

# Collective Curating in Performing Arts

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# Editorial

## Collective Curating in Performing Arts

Sigrid Gareis, Nicole Haitzinger,  
Gwendolin Lehnerer, and River Lin

While ‘Collective & Collaborative Curating’ is literally on everyone’s lips and phenomenal in the art world, but why is it necessary; what has it suggested; how has it been practiced and embodied, particularly in the performing-arts context?

In terms of how it works, the collective or collaborative curatorship has enacted a shared and horizontal leadership structure compared to the preconceived solo-genius curator with the top-to-bottom power structure. Furthermore, in this volume we, as a collaborative team, aim to reflect this current in a variety of cultural and institutional contexts. From examining its historical backgrounds and case studies to reimagining tuning-in and not-yet-landing issues and methods of collective curation, we acknowledge curating is not understood as a hermetic, linear process, but rather as an evolving, often negotiated practice shaped by both global and local dynamics.

We propose a cluster of several entry points to approach intersectional notions and practices of collective and networked ecosystems of curating. Together with the authors and contributors for this issue, we aim at *decentralizing* and *decolonizing* existing super-curator modes and theoretical approaches, in order to understand other ways and histories of curating and its *fabulous fabulation*, performing the *connectivity* and *transdisciplinary practices* between minds, languages, and movements in a collective curation. Through artist-led case studies, *art-based curatorial collectivity* demonstrates *social engagement* with communities of an internet of things. In performing arts, curating collectively as *tuning-in and embodied practices* performs the process of what arrived, is arriving, and gestures in *the future and not yet* while memories and archives of curatorial practices is a becoming of *post-curation*.

By consciously choosing these intersecting clusters rather than a linear chapter structure, this volume reflects the fluidity of collective curatorial processes. Each of the articles could be accessed and navigated via continually recombined keywords between the clusters, discovering unexpected connections and tracing the rhizomatic structure of curating. In the editorial Q&A session, we reflected on our collaborative process as an editorial team and presented it as unfinished. The result is not a closed system, but rather an open space for thinking and reading that invites an understanding of collective and collaborative curatorial practices as fluid, multifaceted, and transformative processes.

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# Accomplices and Allies: Curating Collectivity towards a Consent of the Heart

Sandra Chatterjee

As a dance-maker and scholar I habitually branch out into the realm of curating. While not considering myself a curator, I feel compelled to engage in the process of curating as a response to conditions I observe in the larger socio-political landscape of our times, particularly concerning socio-political realities of inequality, marginalization, exclusion and discrimination, and also as a response to the obstacles that the dance/performance (infra)structures pose to performatively addressing those realities. I therefore engage in processes of curating with very concrete intentions that emerge from my art/dance making practice and my positionality as a politically engaged human being. I see curating as a way to facilitate and offer spaces to come together in temporary collectivities, to share and exchange, to perform, present, and—importantly—to receive artistic practices and approaches that engage with and resist socio-political realities of inequality, marginalization, exclusion and discrimination. I seek to bring together people with allied intentions and open hearts. In this article, I will therefore look at two instances of collectivity: BIPOC alliances as collectivity and a collective space opened for and with the audience based on my reading against the grain of *Rasa*.

The urge to work toward a more just coexistence is the urge behind my curatorial praxis: how can we use our artistic practice to contribute to the change we want to see in the world? “Praxis”, in this context, is opposed to the notion of “practice”: it refers to an artistic praxis that critically reflects (local, national, and global) social, cultural and political contexts.<sup>1</sup> If critical art and dance making is indeed a space of certain privilege, then let’s use that space to imagine and persistently bring into embodiment—bring to life and onto the stage—a seemingly impossible radical togetherness: equality, togetherness across difference, radical self-positioning with humility, radical sharing of privilege, and decolonial practices that seem more and more impossible in our world.

Curating as Hope  
Curating as Resistance  
Curating as Persistence

This is a slow path but an important pillar of my motivation to curate. This kind of curating takes persistence, both in terms of securing funding as well as finding an audience. Curating for me has to do not only with inviting artists and featuring work, but with inviting participants, guests and partakers—artists, dialogue partners and audience participants—to spend time, share the space, share their work and their attention, to move together, to mutually engage. It has to do with attempting to create an open space that cultivates the quality of non-judgmental encounters – which I will address via a reading against the grain of the notion of *rasa*.

