intermingle. All these developments raise questions about what is on offer on our stages, in our libraries, museums and galleries. For example, how representative is the Western canon on which most of our artistic expression is founded? What do such terms as 'Western', 'European' or 'Arabic' mean these days? And what are the relationships between them, from an economic point of view?

- This sort of questions can provide the dynamic for exciting artistic practices. *Tracks* tells the stories of the Union Suspecte theatre collective and the photographer Charif Benhelima. October 2006 saw the premiere of Union Suspecte's controversial production *Onze Lieve Vrouw van Vlaanderen*. In *Tracks*, we had a look at the creative process behind it. Included here are some photos taken during rehearsals.

[www.unionsuspecte.be](http://www.unionsuspecte.be)

- The piece on the work of Charif Benhelima was written in close consultation with the photographer himself. It is about his first book *Welcome to Belgium*, about which Benhelima says: 'This book is a work which consists of four parts and which – by means of a classic documentary approach – represents the life of immigrants, refugees and illegal people in Belgium. In this work the images should be seen as the representation of a certain emotional state, rather than the capturing of the moment itself. *Welcome to Belgium* was created by approaching different layers: the social, the historical, the political and the personal – my main motivation. This project

was a research about my own identity, since I am the son of mixed parents, a photographic biography in which the pictures are not of me.'

- When it comes to the KunstenFESTIVALdesArts we touch upon the issue of international programming and coproduction. During the festival in May 2006 the Flemish Theatre Institute organised a discussion group with performers at the festival from Belgium and abroad. We watched many performances together and exchanged ideas about what we saw in relation to the festival's aims. The artist Ho Tzu Nyen responded with his own contribution. Both the story about KunstenFESTIVALdesArts and Ho Tzu Nyen's reaction are included here.

[www.kfda.be](http://www.kfda.be)

- *Tracks* contained a piece by the theatre-maker and journalist Michael de Cock, the artistic director of 't Arsenaal, a theatre company in Mechelen. He explains why and how he is planning a docudrama about first-generation Moroccan immigrants, 'about those sometimes illiterate people who left their homes to come working in Belgium "for a couple of years".... How did those couple of years become a lifetime? Why did they leave and what did they leave behind? What did they expect they find and what did they find (or not)? When did they want to return and why have they never done this? I want to talk about these things and about things that are as yet unimaginable to me but will present themselves along the way, while we're talking.'

[www.tarsenaal.be](http://www.tarsenaal.be)

## 5. PUBLIC

For many organisations the most important reason for taking a new approach to their work is accessing new segments of the public. What strategies can artists and organisations use to this end? There are no ready-made recipes for success. It appears to be extremely difficult to pursue a policy of diversity only in the areas of communication and education. In other words, you cannot reach a diverse public without also reflecting on what you yourself have to offer, without taking a critical look at your own work, or without making your organisation more recognisable or expanding your networks.

- In a series of stories we looked at different approaches to the issue of the public. As our guides we chose the public intermediaries from MuHKA, Antwerp's Museum of Contemporary Art, who have built up considerable experience in bringing visitors of various backgrounds, interests and skills into dialogue with art. They have abandoned a previously standardized for a tailor-made and interactive approach, taking into account the specificities of each work of art and any visitor whatsoever. Putting this into practice while presenting the de-regulation work of audiovisual artist Kutlug Ataman turned out to be quite a challenge...

[www.muhka.be](http://www.muhka.be)

- *Boekenkaravaan* (the 'Book Caravan') is a project of a completely different sort. It is an initiative taken by Leesweb, a centre that wants to promote reading. *Boekenkaravaan* sends readers – usually volunteers – with entertaining and exciting books to families where reading out loud is seldom if ever done.

[www.boekenkaravaan.be](http://www.boekenkaravaan.be)

- We also presented the approach taken by Open Doek, a film festival in Turnhout that programmes films 'from everywhere', and organises a number of associated activities in order to introduce diversity. We looked at what 'art education' means to Open Doek.

[www.opendoek.be](http://www.opendoek.be)

- Circo Paradiso is an annual festival in Heusden-Zolder, initiated by the cultural centre Muze, which brings a whole series of external partners to bear to make innovative links between 'high' and 'low' culture, between creativity and education.

[www.muze.be](http://www.muze.be)

- The book contains an account by Pierre Muylle, who until recently was the driving force behind 'Wijk Up', a socio-artistic project in Zeebrugge – started up in the city's periphery during Bruges 2002, Cultural capital of Europe – tries to strengthen the ties with the neighbourhood in new ways.

[www.bruggeplus.be](http://www.bruggeplus.be)

# 1 case study: Kunstenfestivaldesarts

**Since** 1994, the programme of KunstenFESTIVALdesArts in Brussels does not limit itself to neither specific topics nor to single artistic disciplines, communities, regions or countries. Instead, the programme highlights artistic individualities who aim to reconcile beauty with the complexities of our contemporary society. Artists who go in search of new forms to share their view on our shared present. Who do not complicate what is clear or simplify what is complex. The festival aims at creating a dialogue between the Flemish and the French-speaking communities in Brussels and to present the work of non-Western artists as an alternative to a 'eurocentric' view from which, unfortunately, none of us escapes.

This article investigates how this programme is being put in practice. Which criteria for selection does the festival apply? In which way does it reach out to artists of non-European origins? Which attempts are made to shape the context of that artist in Brussels? The basic assumptions of the festival were investigated closely, not only with the organisers of the festival, but also with the 'non-Western' artists who were their guests.

## ***Do something about your ignorance***

The first edition of KunstenFESTIVALdesArts took place in 1994, some years after the first 'Black Sunday', marking the first electoral breakthrough of Vlaams Blok, the Flemish extreme right political party. It was a time characterised by increasing community-related discussions in Belgium. 'As a festival, we absolutely wanted to have a voice in that political debate,' says founding director Frie Leysen. 'We wanted to make clear that we

disagreed with that kind of discourse. Our aim now is to create a local project that brings the two communities together.' To this very day, the communication between the various communities in Brussels continues to be an important motive for the festival. Political indignation also stipulates the stakes of the festival at another level: not only in Belgium, but also in other European countries nationalism took root in the early 1990s.

According to Frie Leysen, this can be explained by the overall increase in scale due to the economic globalisation and the political unification of Europe: 'The larger the community is of which you are a part, the greater your need will be for your own church and grocery shop.' Another factor, according to Leysen, is the fact that our colonial history is far from over:

*For a long time, we Europeans were used to propagating our culture throughout the world - in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America, everywhere. We never stopped to think what kind of culture was present in those countries in the first place. And now we are faced with enormous migratory flows, and in our own street we are being confronted with those cultures that we have always denied and ignored. And we don't know how we have to deal with our ignorance.*

Of course the real question is: what kind of artistic project can you embark on to counter an intensified separatist discourse, rising nationalism, and neo-colonialism? Which instruments has the festival developed to bring those objectives into practice? 'For a start you can get to know people from other cultures, and their work,' says Frie Leysen. 'Not the way it always happened in the past, from a folkloristic or exotic angle, or as a bad imitation of 'our' culture. But by investigating the contemporary artistic expressions in other, non-Western cultures. We came to the shocking conclusion that we knew absolutely nothing about contempo-

rary art from non-Western countries. That observation was the starting point of the first festival programme.' Therefore, for KunstenFESTIVALdesArts the debate about diversity here instantly occasions a strong, international action radius that wants to steer away from the trodden paths.

In the programme brochures of the first edition of the festival (May 1994) it was phrased as follows: 'An encounter of artists from around the world with the (heterogeneous) audience present here, across all language borders. An exchange between the different artists who take the stage in Brussels together.' In the course of the years, the stakes have hardly changed at all. The emphasis still lies on 'encounter' – which should not be interpreted as simply presenting finished products and views next to each another. According to Frie Leysen, the festival wants to present those views 'at a very human level, namely as an artist of flesh and blood, who has really come to tell his tale, who is physically present on a stage, addressing the public here in Brussels. An artist who you can also meet at the festival bar while having a beer, and with whom you can strike up a conversation.' For that reason, the festival invests quite a lot of energy in instruments and formats that make those encounters possible, whether they be formal or informal. Interviews and 'after show' talks are organised for each performance, and in the 2005 edition there was a daily talk show with Jérôme Bel at Beursschouwburg. Finally, the festival centre itself plays an important role as an informal meeting place for artists, international guests and the public.

### ***Leave the trodden paths, give carte blanche***

The particular approach of KunstenFESTIVALdesArts has implications for the way one composes a programme, for how one prospects and selects. The world is a big place and there are a great many artists, representing a broad range of trends and styles. Ac-

cording to which criteria does the selection take place? Frie Leysen: 'We go in search of artists, personalities; people whom we do not expect to represent a certain culture. We don't start out from preconceived themes. On the contrary, we invite the artists as individuals. We expect them to have a personal and critical view on the world and on their art. One that differs from the way **we** see and shape the world here.' The work of a Brazilian artist will not be presented as being representative of the Brazilian dance, art or culture. Of course, the context in which someone lives and works exerts a large influence on one's creations; either it seeps through in the work or the artist reacts against it. 'That border is sometimes difficult to make clear to the public,' says Frie Leysen:

*Work that does not aim to be political sometimes gets an explicit political interpretation here, simply because it comes from somewhere else. We look at it through our Western glasses, and it's hard to do otherwise. In part, such misunderstandings cannot be avoided: you can steer the perception only to a certain extent. Furthermore, we are not an educational project; we do not tell the audience **how** they should see. We strongly believe in the eloquence of art. Yet when we select, we do take into account the transplantability of foreign work to Brussels.*

From the very start, the concept of encounter and exchange was focused on, now the term 'conflict' is surfacing:

*Sometimes you import political conflicts to Brussels, which otherwise appear only a few seconds on the news. In 2004, the video production **Looking at Tazi'ye** by Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami provoked quite a controversy. Kiarostami filmed a traditional mystery play and focused on the responses of the spectators. Some artists from Beirut who were present at the festival called me a fascist because I showed it here.*

The Beirut artists claimed you cannot present this traditional mystery play – and the audience's reactions to it – in a completely different context, without providing the meaning this has in its original context. This would create misunderstandings, since a ritual which is part of a specific subculture might be viewed by the Brussels' public as representative for 'Arabic' culture.