Curating as Bringing Together  
Curating as Assembling  
Curating as Sharing



## Curating Against the Grain | Post-migrant and BIPOC Positionality as Collectivity

Don't just follow the latest trend. Follow your critical ideas even when they go against fashion, money and recognition

Take a step out of the artworks! Engage in an ongoing dialogue with all sorts of people

Please don't treat us like the newest specimen you have discovered. Or, if we are aging, as a forgotten artist you have rediscovered, Treat us with utmost respect as peers. We will treat you accordingly. Let's develop a new trust.

Today's weather report: It's time for Anglo-America and Europe to be quiet. Humble. And listen. Listen to nature and so-called "people of color". It's your only possible redemption.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña, excerpts from "An Open Letter to the Museums of the Future."<sup>2</sup>

In Germany I curate from a postmigrant/BIPOC perspective – in other words from a politically engaged perspective that focuses on social change towards decolonization, equality and justice, equal rights and treatment, accessibility and anti-discrimination. The term person of color/people of color which is contained in the acronym BIPOC, is a politicized, emancipatory self-designation and an umbrella term that refers to "all racialized [sic] people who have different proportions of African, Asian, Latin American, Arab, Jewish, indigenous or Pacific Islander origins or backgrounds. It connects those who are marginalized by the white dominant culture and collectively devalued by the violence of colonial traditions and presences."<sup>3</sup> It gained political agency in the US Civil Rights Movements in the 1950s and 1960s and from its inception includes solidarity with anti-colonial movements across the world.<sup>4</sup>

I explicitly use this term to foreground its emancipatory political roots over a mere identity category, while I am also aware that an easy and direct transposition of this politically energized position to Germany is problematic. In a context which is disconnected from the political movement that gave rise to the position's political agency (since Germany did not have a civil rights movement), the term runs danger of being rendered non-performative on a larger socio-political level, as the groundwork that the civil rights movement accomplished are lacking.

As such – for the German context I do not want to drop the term "postmigrant" which was starting to have currency in the German artistic landscape, but seems to have been somewhat overtaken by BIPOC more recently (could this be connected to the stronger political resonance of BIPOC, which in the case of post-migrant did not come to fruition in Germany on a larger socio-political level?).

Postmigrant became-established in the German-speaking world by way of Berlin-based director Shermin Langhoff's intervention in the Theater am Ballhaus Naunynstrasse (2008–2013) (Maxim Gorki Theater 2021). This so-called post-migrant theater often focuses on narratives emerging from the realities of life for migrants of the second and third (etc.) generations, because they "are in the context of migration but are told by those who did not themselves migrate. Thus, postmigrant."<sup>5</sup> (Langhoff in an interview with Fanizadeh 2009, n. p.)



From this politically energized position<sup>6</sup> curating to me means curating against the grain – against canonical patterns, towards attempting to offer alternative visions of artistic practice and audiences, formats of presentation, but also of social coexistence, of a more just coexistence internationally. Curating against the grain involves “reading” the curatorial strategies, statements and patterns of inclusion and exclusion by institutions and festivals curated under white leadership (especially not critically-white curatorial positions and practices). This “reading against the grain” means “to read critically, to turn back, [...], to ask questions [...], to look for the limits of [those curatorial] vision[s], to provide alternate readings [...], to find examples that challenge [...], – to engage [...] to refine it, to extend it, to put it to the test.”<sup>7</sup>

Curating Sequential Collectivity  
Curating as Multiplying Voices  
Curating toward a collectivity of accomplices<sup>8</sup>

In this article, I also want to invoke a collectivity of curatorial accomplices, committed to BIPOC or critically white perspectives in curating against the grain:

Curatorial projects in which people come together to suspend these power relations—even if only for a limited period of time—have a revolutionary character. If there is a right curating in the wrong one, then it is one that creates spaces in which emancipatory struggles are combined with artistic, curatorial and cultural strategies and become places in which discriminatory routines are interrupted. It is not so much about a finished result, but about a process in which broken connections and lost trust in society and its institutions can be restored.<sup>9</sup>

In order to curate in an anti-racist way, however, it would first be necessary to take subjectivity or subjectivation into account as well as to ensure multi-perspectivity. Basically, there is a need to traverse and question all narratives and pieces in an exhibition in different ways from the outset: Whose story is being told here? Whose perspective is privileged? Which images appear? Who reads these images and how? How were the pieces generated? How are the texts created? Are the narratives and images designed to “empower” groups that have so far been underrepresented or even objectified in representations?<sup>10</sup>

For curating in the field of dance in particular, curating against the grain means working towards a consistent presence of voices, movements, dance forms, histories, stories, approaches, perspectives from historically marginalized communities in all aspects of the field of arts on and off the stage, from creation to curation to production, outreach, PR and criticism.

Dance is unfortunately one of the most closed of all disciplines. I do straddle the visual arts as well, and working with visual art curators is different, probably in theatre as well. Why is dance so behind? It could be paranoia or fear because dance is so intimate and so direct. I mean that's also why I like to make performance, because it's very intimate, but in that intense connection in a black box, people tend to be more protective or pre-emptive.

Coloniality is like something we really didn't know because we didn't encounter it, but the current dance scene is sometimes like a parallel universe and as a migrant artist, you come and it's like, how do we find the meeting point? How do we collapse the gap to have some of that communication? I feel it's also both ways. We shouldn't take it for granted that because they are hosting this, they

have the interest to work this out. We also have to learn how to communicate with them. And that's how it works.<sup>11</sup>

In the context of CHAKKARs – Moving Interventions,<sup>12</sup> a Munich-based platform I am co-directing with Sarah Bergh-Bieling, for example, we work towards these intentions by explicitly curating and creating formats from a postmigrant/BIPOC perspective. We foreground politically engaged work focusing in an intersectional way against discrimination. We curate around three core topics, 1) antiracist practices, 2) decolonizing turns, 3) forgotten dance histories. CHAKKARs is not a BIPOC-only platform, but our core topics strive to decenter Eurocentrism and whiteness, center BIPOC and post-migrant approaches, while explicitly inviting critical white perspectives.

We curate, of course, to invite audiences to witness the artists and works we invite, but we also curate to collect and tell marginalized stories and to bring (post-migrant/BIPOC) artists and practitioners of dance together and provide space for mutual sharing.

Curating as Oral History  
Curating as Community Care

### Curating to Move Allies | Curating for Consent of the Heart

The audience enters the space. In the center of the space there are buckets full of colorful flowers, along with materials required for designing and making flower garlands – Lei-making.<sup>13</sup> While walking into the room towards the central flower arrangement, the guests walk through an installation with text and audio-visual material, inviting to linger, sit, read, listen and watch:<sup>14</sup> concepts of decolonization presented in poster format, as well as texts, songs and videos, postcolonial dance and migration stories spanning Germany—Hawaii—South West Africa/Namibia and India are intended to become catalysts of the debate. Genealogies of resistance meet stories of (possible) collaboration. The aim is to enable an artistic examination of identity politics, historically situated migration histories and colonial histories that are not often considered together: German colonial history, the Indian and Hawaiian independence movements, as well as reflections on water, surfing and sailing and racism from South Africa, among others.

While sitting on the floor together, cutting and stringing together flowers, deciding on patterns, comparing, making decisions, dialogues about the works, the colonial contexts, as well as the videos and texts installed in the space were able to emerge in a relaxed atmosphere structured by a collaborative hands-on activity, even if the topics that were then discussed, spanning Hawai'i's annexation, German colonialism in South West Africa/Namibia, etc. became intense and tackled forgotten histories. The installation days concluded with curated guest performances and a panel. The transitions from dialoguing to watching and listening were initiated by welcome warmups, inviting the audience to dance together.

This is one example of how in CHAKKARs we intend to approach curating and creating spaces and formats of encounter and reception. We strive to get into dialogue with the invited artists early on around the format, as a participatory space, which invites the audience to join in moving together or making something together, which shapes the space and has emerged as a productive approach for us. We want to create welcoming, activating, sensual spaces of encounter, spaces to foster solidarity, for moving interventions.