Frie Leysen concedes that – for an outsider – it can be very difficult to anticipate some of these sensibilities. But she argues that such conflicts can be productive as well, since they counter-act our ignorance: 'These conflicts stop being fleeting newflashes, they become visible in and relevant for Brussels.'

### **Scouting and co-production**

Which 'non-Western' countries are selected for scouting? 'There are several ways,' says Frie. 'The easiest way is to go shopping at festivals. But in the first place I am curious about what I don't know. For example, you hear someone say that there is no interesting theatre in Indonesia. So we go in search of it.' Frie Leysen and Christophe Slagmuylder, the new artistic director who is Leysen's successor, want to leave the well-trodden paths. The very first festival already presented a series of performances from China, a country that programmers from the international festival circuit only flocked to much later. Also in Argentina, Thailand, and Iran, Frie Leysen was breaking new ground:

*It requires time, energy and resources – sometimes it's an investment at the expense of one production at the festival. But it is a conscious choice. The first time you return, you are depressed. The next time you return, you are better armed. I meet many people and speak with programmers who are on the same wavelength.*

Just like the artists who only represent themselves, Frie Leysen and Christophe Slagmuylder set off on their own. They do not travel as a member of more or less official delegations, such as the ones that some European institutes organise. The same vision results in specific strategies for the creations that they produce or co-produce. In this way KunstenFESTIVALdesArts distances itself from the strategies set out by national institutes in the larger European countries. Even though these institutes give creative assignments in non-Western countries, their agenda is still strongly determined by the worldwide promotion of their own national culture. Even though they invest in artists from around the world, they make clear demands, such as the creation of a certain repertoire, or the participation of European directors or technicians. Frie Leysen finds this a questionable choice:

*The choreographer that works with the local dancers is often from the United Kingdom or from France. The brains always come from the West and the muscles, the raw material, is added locally. The result: Africans dancing like the French. Which in the end serves them well: they are liked in Europe, and are invited for major tours... Of course a non-Western artist can be influenced by Western art. But it shouldn't be a mere copy served with an exotic sauce to score in Europe. You should process those influences into a language of your own.*

KunstenFESTIVALdesArts claims that it gives the artists and companies complete *carte blanche* regarding the artistic decisions – although they do offer a degree of follow-up, coaching and feedback. This also means that there are no a priori expectations with respect to hybridization or multiculturalism. Leysen: 'The artists are free to work with mixed casts or not. We do not intervene.'

Yet it remains quite difficult for KunstenFESTIVALdesArts – perhaps even impossible – to steer clear of the pernicious role

game of buyer/seller when dealing with foreign artists. Frie Leysen and Christophe Slagmuylder are making serious attempts to avoid this trap. But even they say that it is virtually impossible to make that context disappear when you have to do with artists who hardly have any resources to work with. Frie Leysen and Christophe Slagmuylder say:

*We are not interested in buying a project; we are interested to know who those artists are. Why they do what they do. How they work, where, for whom and with which. First we try to get a sense of that and afterwards we decide if we cooperate, if we invite the performance, if we produce a project or if we co-produce. Each contact develops in a different way. But generally it is difficult to take distance from the game of supply and demand. It is true that it is a market: we are walking wallets, we can provide those artists with airplane tickets, or an invitation to an international festival in Brussels. For many people you represent the hope for a future. In this context it is very difficult to push the mercantile element to the background. It makes a genuine conversation nearly impossible.*

### **Make room for exchanging ideas**

To develop a 'normal' conversation, KunstenFESTIVALdesArts drew up a number of strategies. As said before, the programmers travel alone and mostly prospect outside the festival periods... For a few years now there has also been the formula of the *touristes artistiques*. The 'artistic tourists' are a number of non-selected artists who are invited to Brussels to attend the festival as a witness, without any further expectations. Apart from a per diem allowance, they get their travel and accommodation expenses refunded. Some younger artists who do perform at the festival are also offered the opportunity to stay in Brussels before and



after their series of performances at the expense of the festival, to breathe in the festival ambiance, to see lots of performances and to meet people. Working with these artistic tourists is not a smooth magic formula. Sometimes non-selected artists interpret an invitation to be present only as *touriste artistique* as a rejection because they had hoped to appear on the poster. Yet for the artists and for the festival it is important to overcome this friction. It is way to get to know each other more closely: they not only meet Frie Leysen and Christophe Slagmuylder, but also other festival staff members, fellow artists, foreign programmers and the Brussels public.

At a previous edition of the festival - in May 2006 - Vlaams Theater Instituut and KunstenFESTIVALdesArts used the intellectual and artistic baggage that the artistic tourists brought with them to their advantage. We organised a ten-day discussion group on art and diversity, on the canon, the repertoire, on cultural traditions. The starting point was the sense that discussions concerning these topics are sometimes conducted at a far too abstract and hence generalizing level. Art, diversity, quality...: are flexible, multi-purpose terms, which easily create misunderstandings. For that reason we wanted to start from a common viewing experience for the discussions. What happens when artists from around the world see the same performance? Did everyone see the same? Which parameters can explain these different viewing experiences?

From 12 to 20 May 2006 about fifteen participants saw ten festival performances. In a small studio on the top floor of the Théâtre National, which served as the festival centre during this edition, we talked for twenty hours about what we saw. The group was partly made up of artistic tourists. Mariano Pensotti, Ho Tzu Nyen, Andrey Quamba and Frederico Paredes were artists whose work was part of the programme. Ho gave a post-colonialist lecture/performance on the construction of national identity in

Singapore. Pensotti's *La Marea* showed a staged series of tranches de vie on location. Andrey Quamba presented a double bill at Théâtre 140, with two choreographies based on improvisation exercises. Parades made a second appearance with a hybrid lecture-choreography. They all made use of the opportunity to stay a few days longer in Brussels after their performances. Others left their work at home. Choreographers Jonas Byaruhanga and Arifwaran Shaharuddin and theatre makers Agustin Meza and Paul Grootboom were invited to follow the programme a number of days. A number of art critics from the Low Countries completed the group. Wouter Hillaert and Marie Baudet write reviews for newspapers on either side of the Belgian language border, i.e. *De Morgen* and *La Libre Belgique*. Eva Wittocx, former curator at SMAK, is the programmer for visual arts and performance at STUK, the Leuven art centre. Sonja van der Valk deals with diversity and gender issues at Theater Instituut Nederland. For *VTi* researchers An van Dienderen and Joris Janssens and director Ann Olaerts took part. The moderator of the group was Bart Top, a consultant and publicist from Amsterdam, specialised in media, culture and diversity.

In short: the people present were all professionally involved with the (performing) arts, but had very diverse backgrounds: there were makers, critics, programmers and researchers from various countries and with an interest for diverse artistic disciplines. That created a strong surplus value for the debates on diversity. When referring to the 'other', the other was actually present. They talked about artistic tourists with the artistic tourists, and artists talked about their work. Apart from the members of the discussion group itself, Pichet Klunchun came to speak on his productions *Made In Thailand* (with Jérôme Bel) and *I Am A Demon*, and Frie Leysen and Christophe Slagmuylder discussed the démarche of KunstenFESTIVALdesArts. These discussions produced captivating conversations concerning topics that had

sometimes to do with diversity, and always with art. We discussed individual performances: art from non-Western countries, but also performances made here that in one way or another dealt with heritage, repertoire, cultural traditions or frames of reference. We had a conversation. We concluded with a discussion of a number of remarkable trends in the programme of 2006.

### **Diversity as a 'European' theme**

Opinions about the productions strongly diverged, as was to be expected. The question then was: which parameters can help to understand the various interpretations and evaluations? To start with, what role did the 'ethnic-cultural' background of the participants play (to use a popular term from cultural politics)? In fact, ethnicity did not play an important role at all. Neither did identifications or an emotional attachment with a certain 'people' come to the fore when discussing the productions. Except in a roundabout way: the importance of such cultural-political criteria was strongly relativised by the international guests. They strongly resisted being 'pinned down' to their origin and background.

Such a position created a certain degree of friction with the festival's objective to present non-Western artistic expressions in Brussels as an antidote against ignorance. As said before, the festival does not nourish the expectation that artists represent a country, a community or a theme (yet at the same time their testimony of the context in which they live and work is much appreciated). Frie Leysen already indicated that it is not easy to clearly communicate the dividing line to the public. For some time now, one strategy of KunstenFESTIVALdesArts has been to mention in the programme - next to the artistic discipline - not the artist's nationality, but the city where he/she works. Thus for ZOO/Thomas Hauert there is no reference to Switzerland (nationality of the choreographer), but to Brussels (his work place). But the de-

bates showed that even such careful identity markers are a very sensitive issue for the international guests. This may well have to do with the unequal production proportions in the international production circuit.

What also came up in the discussion group was that the issue of art and diversity is chiefly a *European topic*, unknown to the work of, for example, Latin-American makers. Mariano Pensotti said:

*I can feel the concept of cultural diversity is a huge subject in Europe. In Latin-America it isn't at all. Maybe this is because you recently had these immigrations. Maybe you recently discovered you're not alone in the world? I come from a country made of different cultures. Now we're a creole country, and this is not a problem at all. We made our society out of this. Our 'diversity' is about economic differences, not cultural differences.*

Frederico Paredes added:

*I detect a wave of discussions on diversity. Many people expect art to be a mirror of society, and that worries me. But if you capitalize on that - for example by using mixed casts - then you increase your chances to perform in the international festival circuit. Last year a delegation of French programmers visiting Brazil told choreographers that their work was not 'Brazilian' enough. Anticipating on stereotype expectations is rewarding.*

'Diversity' is a European theme and might lead to exoticism. For some programmers and producers, exoticism seems to be the motivation to work with 'non-Western' artists, who are put in a catch-22 position. This confirms the analysis Frie Leysen and Christophe Slagmuylde made: the relationship between Europe and the rest of the world does not go on equal terms. The 'artistic tourists' of the discussion group witness the emergence in many

countries of a lucrative but selective market for artists who are invited to adapt themselves to Western exotic taste. They are expected to create a fusion of local traditions with a modern touch. Choreographer Arifwaran Shaharuddin states:

*In Malaysia, European producers come into the country. And all of a sudden, there is a mode of production that people do to get recognition in that sense. Especially since the 90's, when Europe started looking at Asia, there's a lot of that. They say: ok, let's take traditional dance – we don't know anything about it, but and let's fuse it with 'modern'. Then you get this kind of intercultural **mix match**. To me it looks like a kind of stamp-box; you just stamp movements. Those ideas have gotten really big. At one point, it is trendy to have a traditional training. But at the same time there's a huge separation between theatres of racial groups and the English theatre.*

*The Malays and the Chinese have their own theatre groups, the Indians don't have so much of a theatre scene, and there's English theatre. Then there's this whole inferiority complex. A lot of artists feel that if you don't speak English, you're not clever. The difficult thing is that acknowledgement of work cannot come from local performers. There's always a point of comparison somewhere else. The most difficult aspect however remains the funding of work.*

'Western', Shaharuddin says, is not only about style or tradition. 'Western' here means economic and symbolic capital: not just the production resources, but also recognition, or 'acknowledgement' by being selected for prestigious stages, which in turn generate new invitations. This clearly shows that the sensitivity in talking about one's origins is rooted much deeper than the matter of identity markers in the festival communication. What really matters is who has the decision power in production and selection processes;

who is getting chances and who isn't; which criteria are used and which discourse is being used. Until further notice, the decision power concerning such matters still lies in the 'rich West'.

### ***The 'essence' of traditions***

This topic of the power structure of the trans-national production circuit explicitly came up for discussion in the context of a number of productions from the festival. For example, *I Am A Demon* by Pichet Klunchun, who explicitly presented his performance as a return to the core of the Thai Khon tradition. For sixteen years he was trained in this Khon style by his master. After spending some time in the United States and meeting William Forsythe, he had tried to modernise the style. But recently his master had died, and Klunchun felt the need to return to those roots. This biographical tale, which Klunchun came to tell in our discussion group, is also the one that he stages emphatically in *I Am A Demon*. A demonstration of Khon movements is preceded by a warm-up and followed by a video projection of the deceased master and a closing speech by Klunchun. The latter does not retreat in the skin of his Khon character. He explicitly takes distance from the aesthetics of fusion. But he staged his own biography, and as a result he emphatically distances himself from the Khon tradition in which the dancer is subordinate to his character. As a matter of fact, this suits the policy of the Kunstenfestival very well, but it might sound like a ban: is an artist allowed to represent his or her tradition?

So, what then is the essence of that tradition, and according to which parameters is its modernization legitimate, wanted, and authentic? Is this truly Klunchun's tale, or does he comply with the expectations of a Western circuit? If this is the case, does it render his work worthless? If he returns to tradition, does he represent his country and culture of origin? How does work like Klunchun's or Andreyana Ouamba's have to be presented in Brus-

sels, how should it be communicated? It is probably utopian - and perhaps not even desirable - to think that these unsolved questions, which were raised in the discussion group, could ever be answered in consensus. Let us suffice to say that the balance in the international production space turned out to be a key discussion topic, with consequences for creation, programming, presentation and communication.

### **Parameters**

It may be clear that geography took up a central position in the debates about the productions. But it seems that origin, or identification with abstract notions as 'nation' or 'people' is less important than the institutional position from which someone speaks and the context in which one works and lives. At that level, important identification processes took place that determine the position that a spectator takes with respect to art. Thus the stakes of a production like *Winch Only* were not shared by Ho Tzu Nyen. The codes and conventions of Marthaler were not illegible for him, far from, but he could not relate to the stakes of Marthaler's démarche. He had no problem in understanding the shocking confrontation with 'the other'. He saw in it a European burden, a struggle with burdens of the past, the father character, the family that was no doubt better portrayed in so many other works of art. Further on in this booklet, Ho Tzu Nyen elaborates on his position.

Paul Grootboom had a different experience. His first visit to KunstenFESTIVALdesArts was at the same time the first time in his life that he left South Africa. For him *Winch Only* was a revelation, as he was not familiar with non-narrative ways of making theatre. His distance to the cultural-political frame of reference of *Winch Only* was possibly greater in comparison with the [academically trained] Ho Tzu Nyen, but at the same time it was less problematic. Even though he was very much aware that the cul-

tural and political references and implications of the performance largely escaped him and he spent the first hour of the production groping for the story, his goodwill was not impeded. 'After an hour I adjusted my expectations, and I started to appreciate the music and the setting.' For Grootboom the festival meant a thorough challenge for his frame of reference, especially concerning the fragmentation of content. He wanted to know if the other participants did see a whole in *Winch Only*. Ho Tzu Nyen's answer was affirmative, but he rejected this whole by placing himself outside of it as a non-European.

However, it is possible for an artist to take a position with respect to a local frame of reference, without excluding outsiders. Ho Tzu Nyen's lecture performance, *Utama, Every Name in History Is I*, serves as an example. He gave a critical lecture on the way in which the (pre-)colonial history of Singapore is dealt with in history books; i.e. he gave a comment on a specific situation in local politics. But the relevance of his story transcends the local aspect, because it gave an insight in the mechanisms with which other nations construct and legitimise national myths and stories, in search of a politically interesting tale about national identity.

'In fact the combination of a lecture and a performance is particularly well suited to flexibly address the different fields of experience of the public in different countries,' added Ho Tzu Nyen in the discussion group. 'You can easily omit details or add digressions, and adapt your tale to the place where you tell it.' More in general it was striking that the 'non-Western' artists that we saw at KunstenFESTIVALdesArts had already used such mixed formats, which contained not only dance and theatre, but which reflected, by means of various strategies, on its own intentions in the performance itself. Therefore, non-Western artists do not leave the monopoly of discussing with the public up to (the communication officers of) the Western programmers. Quite a few of them start a dialogue in the performance itself.

## **Different lines of experience together make up a life story**

In the conversations on art and diversity which the discussion group conducted, several aspects were brought forward that reveal something about the relationship between art and diversity, the relationship between life and work, about the impact on making and viewing of the different lines of experience which together make up a biography. Makers and spectators turn out to be unique junctions of various wires, which are frequently related with the place where you live and work, with the (cultural-)political context, the European burden, father figures and family relations... but also with parameters that have to do nothing at all with geography. For example, artistic specialties created important fracture lines in the discussions: the choreographers talked about the dance performances on a different level; the theatre specialists talked with more subtlety about Arpad Schilling's performance than others who had never seen a production of Chekhov's *The Seagull*.

Biography and origin are crucial for the development of one's frame of reference, but so are particular affinities and special interests. But it might still be impossible to get to the heart the diversity discussion, Ho Tzu Nyen suggested during our discussions:

*I think we should try to stretch what diversity means outside of ethnic differences. Sonja was constantly reminding us of the importance of gender issues, age... But I ask myself whether all these frameworks are arbitrary, in a sense. Yesterday Frie and Christophe talked about the differences – color, middle-class, language – in their audience. But how far do we push this idea of difference? In any audience, differences can be found. If I push it to the extreme, then I'm different from myself. This may seem like an abstract, academic approach, but the two are related. Direct political concerns are important but if we limit ourselves to this, we might never reach the*

*root. We might want to stop by defining differences through the 'other'.*

## **Clumsily, or not at all?**

All these geographical and social aspects give evidence of a particularly complex dynamics in discussions on art and diversity. They constantly evolve. Depending on the discursive context, the topic of discussion, the person one is speaking to... different lines of experience come to the fore. Who is sitting around the table? How formal or informal is the conversation? Do we speak about art or about diversity? Pichet Klunchun plays another role in Thailand than in Brussels. At home he tries to activate and modernise a tradition that mainly functions in a tourist context. In Europe he takes distance from fusion and pleads for a return to essence and tradition. Then there is also the difference between intentions and perceptions, which means that one artist can take up several roles, or can be assigned a role involuntarily by an ignorant public or by brokers in an international circuit.

In such a context, it is not so simple to bring the basic principles of KunstenFESTIVALdesArts into practice in a consistent manner. In practice they give cause to a number of frictions that are ingrained in the international production space to such an extent that it seems particularly difficult, if not impossible to escape from them. It turns the festival into a process of searching, clashing and finding, an ongoing search for new and better answers, new interpretations of what art can be, new ways to present the diversity of the global society as well as possible during one month a year in the different art houses in Brussels. Frie Leysen: 'In fact it is not possible. But that does not release us from the necessity to try. I prefer clumsily to not at all.'

# Impotent fathers and mystified masters. A dialogue about 'Asian – European' foundations<sup>2</sup>

Ho Tzu Nyen

**Joris:** *I think it might be a good idea if you start by describing your relations to 'Europe'. What does this concept or reality mean to you?*

**Tzu Nyen:** I was born – and still live in Singapore. Singapore was a British colony from 1819 until the 1960s. It is a little complicated to state the actual date for the withdrawal of British power, but the official date for Singapore's independence is 1965. This is one way by which I can begin to speak of my relationship to 'Europe'. But of course, England is only a very small part of 'Europe' – an entity which I think you have quite rightly suspended between quotation marks.