## Curating towards a collectivity of allies | the audience as allies

Underlying my understanding of aesthetic communication with the audience and of reception is my training in classical Indian dance, and the way in which the relationship between performance/performer and audience is conceptualized. I draw on the concept of “*rasa*”, according to Rustom Bharucha “one of the most important concepts in Indian aesthetics”<sup>15</sup>. Central to *rasa* is an understanding of the open-hearted sensually literate connoisseur – spectator, the so-called *rasik/rasika*, as theorized in debates on aesthetic experience (*rasa*) emerging from the Indian subcontinent.

The theoretical vocabulary explicating this understanding of the aesthetic communication is accessible to me as a primarily diaspora-trained dancer via Sanskrit aesthetic treatises available in English translation, such as the *Natyashastra* and *Abhinaya Darpana*, which my understanding rests on primarily. It is important for me to mention here, however, that I am also tracing the concept of the *rasik* – in Baul/Fakiri musical practices<sup>16</sup>, which syncretic and anti-hegemonic strive is a continuous source of inspiration for me, even as I am not as familiar with this context. In terms of training, the complexly detailed Sanskrit debates of *rasa* are the most ingrained in my practice. As much as an understanding of *rasa* irrevocably shapes my understanding of performing<sup>17</sup> and audience-performer relationships, I also read *rasa* and particularly the *sahridaya rasika* (the spectator who has a similar/open heart) against the grain of my traditional training. In other words, I depart from the distinguished definition of the *rasika* as “noble, learned, virtuous, impartial”<sup>18</sup>, which—parallel to a European notion of taste—has class implications, and assumes the ideal spectator to be a cultural insider, well-versed in the classical (Indian) canon.

There are three aspects as articulated especially in the *Abhinaya Darpana* Abhinavaguptas 9th/10th century AD interpretation, which I want to highlight to illustrate this “reading against the grain”:

### 1. one-on-one communication

Aesthetic communication in the context of *rasa* is conceptualized between performer (or in the case of poetry, for example, the author) and each single audience member, not the audience as a group. It is therefore not looking in the first place at the numbers (“as many audience members as possible as a mass”), but the communication of each audience member within the collective of the spectators with the performance as a one-to-one communication, which I believe can and should be considered also in the context of curating.

### 2. the potential non-correspondence of *bhava* and *rasa*:

The Sanskrit debates around *rasa* distinguish the (emotional) intent performed by the performer (*bhava*) from the flavor (*rasa*) any single audience member receives, or literally tastes. The emotion performed (*bhava*) or offered by the artistic producer does not by default mean that the corresponding *rasa* is necessarily evoked in an audience member. In other words, a performance of love, or *rati bhava* does not necessarily have to evoke the corresponding *sringara rasa* (love). Although they are easily conflated and ideally do correspond, they do not have to correspond,<sup>19</sup> rejecting a direct “cause-effect relationship”<sup>20</sup> in reception. The aesthetic response depends on the intersection between the states/conditions and intentions of the performer and the predispositions and openness every individual audience member brings to the performance.<sup>21</sup> In order to receive the full flavor of a given performance, audience members have to actively participate in the act of reception, and the level of enjoyment depends on the level of knowledge an audience member already has.<sup>22</sup> In the classical understanding of *rasa*,

it is primarily an ideal spectator, “the *rasika*”, who is knowledgeable about form and content of the performance, in other words – a knowledgeable connoisseur, who is also “*sympathetic*”, or *sahridaya* — which means she or he has a similar, or an open heart.”<sup>23</sup> Rajagopalan and Bharucha define the *sahridaya* as “[a] connoisseur who [...] has been initiated into the full enjoyment of an aesthetic experience. According to the Natyasastra, the *sahridaya* must be noble, learned, virtuous, impartial, and critically responsive to the structure of emotion in a work of art.”<sup>24</sup>

Because this is the training, in which my artistic practice is grounded, I am drawn to translate these potential gaps of understanding in performance and reception into my current, critical context, which I believe can and should be addressed curatorially. When looking at BIPOC artistic practices in Europe today, for example, the gap between critical artistic productions of artists of color and largely white audiences (in identity terms, a kind of insider-outsider situation), can not necessarily only be bridged by becoming knowledgeable and a learned connoisseur<sup>25</sup>. However, being “impartial, and critically responsive to the structure of emotion in a work of art”<sup>26</sup> can be a crucial basis for facilitating the aesthetic communication, and thereby also respond with an open-heart to a work that addresses e.g. racism from a BIPOC perspective.