Singapore's relationship with the British is one that I will describe as being at once near, yet distant. Like many Singaporeans of my generation, I have very little emotional attachment to Britain. Yet many scions of well-to-do Singaporean families in Singapore continue to be educated in the best of the English educational system. In fact, many of our first generation 'post-colonial' leaders were themselves educated in England. Hence it should come as no surprise that Singapore's 'post-colonial' Constitution is largely inherited from the British.

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2. This is an imaginary dialogue written by Ho Tzu Nyen, and based on Joris Janssens's suggestions of what could be discussed in this contribution.

One British legacy that is most profoundly entwined in our everyday existence is language. In Singapore, English is our working language. Yet at the same time, we brutalize the sanctity of Queen's English, and bastardize it with Chinese, Malay and Tamil phrases.

In any case, my linguistic indoctrination in English has in large part produced the parameters of my cultural framework – one which is susceptible to Anglo-American influence. But as things turned out, I began to engage more intensely with the cultural productions of other 'European' countries – especially with Italian, German and French art and philosophy, all of which are mediated through their translations into English. As a result, while these 'European' lines of thought are crucial to my own development, a certain kind of distance to 'Europe' is always present.

So to answer your question of what this concept or reality of 'Europe' means to me – I guess it is an experience of a kind of distance, no matter how close it may be.

**Joris:** *I listened to recordings of the discussions we had, and I would like to ask you to comment more on your seemingly negative appreciation of Christoph Marthaler's **Winch Only**, specifically its replay of what you described as the family/father drama that you called typically European and found obsolete...*

**Tzu Nyen:** Before I begin, I should like to state that my appreciation might be more accurately described as a 'dialectical' one - in the sense that what I found to be so accomplished in **Winch Only**, is also precisely what I found to be problematic about it. The piece was formally exquisite, the set astounding and the performance excellent. It was 'airtight', which also means that it felt 'airless' to me.

I should also add that as I am only conversant in English, much of the dialogue of the piece was lost on me. Yet at the same time,

despite my linguistic alienation, what unfolded on stage seemed rather familiar – a replay of the bourgeois familial romance.

Of course this was the bourgeois family gone neurotic. Yet the representation of this neurosis is at least as old as Freudian accounts of the Oedipus complex, diagnoses that have been repeated endlessly, like an interminable psychoanalytical session - expensive, confessional, and fixated on the past.

To be fair, Marthaler seemed to be consciously using this highly caricatured family affair as a trope for the neurosis inherent within a certain vein of the 'European' Tradition – hence the piece's relentless pastiche of 'European' dramatic genres, and the assignment of different 'European' languages to each of the characters.

But this brings me back to your earlier question of what 'Europe' is. Do the languages that the various characters speak truly reflect the linguistic diversity of the place we call 'Europe' today? Is the dysfunctional bourgeois family unit still an adequate trope for the problems facing us today?

Is there a point where such a production, for all its critical intention, becomes a kind of staged self-flagellation that an audience, hidden safely in the darkness of the theater can observe from the sidelines?

**Joris:** You mentioned too that you saw this theme of the 'Father' in Pichet Klunchun's **I am a Demon** as well...

**Tzu Nyen:** That's right. Before I begin commenting on this intriguing piece, I'd like to quote here the festival's write-up about this production.

*He (Pichet Klunchun) patiently spent three years as the disciple of Chaiyot Khummanee, learning the foundations of Khon, Thailand's traditional dance. But in the orient a master*

*does not pass on how it is done; instead he slowly reveals the disciple to himself. To dance the giant 'demon', the sophisticated acquisition of codes remains sterile unless the pupil lets nature and time enter his movement, unless he awakens the other(s) in his body who are sleeping: like giving birth to yourself. After **Shoes & the sacrifice of Phya Chattan** (2005), Pichet Klunchun performs his latest interpretation the ancestral yak (demon) and pays homage to his master whose image appears. A long way from folklore and firmly embedded in the contemporary, this is a bare and refined work on the spiritual essence of his dance form.*

Pichet Klunchun is an excellent performer, and his performance very thought-provoking. But when I read this description and recall the performance, I cannot help but experience a flood of stock images – images of the inscrutable Father/Master from the 'Orient' punishing the Son/Disciple – for his own 'good', as it were. The disciple discovers the power within himself – he becomes a Man, not just any man, but the (new) Master.

This is the plotline of almost every martial arts movie made in Hong Kong, as much as it is the story of many Hollywood films such as *Karate Kid* (with its Japanese karate master) or *Star Wars* (with the undeniably 'Asiatic' Yoda). Such a narrative seems to resonate with one of Confucius's most famous dictates – first the regulation of self, followed by the regulation of the family, and finally the regulation of the state. This is a technique of self-repression seen as key to external dominance. Confucianist themes of this kind have a rather disturbing echo for someone like me – someone living in a state dominated by a repressive patriarchal society, which is incidentally a system common to quite a number of 'Southeast Asian' states, including Thailand.

At the same time, I feel that inherent within Pichet's piece (and the festival's description of it) is also a field of radical pos-

sibilities. Namely – an awareness of the irreducible otherness within the 'self'. For me, the crux of the piece lies precisely in how this sense of otherness is treated. The description seems to hint that this otherness was heroically mastered, so that Pichet, in 'giving birth to himself', can emerge as a unified Man – the great fantasy of 'Western' Enlightenment. The child becomes the Man, the primitive into the modern, the raw into the cooked, the traditional into the contemporary.

But Pichet's performance is not nearly so 'airtight'. His emergence into his own – is also the very moment that he becomes a double of his Master. The Master haunts him, possesses him without end. Perhaps 'giving birth to yourself' is not interesting enough. Perhaps one should perpetually give birth to a host of bastards. Perhaps to be truly demonic, one must also give birth to one's father.

Could the slow death of the neurotic, impotent European Father in Marthaler produce a sense of nostalgia for the God-like Asian Father of Pichet?

**Joris:** *This brings me to the question of power structures, where European money drives an interest in multiculturalism or 'non-Western' cultures. What do you think of so-called 'non-Western' artists having to be 'representatives' of their cultures?*

**Tzu Nyen:** This is a highly unfortunate state of affairs that every festival programming 'non-Western' artists gets enmeshed into. I have no doubt that many such festivals, like the KunstenFESTIVALdesArts, exert no such pressures on the artists. Yet I have the feeling that such a state of affairs can sometimes be inevitably reproduced in the very terminologies and patterns of descriptions overlaid onto the 'non-Western' performances. Moreover, no degree of sincerity and goodwill on the part of 'European' festivals can prevent some of these 'non-Western' artists from self-con-



sciously playing into the game of being cultural representatives.

This being said, I should rather like to approach your question from another angle. Namely - every artist could in some way be understood as bearing the imprint of his own milieu, in the shape of his figure, in the signature of his gesture, in the grain of his accent. He does not need to represent his culture - his culture is like a scar, inscribed and branded all over his body.

**Joris:** *In our discussions, you frequently referred to this lively discussion in Asia, about how sometimes 'non-Western' art is perceived as imitation and 'bad copying'.*

**Tzu Nyen:** In many of the 'Asian' art historical symposiums and conferences that I attend in my guise as an art historian, I am always struck by a kind of 'anxiety of influence' that permeates proceedings. Art historians whose works are staked on the relevance of the Asian art works they study, always seems obliged to explain away the 'embarrassing' phenomenon of, for example, a 'cubism' profoundly misunderstood by a South-east Asian artist practicing it 30 years after Picasso and Braque. This 'anxiety of influence' no doubt resonates with the larger postcolonial anxieties of many of these 'non-Western' nations, in their search for autonomy from the 'West', their quest for identity and individuality.

I will like to propose that the category of the 'bad copies' is no longer very productive. Rather, there are only 'strong' and 'weak copies'. A 'strong' copy transforms not only the meaning of the 'source' or the 'original', but throws into question our received assumptions about what originality itself can mean.

Sometime ago, P.F Jenkins, in studying the song of a bird called the Saddleback, which lives on islands off New Zealand, showed that song patterns were not inherited genetically. Rather the young male adopted songs from his territorial neighbors by imitation, like how we learn language. Interestingly, a new song

was invented when a mistake in the imitation of the old one occurred. He refers to the origins of new songs as 'cultural mutations'.

To bring the point of my argument into more familiar human territories, we can refer to Walter Benjamin's very interesting comments in 'The Task of the Translator'. For Benjamin, the process of translation should not be judged in its fidelity to the 'original.' Instead, he wrote: 'no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness of the original. For in its afterlife - which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living - the original undergoes a change'. Translation transforms the meaning of the source; the son gives birth to the father.

# Some conclusions: qualities of intercultural processes

## CHALLENGES IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

Some organisations and artists covered in our book have traveled further in their pilgrimage than others. Yet all practices are still experimental. All our stories exposed some frictions, which shows that relating to the diversity in our society is still a case of trial and error. There appear no ready-made recipes to 'interculturalise'. You know where to start, but you are not sure where you will end up. We encountered no clearly defined and coherent method which could be applied bluntly in any new setting or project. Nevertheless, the processes we documented also had a number of features in common. This is not only a question of practical *do's* and *don'ts* (i.e. methodological details). In the first place this is about a basic mindset, a mentality. This is about the will not only to blame others after a confrontation, but also to question oneself. Then, there has to be an innovative dialogue with others to think about the challenges which a changing society presents to artistic practice. In this chapter, we summarise the main conclusions of the research done for *Tracks*. First, we will consider these challenges. Last, we show a number of features or qualities the most interesting artistic processes had in common.