As a result, I have proposed in a previous article and talks, a different notion of this ideal, imaginary sympathetic viewer which is based on taking much liberty in rethinking the *rasika* defined in passed down treatises:

Applying the notion of creating *rasa* to my diasporic [BIPOC] context, I would like to see the *rasika* [...] as someone who is *sahridaya* in the sense of being willing to embark on the journey of the performance together with the performer and allow a meeting of their perspective and the performer's. I see the *rasika* in a sense as a knowledgeable ally.<sup>27</sup>

How can, therefore, a curatorial framing and the development of formats of reception facilitate such interactions between performance and audience to create a temporary “we” collectively engaged in an act of aesthetic and emotional communication?

### 3. *sadharanikaran*, the concept of making common

Another fundamental principle that becomes important here is the emphasis on the idea of ‘making common’, in other words, transcending the immediately personal. As Bharucha explains:

It is important, that “tasting *rasa*” of a particular performance constitutes a heightened experience that transcends temporal, spatial, and personal conditions and constraints. In effect, what one experiences is not just the emotions relating to a character in a particular scene, still less the personality of the actor, but a transpersonal and universalized state of emotions called *sadharanikarana* [...].<sup>28</sup>

What is interesting to me here for a border- and community-crossing artistic and curatorial praxis is the non-dependence on connections and resonances based on familiarity and commonality and based on identity or positionality. The idea of trying to make common by way of transcending the immediately personal opens in my understanding – the possibility for ally-ship. Rather than presupposing expert knowledge for achievement of the ideal emotional correspondence to “taste the *rasa*” of the performance, I am interested in the notion of the open, or sympathetic heart, or, in Bharucha's terms “the consent of the heart”:

Nonetheless, its consensual and participatory pleasure is made possible to connoisseurs of the arts, who are called *rasika* or *sahridaya*, whose ‘consent of the heart’ makes the experience of *rasa* at once immediate and indivisible.<sup>29</sup>

Together with my colleague from the Post Natyam Collective<sup>30</sup>, Cynthia Ling Lee, I have expanded this understanding by invoking the *rasika* as a political ally, who can be sympathetic without being deeply knowledgeable in the art form, without directly identifying with the performer/protagonist, but to receive and be moved by what they are not familiar with, do not understand. Drawing on Jose Esteban Munoz<sup>31</sup> we concluded that “[p]oliticizing the *rasika* potentially informs ‘an anti-identitarian identity politics’ in which commonality is not forged through shared images and fixed identifications but fashioned instead from connotative images that invoke communal structures of feeling.”<sup>32</sup> (Esteban Munoz 1999: 176, original emphasis).

[...] A politically re-appropriated *rasa* would, to recontextualize David Halperin’s words, entail ‘cultivat[ing] that part of oneself that leads beyond oneself, that transcends oneself’; as Jose Esteban Munoz states, ‘[t]his moment of transcendence is the moment in which counterpublics become imaginable; it is a moment brimming with the possibility of transformative politics’ (1999: 178, 179).’’

When setting out to rethink the open-hearted spectator in curatorial and critical artistic praxis, I intend to re-think the relationship between moving (affect),<sup>33</sup> emotion, and solidarity. How do I/we need to curate to move audiences to become allies? What formats do we need to develop for white audiences to taste the *rasa* of critical work by BIPOC artists? How can we curatorially awaken or facilitate a non-judgmental, open-hearted, sensual encounter between audience members and the performers, performance or installation, for example by creating welcoming, sensually engaging, and, at the same time, challenging spaces of encounter and engagement, which intend to set the tone for the aesthetic communication—for the meeting ground of this temporary collectivity of potential allies.

In line with anti-canonical and anti-discriminatory approaches at the intersection between art, activism and curation, I focus my re-interpretation of the *rasika* on the idea of being “critically responsive to the structure of emotion in a work of art”<sup>34</sup> and the notion of “consent of the heart”.<sup>35</sup>

Creating formats that facilitate the reception of BIPOC, anti-classist, anti-racist, decolonizing artistic positions stays primary for me: how can we invite audiences in and create spaces of exchange, spaces where allies in the guise of *rasikas* can emerge? How can we curate to move the witnessing guests of the performances to grant ‘consent of the heart’ and become allies?