### ***The trap of stereotyping***

The debate about art and diversity in society usually starts with the presupposition that there is not enough 'colour' on the stages, in the halls, or behind the scene. This leads to strategic discus-

sions about the best way to try to 'catch up' with demographic evolutions. In 2006 the Flemish Culture Minister Bert Anciaux (SP.A- Spirit) presented his 'Actieplan Interculturaliseren' (action plan for promoting interculturalism). Here, he introduced a ten per cent norm. He concludes that – since ten per cent of the population of Flanders 'consists of people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds' - this must be reflected, for example, in the boards of large cultural institutions. This strategy generated both approval and opposition. Critics maintained that interculturalism is more than a question of colour, ethnic or cultural background. Various participants in our survey also commented: 'There isn't a single artist who wants to be labelled on the basis of such external elements.'

Labelling on the basis of origin evokes opposition, as we have seen above, amongst the international visitors at the KunstenFESTIVALdesArts. Initially, the festival brochure stated the countries of the invited artists as an epithet. Since then, the organisation has become well aware of this sensitivity and is taking initiatives to avoid *typecasting*. This is also a major concern which the organisers of 0090 arts festival (a festival which is geared explicitly to art related to one country of origin, Turkey) have expressed on behalf of these so-called 'foreign artists'. Such a term creates an undesirable gap between 'foreign' and 'indigenous' artists. Moreover, it denies that there is a major difference between different countries of origin. The Union Suspecte theatre company also reacts disparagingly to such narrow mindedness 'because of the forcible reductionism which is conveyed therein'. In general, one's artistic identity is deemed more important than one's country of origin.

Identity markers are a hugely sensitive issue. Various factors could explain this. The source of the problem is related to a power struggle. Who distributes the resources for artistic production? And on what basis is this distribution carried out? In other words,

what are the requirements which 'new' artists have to meet in order to enter the artistic sector?

The problem is found at different levels. At the international level, it emerges from the stories told by KunstenFESTIVALdesArts and the 'Open Doek' film festival as well: exchanges between Europe and the rest of the world do not proceed on an equal basis. It is usually Western countries that have means of production at their disposal and set the agenda. Power structures from the former colonial world continue to operate.

In Belgium, people of mixed origin who want to become an artist occupy a complex position. Of course, all new artists face thresholds which impede their entrance into the artistic sector. Even 'indigenous' artists have to plot their own course by convincing people of their art. Not only governments, which provide subsidies. They also have to gain the approval of programme planners, administrators, directors, and gallery owners. But a different ethnic or cultural background undoubtedly complicates matters. At first sight, it sometimes looks as though artists with mixed origins even enjoy certain benefits. More and more organisations are promoting 'intercultural dialogue'. Governments at various levels are developing initiatives. A non-Western background seems to open some doors. 'I have some mates who play some super music, but they don't have the same opportunities because they are white,' says mc Sibò Kanobana from the young hip hop crew Mobassik.

There are opportunities in the short term for artists with 'foreign' roots. However, we need to consider the long-term consequences. The opportunities might lead to numerous traps. There are often stereotypical expectation patterns towards artists with a non-western background. Union Suspecte and the people behind the 0090 arts festival, like so many others, were first referred to social-artistic and welfare funds. Flemish policy-makers and programme planners like to think, and tend to think, that this work

has a social point about it, rather than an artistic one. Social expectations and stereotyping help to explain why most of those involved in *Tracks* stress the artistic identity and point of their work so much. A good many organisations say that art must have an aim of its own. Art must not become instrumentalised and does not have to facilitate or compensate for anything.

All new artists are faced with thresholds. But artists from non-Western backgrounds also often have to face an implicit, yet stealthy ethnocentricity, or Eurocentrism as the case may be. When it comes to art, a 'European' background is often regarded as superior in comparison with other non-Western backgrounds. And so, the idea spreads that there is no theatre in Islamic countries, for example. Sometimes, non-Western art is associated with tradition, and pre-modern stages of development. Non-western cultures are often frozen in time: they are situated outside our (post)modern era. Non-western art can only be regarded as essentially traditional from a Eurocentric perspective. In that case, if it is supposedly authentic and representative, it must not be defiled by 'western' influences.

Artists who succeed in acquiring a reputation usually manage to overcome such prejudices. Yet several 'coloured' artists feel that such clichés are a serious impediment which prevents them from entering the 'regular' artistic sector. It is as if people do not want to judge them by their artistic merit. It either excludes them or includes them for reasons which many consider to be wrong. This gives rise to a miserable predicament. The 'other' artist not only have to produce good work. He or she also has to solve the problems of the sector which is 'too white'. This might be too much for one person. The artist is given the troublesome job of defending not only his or her own artistic point of view, but also that of an entire generation or culture towards which he or she is often quite critical.

## ***Art as heterotopia***

An excessive focus on an ethnic or cultural background can act as a lens that obscures many other dimensions and parameters – including artistic quality. Target group policy produces stereotypes. It stigmatises and is counterproductive. It disguises the fact that so-called 'foreign' artists want to be *artists* first and foremost rather than social workers. Maybe 'diversity in society' has for too long been associated with welfare matters and social disadvantage. This would explain the marked emphasis of those involved on the artistry of their approach. They reject the direct association of an artist with his or her background. In order to counteract stereotypes, they often distance themselves from the social or corporate side effects of their practice.

However, this emphasis on the artistic element does not exclude the possibility that artists also might have other objectives. Art can, of course, represent a change in mentality, cause paradigms to switch, provoke categories, contain relevant and urgent propositions in itself, or even provide entertainment and relaxation. An artistic perspective certainly does not exclude other possible effects of art. In this connection, there is an interesting view of art as a 'heterotopia' which emerges in the story of the MuHKA, Antwerp's museum of contemporary art.

At the end of 2003, MuHKA presented work by the Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, more specifically his *Cittadellarte* project. *Cittadellarte* is an artistic laboratory situated in a disused industrial site in northern Italy. The site consists of different *uffici* - 'offices' - where artists think about the relationship art maintains with other domains in society: education, politics, philosophy, religion, economics... It is implied that art differs radically from these other disciplines, but at the same time it is not totally cut loose from them. At least, art has something interesting to say about them, says Pistoletto: 'Artists have a unique and com-

pletely free way to understand and analyse society, and hence be involved with it,' he states.

Art makes a historically acquired claim to its own logic and dynamics. However, this does not mean that artists are doomed to stay in their ivory towers. On the contrary, their individuality can be the starting point for major commitment. In fact, the creativity and uniqueness of art is the starting point for this involvement. So this is about art which distances itself from ivory towers, but does not surrender its individuality. It is not an instrument to be used for social or educational purposes but can be combined with social questions.

To pinpoint this relatively autonomous position of art, the Belgian sociologist Pascal Gielen referred to the concept of 'heterotopia', coined by the French philosopher Michel Foucault in 1967 (in his lecture *Des espaces autres*). Just like a utopia, a heterotopia is 'another space', a site where an alternative logic can prevail. But whereas 'utopia' literally refers to a space that does not exist, the heterotopia is a space in reality. Foucault says that every society has places like that: the cemetery or the garden, and the theatre, the cinema and other cultural infrastructures as well.

Since Foucault's lecture, 'heterotopia' has been a popular term in reflections about art and its position in society. In fact, it is hardly a coincidence that precisely MuHKA collaborated with Michelangelo Pistoletto. Neither is it surprising that MuHKA catalogues refer to this concept of 'heterotopia'. It appears to be an interesting searchlight to look at the way this museum positions itself vis-à-vis society: it is claiming its artistic identity affirmatively, but working from a genuine commitment towards its mission of being a public institution.

More generally, this mix of determination, flexibility and commitment – in Pistoletto's slipstream – seems to be typical for a lot of work covered in our book. The musicians of the Krijtkring, for instance, always start from an artistic concept and at the same time the group aims to make music for which there is a social basis in

Morocco and Brussels. They ask questions about the meaning of art and simultaneously they reflect on the question of what diversity in society actually is. As dramaturge Hildegard De Vuyst, who is employed by the Brussels city theatre KVS and who worked with Alain Platel on *VSPRS*, stresses: 'If you are an artist, you enter into a relationship. You speak to someone, you don't just speak to yourself, do you? Your relationship is you're an interesting discussion.'

### **Identity dynamics**

Quite a lot of artists and organisations in *Tracks* fiddled around with excessively static views of culture and identity, such as simplistic 'us-them' blueprints. They do this by mixing symbols and icons and by breaking down myths, clichés and taboos. They examine hybrid positions which arise out of multiple identities and arts. Sibobana is one of the mc's of Mobassik, a hip-hop crew rapping in French, Dutch, English and Swahili. He says: 'We know that what we do is actually indigenously Belgian. In Africa, we would never have done what we do now. Africa is a different context, there is a different network of musical influences. What we are proving is that Africa is present in Belgium and is finding its own way, its own voice.'

Flanders, Belgium, Europe... are places of change which are constantly modifying their forms. An artistic perspective apparently offers opportunities to 'inject viruses' into self-satisfied identities which circulate here – to paraphrase the view of the KVS. This new concept of identity is very much related to the concept of 'identity dynamics', coined in the nineties by anthropologists Rik Pinxten and Ghislain Verstraete: identity is something dynamic and concocted which nonetheless can never be divorced from contexts and situations in which processes occur.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Rik Pinxten en Ghislain Verstraete (red.), *Cultuur en macht. Over identiteit en conflict in een multiculturele wereld*. Antwerpen, Houtekiet 1998.