How can we move the allies to contribute towards anti-discriminatory change. How can we gain consent to affect audiences to act against racism and discrimination and the continuity of (neo-)colonial connections?<sup>36</sup>

Curating in solidarity

Curating spaces of reception — rather than merely spaces of (re)presentation  
Curating to build lasting community relations around an intention (not a topic)

Curating as Hosting  
 Curating as Hospitality  
 Curating against Racism  
 Curating against Classism  
 Curating as a Gesture toward Decolonization

## Notes

**1** David Elliott, Marissa Silverman, Wayne Bowman. "Artistic Citizenship: Introduction, Aims, and Overview", In *Artistic Citizenship: Artistry, Social Responsibility, and Ethical Praxis*, eds. David Elliott, Marissa Silverman, Wayne Bowman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 3–21, 7. Sandra Chatterjee and Siglinde Lang. "Renegotating Art and Civic Engagement: The Festival 7hoch2 as a Hands-On Platform for Co-Creating Urban Life." In *A Question of Culture and Attitude. New Perspectives On Actors And Institutions Of Urban Development*, eds. Gesa Ziemer, Hilke Berger (Berlin: Jovis Verlag, 2017): 94–107, 96.

**2** <https://www.hullhousemuseum.org/to-the-museums-of-the-future>, accessed November 13, 2024.

**3** Kien Nghi Ha. "People of Color' als Diversity-Ansatz in der antirassistischen Selbstbenennungs- und Identitätspolitik." In *Heimatkunde: Migrationspolitisches Portal der Heinrich Böll Stiftung* (2009/2013). <https://heimatkunde.boell.de/2009/11/01/people-color-als-diversity-ansatz-der-antirassistischen-selbstbenennungs-und>, n.p., accessed January 15, 2024.

**4** Sandra Chatterjee. "Writing for Change: Kritische Perspektiven in künstlerischer und wissenschaftlicher Praxis als 'Handlungsaufforderungen'." In *Musik und Migration: Ein Theorie- und Methodenhandbuch*, eds. Wolfgang Gratzner, Nils Grosch, Ulrike Präger, Susanne Scheibelhofer (Münster, New York: Waxmann Verlag, 2023): 526–546.

**5** Langhoff in an interview with Fanizadeh 2009, n. p., quoted in Chatterjee. "Writing for Change", 526.

**6** I connect here, among others, to the approaches to anti-racist curating as assembled in the book: Natalie Bayer, Berlinda Kazeem-Kaminski, Nora Sternfeld, eds. *Kuratieren als antirassistische Praxis* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2017).

**7** David Bartholomae, Anthony Petrosky and Stacey Waite. "Introduction: Ways of Reading." In *Ways of Reading*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed., eds. David Bartholomae, Anthony Petrosky and Stacey Waite (Boston, MA/New York: Bedford/Martins: 2014): 1–21, 10–11.

**8** In her 2012 article Gesa Ziemer proposes the German term "Komplizenschaft", which I have previously translated as "accomplice-ship" rather than complicity, to distinguish the particular mode of collaboration (Komplizenschaft) from other forms such as teams, alliances, networks, and friendships She re-defines "accomplice-ship," which is linked to the legal notion of collective delinquency in a criminal context, and instead proposes to view collaborators of a subversive enterprise as accomplices who get together to establish alternative orders. Gesa Ziemer. "Komplizenschaft: Eine kollektive Kunst- und Alltagspraxis." In *Kollektive Autorschaft in der Kunst: Alternatives Handeln und Denkmodell*, ed. Rachel Mader. (Bern: Peter Lang, 2012): 123–139, 124–125.