In many projects in this book, the examination of identity dynamics acts as a mainspring. The 'sense of being an outsider' permeates the work of photographer Charif Benhelima. His first book *Welcome to Belgium* is an attempt to reconstruct this feeling with photographic means, by making portraits of for instance refugees and asylum seekers. Mika Hannula wrote in a text about Benhelima's work:

*I am convinced that the only way we can deal with and confront with the question of identity is to allow it to be truly a process. (...) It is a process in which it is relative futile to reach out to something solid and authentic. A process during which the point is what you make with the ingredients that are given to you, how you mix them and how you achieve new ingredients to your daily life called mess. It is not a soap, but a game for survival. A game within which you know that you have to be innovative, but also honest to yourself, because that is all you got and get. It is a game of identity in which, in fact, anything can potentially be part of it, but in which not everything is. It is again what you make with it, how you define yourself and your surroundings, and ultimately, how you negotiate your being-in-the-world with people next to you.*

Theatre-maker Michael De Cock makes no apologies for doing 'documentary theatre'. His work is about the artistic interpretation of stories of refugees and first generation immigrants from Morocco, never heard by the white middle classes. In Mobassik's case, this search for multiple identities is the driving force behind their raps in Swahili, English, French and Dutch. Els Dietvorst, together with the participants in her local project, searched for a new nickname: in the course of time, they all felt like 'swallows'. Through performing, rehearsing, making films, works of art and exhibitions, through living together, a new identity was developed

collectively. Union Suspecte opts for mixing traditions and frames of reference. Traditional Arabic and Catholic icons and symbols are put into a completely different context: this is meant to be a kind of alienation, as a reaction against emerging anxiety reflexes concerning identity.

Such artists raise questions about the search for identity in a society in which previously clear identity profiles (of the nation state, continent, colonial relations, etc.) are losing their significance. Their art gives an account of the cultural hybridisation, the wave of immigrants, and the diversification of the population. Through their creations, these projects and processes question the reductionism of Eurocentric, static, essentialist, and neo-colonial presuppositions.

### **Bridging the gap**

A possible strategy to avoid stereotyping is to respect the non-reducible character of each individual artist or cultural expression. Several artists and art organisations from Flanders and Brussels are searching for strategies to put these theoretical issues into practice. For example, the guides of the MuHKA wish to be able to adapt to the interests of 'any visitor whatsoever at any time'. As we have seen above, artist Ho Tzu Nyen felt there was little value in continuing to define 'difference' in terms of 'someone else'. Likewise, discussions in the Netherlands have shown that an approach geared to one target group hardly squares at all with the way 'foreign' creators themselves want to be seen. This might produce visible results in the short term, but in the long term it might prove counterproductive. Specific multicultural assignments can give rise to segregation and ghettos. These were the findings of the Dutch researcher Sandra Trienekens some years ago in her study *Urban Paradoxes*. In the Netherlands in recent years, there has been an increasing turning away from the target-

group policy which has given rise to the existence of a separate circuit. This circuit still exists today, but one now hears more pleas for strategies geared towards mainstreaming in which attention to the social diversity of the art world is an absolute must.

In Belgium, too, there is a consensus that mainstreaming might be the preferable long-term solution. Nevertheless, the strategy of trying to represent those deemed 'minorities' is applied. In the debate following the presentation of Anciaux's Action Plan, there was more than just suspicion. There were also voices pleading once again for more representation, for 'gentle compulsion' by means of quotas. This line of reasoning is not based on a naïve blind spot for the sticking points of this approach. There is a general awareness that these are not suitable instruments in the long term, but some say that these objections are 'gradually becoming superfluous discussions about inevitable teething troubles'. At present, there is a gap and in the short term this gap needs to be closed. That is their logic.

This same idea also pops up as a motive in some stories in *Tracks*. Sure, the selection of 'foreign' participants in the CORDOBA training and employment project is done on the basis of their skills. They are not just approached as 'target-group game'. Nevertheless, such initiatives stem from a concern about a lack of ethno-cultural diversity in the cultural sector. The people who have taken this initiative want more 'coloured' people to be staff member in a cultural organisation. Through the creation of role models, CORDOBA wants to make the cultural sector more attractive to professionals from immigrant communities.

A seeming paradox is to be found in the demarche of the 0090 arts festival, a showcase for artists who are linked to Turkey. The festival places great emphasis on the artistic finality of the work exhibited but its programme is nevertheless tied to art connected with one particular country, a country of origin for many migrants. The motivation for this has to do with the disadvan-

taged position of Turkey in the international network of Flemish programme schedulers. In other words, 0900 is an organisation which, if it succeeds in realising its aims, will eradicate the need for its existence.

Representation is also the basis of some important choices made by dance maker Alain Platel (Les Ballets C. de la B.). He unhesitatingly pleads for positive discrimination:

*If I'm holding auditions and I can choose between a good white candidate and a good black candidate and I still don't have enough diversity, then I will choose the black candidate – to put it bluntly. I believe that coloured people should be much more visible in Belgium, both in performances and on TV. It must become a perfectly normal thing.*

What is the importance of ethno-cultural origin to methods concerning programming, networking, audience relations and education? It is a continually recurring discussion and in different contexts a whole range of possible solutions is put forward.

On the one side there is what you might call a multicultural point of view, whereby different cultures are placed peacefully side by side but still separated from each other. In some cases, this leads to a pragmatic target-group policy, as was apparent in the story of CC Muze - a cultural centre in Heusden-Zolder, in the province of Limburg - where, at its Circo Paradiso festival, a specific area was provided for representatives of the Alevitic community. One also thinks here of the documentary theatre projects by Michael De Cock, who goes in search of underexposed stories from specific groups: asylum-seekers, palliative care patients and first-generation migrants.

Other examples emphasise on the diversity, hybridisation and fragmentation which make up group and even individual identities. They seek an exchange and crossover of different cultures,

value systems, frames of reference, styles, etc. In *Aywa!* by De Krijtkring, people from different musical backgrounds search for common ground. They blend their traditions into new, hybrid artistic expressions. There are the practices of Alain Platel and Els Dietvorst who, in their creative processes, put their own individual authorship, whether temporarily or not, into parentheses. And then there are the small-scale urban interventions of City Mine(d), where separate networks intersect each other thanks to installations, performances, site-specific projects... From the bottom up, they try to create new nodes in the urban fabric.

## QUALITIES OF PROCESSES

*Tracks* shows a wide range of strategies used by artists and cultural organisations in the context of a changing society. It leads to fundamental questions. Should an organisation or artist be 'representative' in its work or not? There are points upon which opinions vary. For some, 'interculturalisation' is something they do self-evidently, as a matter of course. Others try to stimulate the discussion and make it clearly visible on various fronts: through their work, in workshops and debates, etc. Despite such differences, in the twenty stories of *Tracks* several clear lines seemed to emerge. The most successful methods, principles, working practices, meeting skills, relationships, competences and so forth all had a number of characteristics in common. We will summarise them under five common denominators: self-reflectivity, contextualisation, long-term perspectives, reciprocity and innovation.

## Self-reflectivity

The table of contents in *Tracks* is not a list of euphoric hurrah-stories. Many artists and organisations readily admit that not everything they have tried has turned out successfully.

- Originally, the Open Doek film festival was called 'Focus on the South'. That caused confusion. Films from the South used to be seen as good simply because they came from the South. That seemed an unsustainable argument. The festival team wanted to break through this circle of 'representative viewing'. A change of name to Open Doek (Open curtain) and, more importantly, a thorough reflection on all aspects of the organisation was the result.
- After the first years of just reading to families at home, *Boekenkaravaan* (Book Caravan) also began to question its basic assumptions. Reading purely in Standard Dutch did not adequately fulfill the dreams and wishes of the families taking part. A new project was therefore launched which would support reading in the participants' native language(s).

In various contexts, artists and organizations try things out. Some strategies work, others do not. In practice, failure can lead to different conclusions. There are organisations who throw in the towel in and find their excuses borne out. 'They' are not interested. 'It' is not in 'their' culture. Must you then take 'them' to the theatre or the museum at all costs? Other organisations analyse the causes of their failures and dare to put their hand on their heart. In *Tracks*, it is exactly this second class of organisation which, learning from a previous failure, can look back on an interesting trajectory.

To dare to question oneself is a primary condition and begins with self-knowledge. In practice, many strategies have been de-



veloped in order to increase self-reflectivity. This can happen by making one's own position and viewpoint more explicit. We generally experience a lot of things as being natural and self-evident, but much of our perception is culturally programmed. Scrutinising your own selection criteria, trying to make your opinions more explicit and discussing issues amongst the wider team and with outsiders – these are suggestions which explicitly emerge from the experiences in *Tracks*.

- The KVS talks about 'questioning one's own ideal of civilisation' by setting up far-reaching co-operative networks which touch on the foundations of every theatre: even the repertoire is radically questioned. The making of *Het leven en de werken van Leopold II* – a theatre text by Flemish dramatist Hugo Claus about the colonial history of Belgium, led to the founding of the so-called Green Light group, consisting of artists, writers, and performers of Congolese or African origin. They organize lectures and exhibitions, perform in KVS productions and even staged a Congolese adaptation of Arne Sierens's play *Martino*. Jan Goossens, artistic director of KVS, says: 'Today, you cannot mount Hugo Claus's text without involving the people who live in Brussels and are the embodiment in the present of this common past. Reciprocity was our motivation.'
- According to Els Dietvorst, you can attempt to relativise your own frame of reference by partly renouncing your authorship. The group of Swallows made artistic choices which she herself would never have made. It is a risk, Dietvorst states, 'since you're paddling a canoe without knowing where it's going.'
- HETPALEIS makes use of a so-called Diversity Plan, an instrument the Flemish government developed to stimulate intercultural dialogue through human resources management.

Their plan makes mention of a self-inquiry exercise that was carried out with the help of the Karel de Grote Hogeschool. One of the crucial points was that the cultural determinism of the personal perspective was laid bare in the selection procedure. This diagnosis was an objectified basis upon which they based further actions.

Questioning your own character and recognisability, eliciting feedback about your means of communication with regard to the use of image and language... Which position do you hold as an organisation or artist in the art and cultural world? Which power position do you adopt, which share of the resources do you have, what 'symbolic capital' does your organisation possess? Polishing up your own 'cultural' lens can lead to another way of collaborating with 'others'.