**9** "Kuratorische Projekte, in denen sich Menschen versammeln, die diese Machtverhältnisse – wenn auch nur für einen zeitlich begrenzten Rahmen – außer Kraft setzen, haben revolutionären Charakter. Wenn es ein richtiges Kuratieren im falschen geben sollte, dann eines, dass solche Räume schafft, in denen sich emanzipatorische Kämpfe mit künstlerischen, kuratorischen und kulturellen Strategien verbinden und zu Orten werden, in denen diskriminierende Routinen unterbrochen werden. Es geht dabei in erster Linie weniger um ein abgeschlossenes Ergebnis, sondern um einen Prozess, in



dem sich abgebrochene Verbindungen und verlorengegangenes Vertrauen in die Gesellschaft und deren Institutionen wiederherstellen können.“ Tunay Önder. “Ein Gespenst geht um im Kulturwesen – das Gespenst der feministischen Spaßverderberinnen.” In *Porös-Werden: Geteilte Räume, urbane Dramaturgien, performatives Kuratieren*, eds. Barbara Büscher, Elke Krasny, Lucie Ortmann (Wien: Verlag Turia + Kant, 2024): 315–324, 321.

**10** “Um antirassistisch zu kuratieren, wäre es aber zunächst notwendig, sowohl Subjektivität bzw. Subjektivierung zu berücksichtigen als auch Multiperspektivität zu gewährleisten. Im Grunde ergibt sich die Notwendigkeit, alle Narrative und Exponate einer Ausstellung von vornherein auf unterschiedliche Weise zu durchqueren und zu befragen: Wessen Geschichte wird hier erzählt? Wessen Perspektive privilegiert? Welche Bilder tauchen auf? Wer liest diese Bilder auf welche Weise? Wie sind die Exponate generiert worden? Wie entstehen die Texte? Sind die Narrative und die Bilder dazu angetan, Gruppen zu »empowern«, die bislang in den Darstellungen unterrepräsentiert bzw. gar objektiviert worden sind?” Natalie Bayer and Mark Terkessidis. “Über das Reparieren hinaus: Eine antirassistische Praxeologie des Kuratierens”. In *Kuratieren als antirassistische Praxis*, eds. Natalie Bayer, Belinda Kazeem-Kaminski, Nora Sternfeld (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter: 2017): 53–70, 56.

**11** Choy Ka Fai in Jay Pather with Choy Ka Fai, Sigrid Gareis, Lia Rodrigues, Jessica Lauren Elizabeth Taylor. “Twists: Dance and Decoloniality.” In *ONCURATING.org* 55 (January 2023): *Curating Dance : Decolonizing Dance*, eds. Sigrid Gareis, Nicole Haitzinger, Jay Pather: 46–60, 55. <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-55.html#.Y9kadS1Xa3U>

**12** <https://chakkars.de>, accessed December 13, 2024.

**13** While making flower garlands is common in many cultural and geographic contexts, including India, Hawaiian Lei-Making is an important reference point here, which we draw attention to.

“In Hawaii, the lei is more than a decorative garland; it serves as a silent yet potent messenger of complex feelings, often carrying the weight of words left unspoken. Whether conveying love, friendship, or even condolences, a lei communicates deeply ingrained cultural meanings. Its significance goes beyond its immediate beauty; the type of flower used, and the color chosen often convey personalized messages understood within the community. For example, a lei made of Pikake flowers might be given to signify romantic love, while a Maile lei could represent respect or honor. Particularly poignant is the tradition of crafting leis using school colors, which adds a layer of meaning at graduation ceremonies. Such leis serve as a visual representation of academic achievement, collective identity, and the transition to a new phase in life. [...]” <https://www.thehalepauhana.com/blog/hawaiian-leis-guide-to-flowers-customs-and-respect>, accessed September 19, 2024.

**14** The initial installation was conceptualized by myself together with hula master and performance artist Monika Lilleike in 2019 for CHAKKARs - Moving Interventions event: From Where you have to go east to get to ‘the West’” at Köşk, Munich. Building on this, the work was expanded and deepened in June 2022 at schwere reiter, Munich as a performance installation entitled flowers, bells and water - decolonizing turns through performances and research by Duduzile Voigts, who is trained in contemporary African dance, Monika Lilleike and the Canadian-based Indian choreographer Hari Krishnan (in collaboration with Sandra Chatterjee).

**15** Rustom Bharucha. “Rasa.” In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* 2 (2003), ed. Dennis Kennedy, 1110–1111 (printed from Oxford Reference 2003, published Online 2005: [www.oxfordreference.com](http://www.oxfordreference.com).)