- Genres and formats are usually ideologically and politically charged. In the use of photographic and audiovisual media, it is certainly important to adopt a position with regard to such connotations. Certain formats may greatly narrow the possibilities for interculturalisation.
- Open Doek looks very critically at a certain type of film which responds to the needs of western programme schedulers who want to show their audience an exotic or folkloric image of the South. This reminds us of one of the concerns of the 'touristes artistiques', the international guests at the KunstenFESTIVALdesArts: in various countries outside Europe there is a market for work that is intended to meet the growing demand for fusions of 'modern' and 'traditional' styles.
- De Krijtkring took the initiative for *Aywa!*, a project in which musicians from Belgium and Morocco fused rural Berber

music with European improvisation. The musicians reflected on the consequences of the project for the life of the musicians in Morocco. They continue to develop suitable formats to present the fused compositions, both here and there.

- Photographer Charif Benhelima engages critically with his medium and various sub-genres, formats and techniques. He emphasises that his questioning of photography in his biography led him to create the moving and respectful photobook *Welcome to Belgium*.

Finally, self-reflectivity is also about reflecting on your capacities and your boundaries, as a artist and as an organisation. Interculturalisation requires efforts in the area of re-schooling, manpower, organisational change, etc. A realistic set of expectations is important in this regard. In the short term, there will of course be some 'loss-making' activities. In itself, that need not be a disaster if it is more or less factored in beforehand. What can people accomplish and when? Experience shows that you must first clarify what you expect of yourself and of others.

### **Contextualisation**

There are artists and organisations who perform in the streets to attract chance passers-by. Others organise specific efforts to reach various types of target groups: not just ethno-culturally defined communities but also youngsters, senior citizens, blind people, 'swallows', politicians, prisoners or artists. Such decisions sometimes depend on external factors. Artists or organisations do not have unlimited freedom of choice. It is a recurring mantra in many books on diversity, also outside the cultural field: diversification means taking account of contexts and is therefore strongly dependent on environmental factors.

Artists and organisations live and work in a city, municipality or neighbourhood in which a lot of people and associations are active. They are all potential partners and accomplices. With well-developed partnerships and the help of intermediaries an organisation can anchor itself firmly in the local community. This can also contribute to building up an (intercultural) audience. However, one should not expect any rapid increase: the careful establishment of contacts only bears fruit in the medium term.

- The KVS employs an audience development officer, Maya Galle, who is present in local clubs and societies, and not just when flyers need delivering. She says: 'Networks exist, which means you don't have to invent them – you have to get integrated. The first thing I tried to do was get in touch with some neighbourhood associations. For some people this might seem a waste of time, but I know it's important. To gain confidence and to show that KVS finds neighbourhood festivals important. And what do you see? When KVS left its infrastructure in Molenbeek we organized a street party, and everyone was there.'
- City Mine(d) makes use of the city's vacant buildings. Unused premises are transformed into places for experiment and creativity. In doing so, they work together with various local partners. Through their actions they are establishing a network which creates a link between politics, the market and civil society.

A social environment has many dimensions: historical, demographic, geographic, linguistic, etc. Settling into your environment means building knowledge of political and economic backgrounds and histories. The establishment of long-term learning processes appears to be an important motivation for quite a number of organisations. A recurring chorus in *Tracks* is the topos of our 'ignorance', which surfaces at various moments in this book.

- The 0090 arts festival believes that in Flanders there is very little knowledge of contemporary art from Turkey. The dispelling of clichés about Turkey is an important mission for the initiative-takers.
- For the KunstenFESTIVALdesArts, the initial motivation is the understanding of our own 'Flemish' or, as the case may be, 'Belgian' ignorance about other, non-western cultures. Ignorance stimulates curiosity.

In addition to keeping an eye on one's surroundings, contextualisation requires that one gives thought to one's own organisation or workplace. By extension, this also means the creation of support and development potential for employees. Finally, contextualisation is also about taking care of the context of presentation.

- During the creation process, Alain Platel reveals himself as a caring 'scout leader'. He tidies up and makes coffee for the performers. He creates a warm environment as the basis for growth and creativity.
- Els Dietvorst and Orla Barry make sure that the social, legal and economic problems of the Swallows are not swept under the carpet. They are taken care of by a contact person within the organisation.
- De Krijtkring ensured a warm reception for the Berber musicians who collaborated in the creation of *Aywa!* They received overnight accommodation in Molenbeek where they were quickly able to build up contacts with the local residents. In addition, at their request a number of excursions were organised, to the seaside and various art cities. As a result, they came to know more about Brussels and Belgium and the social and

artistic biotope of De Krijtkring. This contributes to a more profound partnership, says artistic director Luc Mishalle.

- In the start-up phase, the intercultural website Kif Kif devoted a lot of time to the development of a good supporting structure for the volunteers who, in turn, prop up the organisation.
- The intermediaries at the MuHKA are searching for an approach which is tailor-made for each visitor. The comfort of the spectator is an important parameter in this regard.

### ***Long-term perspective***

Interculturalisation requires a tailor-made approach. There are no fixed scenarios. This means that time becomes a crucial factor. It was a recurring discussion in the processes that we described in *Tracks*.

- Alain Platel does not work with a fixed troupe in his creations. He is also always looking for less obvious performers, such as children, dogs or blind people. He therefore makes provision for a long rehearsal period when he begins work on a new production with a clean slate and a fresh cast. 'The cast is the dramaturgy of the production', says Hildegard De Vuyst.
- The musicians from De Krijtkring need time to look for common ground with the musicians from the Moroccan mountain villages.
- When Michael De Cock draws up an open long-term plan for his docu-theatre project with first generation migrants from Morocco, he has a strong idea about what he wants to accomplish, yet not all the intermediate steps are fixed in advance.

- It goes without saying that, without continuity, a long-term project such as *De terugkeer van de Zwaluwen* ('The Return of the Swallows') would quickly die a silent death. For the artistic process, time is a necessary condition in order to build up trust with participants or partners.

'Time' also seems to be an important factor at a more organisational level. The process of change in organisations moves very slowly. It requires patience to get everyone moving in the same direction. Unexpected obstacles crop up. Many organisations make the same mistakes. It is therefore important to learn about the experiences of others. At the same time, the importance of handbooks (and so also of *Tracks*) is relative. Many of those involved indicate that interculturalisation is a process of learning by doing.

The fact that it is so difficult to draw up generic measures is naturally a good thing according to Michiel Van de Voorde of the Flemish Ministry for Work and Social Economy. The relative unpredictability of interculturalisation makes it easy to make a start on it without too much bragging. Therefore, the Flemish government's Diversity Plans have been developed as flexible instruments which offer a wide range of possibilities. This allows each organisation to make a choice itself, with the help of the correct expertise of consultants who can draw on examples from others. The systematic approach is therefore mainly about committing yourself to checking, after a sufficient period of time, which of the objectives have been achieved.

The bumps and bruises which occur here and there show that the fine-tuning of artistic practice for a diverse society is always pioneering work. It is the result of enthusiasm and a sense of enterprise, of daring to innovate and test out new formats. It therefore happens within that type of organisations that dares to change, take risks and question their image, identity and quality stand-

ards. We see quite a number of organisations which have undergone an evolution: from thematic experiments to small-scale actions to a more forceful, structural embedding of the concern for diversity in our society.

Incidentally, it is not only from our research that this vision emerges. In the spring of 2006, Sandra Trienekens examined projects which were supported by Netwerk CS, a Dutch organisation that wants to spread expertise at the level of diversity. According to Trienekens, a long-term integral approach is the only possibility. To illustrate this, she distinguishes between 90° and 180° instruments:

Examples of 90° instruments are the introduction of middlemen (ambassadors, intermediaries), target-group orientated communication, cultural education or co-operation with ethnic minority self-help groups. These changes demand a different way of thinking from the organisation but they must be applied without completely changing the structure of the organisation beforehand. It is therefore about making a 'short turn', often involving external projects. ... The problem with these external projects is, as became clear in the previous sections, that they do not contribute sufficiently to the 180° change that an organisation must undergo in order to allow diversity to be an intrinsic component of the organisation or to internalise<sup>4</sup> it.

According to Trienekens, changes which lead to a complete turnaround of the organisation in such areas as staff policy, programming and identity, have the most effect in the long term.

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4. Sandra Trienekens, *180°. Evaluatie en eindrapport*, Rotterdam 2006: 11.

- The Arenbergschouwburg wanted to make its programming, working methods and vision more open to society. They were prepared to take the necessary risks in order to draw in other, less obvious projects. Thanks, among other things, to the recruitment of Gerardo Salinas via the possibilities the CORDOBA project offered, changes were made at the staff level. These ultimately changed the programming and the whole image of the theatre.
- At HETPALEIS, the concern for diversity began with a number of separate and short-term projects. A young, temporarily engaged diversity officer had the extremely difficult task job of 'making diversity self-evident'. That can only happen if the organisation itself wants to change at all levels. The diversity officer encountered a lot of opposition for this plans, of which some bore fruit later on: they were carried out after he left. HETPALEIS has learnt from this experience: those who experiment thematically come to the conclusion that over the course of time a more structural approach is essential.

### **Reciprocity**

Learning processes and contextualisation often happen in partnership with third parties. 'Ambassadors', volunteers or co-producers establish the link with as yet untapped networks. They supply information about how people view the organisation from the outside. This too means gaining an insight into the way you yourself function. You learn how this is perceived by others. You learn which aspects are in keeping with the interests of other people. Taking advantage of societal factors reveals possibilities. You must once again lay yourself open to question. You place responsibilities partly outside yourself by making room for initiative, openness and periods of reflection.

- The mediation method used by MuHKA's audience development staff is very interactive. This way the mediators avoid paternalism and disinterest. For visitors it is stimulating for a guided tour to be based around their own interests and dispositions.
- The Vox media-activist collective negotiates in a basic democratic manner. Anyone can join the meetings. Decisions are taken by consensus. Power is shared.

Reciprocity also appears to be an interesting strategy for facing up to the representation paradox. You can negotiate over labels and identity markers. This can enable you to avoid the sensitivity about 'pinning down according to origin'. An individual creator or spectator is then not deemed to represent his or her community. Through consultation and negotiation the various partners can be put on more of an equal footing.

- Els Dietvorst refers to herself as the 'chief' of the 'swallows' but she does depict a collective story. She does not appropriate the 'others' but continuously creates new categories and genres. For example, their wish that the film the 'swallows' made should not be shown only in underground art house cinemas was respected. They enjoyed the ultimate consecration: being screened in the huge El Dorado Hall of the UGC cinema in the heart of Brussels' traditional entertainment district.
- *Boekenkaravaan* shows a continual interplay between the families and their readers. Different frames of reference come together in a family living room. Without imposing themselves, readers try to respond to the requests of the children and the parents. For example, the children indicate what sort of book they want to read next time and the parents decide themselves whether or not they want to accompany the reader and their

children to the library.

- In the case of De Krijtkring and Platel, dialogue is the motor for the creation of a new artistic language. It is also the basis of the 'Wijk Up' neighbourhood projects, where there have been year-long negotiations regarding the programme of this small-scale neighbourhood festival – organised in the slipstream of Bruges 2002, Cultural Capital of Europe.

Interactive methods make it possible for the 'other' to put forward their own needs and interests. One does not have to enroll for a project which has already been mapped out. Space remains to participate in the design of the project. This creates involvement: both for artistic partners and employees as well as the general public.

- The programme of Circo Paradiso is completed by a number of partner organisations and neighbourhood associations, such as a home for people with learning disabilities, the local integration centre and the Alevitic association.
- In participatory projects, autobiography often forms the basis of the collaboration. This sometimes leaves little room for individual dreams, fantasies and imagination. Many 'swallows' did not want to talk about their own lives. The sharing of a theme created the chance of offering the various people involved a chance to join a communal project. The shared theme of migration and exile, articulated by Arthur Rimbaud, was the starting signal for the project of the 'swallows'.
- Open Doek sets up projects with youngsters, neighbourhood associations and prisoners. They share in the 'power of selection'. In the dialogue with these less known groups, affinity with the other social codes is important.

### ***Innovation, creativity, hybridisation of formats***

Genres, formats and media are themselves bearers of a certain ideological, political and social import. Just think of such dubious concepts as 'world music' or 'world film' or the distinction between so-called 'high' and 'low' culture. Terms such as 'contemporary' and 'traditional' also have clear connotations. We have already raised the point that non-western art is often associated with tradition, folklore and the past. In this context, it seems clear that it requires creativity and innovative force to put the qualities described above into practice. There is a need for new points of view, categories and art forms. The arts can be a fantastic sanctuary to develop new formats and genres.

- Cultural centre Muze in the province of Limburg undermines the all too simplistic division between elite and popular culture. Circo Paradiso searches for a compromise: the audience actively participates in the new interpretation of the fairground and the circus today. The sort of folk culture that artistic leader Tom Michielsen wants to develop is primarily about encounters between high and low culture, culture and education and between different subcultures.
- In the past, on arrival in the MuHKA each visitor used to be handed over a floor plan and a brochure. Today, the museum no longer uses standardised formats. The strategy and the instruments of mediation are reviewed for each new presentation. What does each specific exhibition require? In this way, the museum wants to respond to constantly changing circumstances: new artistic work and new visitors.
- In its site-specific performances City Mine[d] speaks to a newly found audience – found in public spaces. This means that the

certainties of the black box and the white cube have been left behind. They created a transparent bubble in which cultural activities can take place, or a tower with meeting and exhibition spaces: these are vehicles to inject new life into neglected places. They can be used by different groups to diverse ends. This way different partners get in touch with each other.

- Vox's approach is unique. Vox only exists during meetings. This is an innovative way of using audiovisual media for productions which present a different vision of society, the city and its inhabitants.

It is precisely at this level that you can see that the projects in *Tracks* are innovative. They see the diversity in society as fuel for processes of artistic creation, as a stimulus to reconsider what art is and how art is made.

## **SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

### ***A combination of perspectives and speeds***

All in all, what emerges in *Tracks* is how much we still appear to be in an experimental situation. All networks have boundaries. Nobody has an instant recipe for a diverse staffing policy or for reaching new audience groups. It is a question of searching. *Tracks* identified a wide range of practices which sometimes led to different conclusions and solutions.

Is it better to focus on target groups or rather on the non-reducible unicity of each individual? It appears that quite a number of cases combine various perspectives. After *Tracks*, we are inclined to appreciate the existence of these different perspectives alongside each other. The context in which an organisation oper-

ates is often a good indication of which perspective is most suitable. Not every organisation works at the same speed. Structural measures are better than short-term projects, but staking everything on interculturalisation is simply not viable for many organisations. Interculturalisation has many speeds. It involves tailoring and is dependant on specific environmental factors.

In the long term, it comes down to creating a context in which we shall no longer use terms such as 'immigrant', 'ethno-cultural' or even 'diversity'. For the time being, in this experimental transitional phase both perspectives can lead to renewal and innovation and in different ways. The representative perspective is of importance in getting the subject on the agenda and for the creation of the necessary resources. It can be a lever for the development of the intercultural skills of artistic and organisational employees. The more fundamental perspective can function as an experimental laboratory in which strategies are developed for the way we ultimately want to engage with this newly formed capital.

### ***New ways of thinking and assessing***

Although we are still in an experimental stage today, we at the same time see a number of common qualities emerge in the processes that have been described. Artistic practices which engage with diversity do not avoid challenges. They put themselves at the heart and try to relate to the complexity of society. Despite the great variety of possible perspectives, a common attitude emerges. The processes that we followed continually question their own assumptions in consultation with 'others'. They do not make assumptions on the basis of what seems obvious. They have an eye for the context and for dialogue and develop new perspectives and formats. These are all qualities which concern not only finished products but also creative processes.

Here are some meaningful paths for the future. The process

qualities described in *Tracks* can offer points of departure for various stakeholders. Today, both the government and cultural actors are developing initiatives. Valuable experiences are being gained in the course of the experimental quest. At this time it is very important to take stock of these and ensure that they can circulate. They can be a source of inspiration for artists and artistic organisations. As far as cultural policy is concerned, they can above all also give nourishment to the substantive development of evaluation and assessment procedures. Now that 'interculturalisation' is an increasingly popular catchphrase, they can also help external observers (authorities, advice groups, critics, etc.) with the refinement of terms which are pliable but whose content is sometimes only poorly articulated. In this way, cultural policies do not just give impulses. They also dovetail with the experiences that artistic practice learns from by trial and error every day.

### PLATFORM FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Since it was founded in 1987, *Vlaams Theater Instituut* has developed into an open organisation with strong links to both the sector itself and the policy-makers. The reason for its existence is the need for sound information among the public, theatre professionals, politicians, students, press and academics. On performing artists and their work. On cultural policy and cultural management. On international work. On developments and trends. On infrastructure, touring and art education.

*VTi* wants to provide all this information in a broad range of easy-to-use resources. To this end it currently fulfils three main functions: documentation, research and information/awareness. Its intention is in this way to contribute to the ongoing growth of the sector and help build a social environment for artistic creation.

**Documentation Centre for Theatre, Dance and Music-Theatre:** *VTi* assumes responsibility for the intensive documentation of performing arts practices. The sector and its context are observed, artistic and policy-making developments are recorded, sorted and made accessible by means of the extensive database, library and website.

**Sectorial Think-Tank in a Diverse and International Flanders:** Applied research is a major component of *VTi*'s work because it converts the information in the database and collections into a useful form. The research is applied to actual practices by means of descriptive and analytical fieldwork. In this regard, the performing arts are not simply the object of research, but also play an active part in shaping opinion.



**Critical Interface between Theatre-Makers, the Public and the Policy-Makers:** *VTi* is a place for knowledge, study and also vision. It is for this reason that it sets debates going, and wants to actively inform people and increase their awareness. Research and new insights are presented as feedback to the sector on the website, in publications and the periodical *Courant*, through the library and at study sessions. The chief concerns here are reflexive dialogue, practical usefulness and an overview of the broader picture.

In all these activities *VTi* links current events in the performing arts to long-term projects. At the moment, for example, attention is being focused on a thorough analysis of artistic practices and oeuvres, on public participation (concentrating on art education, touring and criticism) and on the challenge of international and intercultural cooperation.

## DAY-TO-DAY BUSINESS

*VTi*'s three core tasks are organically combined in its day-to-day business.

In the *VTi library* visitors can consult books, periodicals, cuttings and documentation free of charge and without enrolment. It includes:

- Documentation on organisations in Flanders
- Books on the performing arts, cultural management, policy, art education, etc.
- At least 10000 plays, in both published and manuscript form
- current subscriptions to over 100 professional journals
- Cuttings archives of relevant information from newspapers and periodicals
- A video library with over 5000 hours of tapes

The [www.vti.be](http://www.vti.be) *website* is intended to be flexible and keep pace with current news. It enables you to keep track of *VTi*'s work, with an overview of all its activities and documents. In addition, the site contains a mass of useful information on the performing arts sector: the ins and outs of subsidies, a list of first nights, the latest job vacancies, etc. An ingenious search engine also provides you with a huge amount of online information from the database.

The quarterly information booklet *Courant* keeps performing arts professionals with special topics, in-depth articles and brief news items.

*VTi* staff also answer specific questions by phone, e-mail, fax or post.

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## Colophon

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