**16** “By using the term Baul and Fakir, I refer to unsystematic groups of singers and/or religious practitioners who are often not organized around a centralized authority, an institution or a single charismatic figure, and nevertheless share performative occa-



sions, corpora of songs, a particular language, and an entire system of beliefs and techniques concerning the body and the universe. Emerging as separate religious communities since the early nineteenth century, they incorporated elements and terminologies of more ancient traditions, particularly Tantric Buddhism, Sahajiyā Vaisnavism and mystic Islam. These lineages attack caste-based discrimination and proclaim equality among jātis and dharmas (caste-based and religion-based social identities). Their body-centred psycho-physiological practices of self-realization (sadhanā) contradict hierarchies and norms of ritual purity imposed by both Hindu and Islamic orthodoxies, scriptural norms and religious establishments. Liberation, according to them, is to be attained through the body, which is considered a microcosm, a source of knowledge on the universe and also an instrument for experiencing divine love (prem).” Carola Erika Lorea. “I Am Afraid of Telling You This, Lest You’d Be Scared Shitless!”: The Myth of Secrecy and the Study of the Esoteric Traditions of Bengal.” In *Religions* 9: 172 (2018): 1–21, 2.

**17** “Grounded in a spectrum of at least nine distinct emotional registers—sringara (erotic), hasya (comic), karuna (pathetic), raudra (furious), vira (heroic), bhayanaka (terrifying), bibhatsa (odious), adbhuta (marvellous), and shanta (peaceful)—the rasa is produced through the exploration of dominant states of emotion (sthayibhava), supported by determinant (vibhava), consequent (anubhava), and transitory states of emotion (vyababhicari bhava).” Bharucha. “Rasa”, n.p. (online-version).

**18** L. S. Rajagopalan and Rustom Bharucha. “Sahridaya”. In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* 2 (2003), ed. Dennis Kennedy, 1174. Printed from Oxford Reference 2003: www.oxfordreference.com. Published Online 2005.

**19** P. S. A. Rao. *Special Aspects of Natya Shastra*. Translated by H. V. Sharma. (New Delhi: National School of Drama, 2001), 103.

**20** Bharucha. “Rasa”, n.p. (online-version).

**21** Sandra Chatterjee. *Undomesticated bodies: South Asian women perform the impossible*. PhD dissertation (Los Angeles: University of California, 2005), 298–299.

**22** Richard Schechner. “Rasaesthetics” in *TDR* 45, No.3. (MIT Press 2001): 27–50, 33.

**23** Schechner. “Rasaesthetics”, 33–34.

**24** Rajagopalan and Bharucha. “Sahridaya”.

**25** Rajagopalan and Bharucha. “Sahridaya”.

**26** Rajagopalan and Bharucha. “Sahridaya”.

**27** Sandra Chatterjee. “Dancing out of time and place: memory and choreography in the South Asian diaspora in Continental Europe.” In *Routledge Handbook of Asian Diaspora and Development*, ed. Ajaya K. Sahoo. (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2021): 346–358, 350–351.

**28** Bharucha. “Rasa, n.p. (online-version).

**29** Rajagopalan Bharucha. “Sahridaya”.

**30** The Post Natyam Collective is a transnational, web-based collective of dance artists and scholars, creating cross border and interdisciplinary artistic work using tools from varied fields. They have been creating open-ended web-based creative processes since 2008, archived on a blog, that emphasize collaborative art making that can be shared and circulated in multiple ways (online, as performance, video, in writing etc).

**31** Jose Esteban Munoz. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

**32** See Esteban Munoz 1999: 176, original emphasis, quoted in: Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Ling Lee. “Solidarity – rasa/autobiography – abhinaya: South Asian tactics for performing queerness.” In *Intellect: Indian Theatre Special Issue – The Body. Studies in South Asian Film and Media* 5, Issue 1 (2013), guest ed. Sreenath Nair: 129–140, 138. A politically re-appropriated rasa would, to recontextualize David Halperin’s words, entail “cultivat[ing] that part of oneself that leads beyond oneself, that transcends

oneself””; as Jose Esteban Munoz states, “[t]his moment of transcendence is the moment in which counterpublics become imaginable; it is a moment brimming with the possibility of transformative politics.” (Esteban Munoz 1999: 178, 179).

**33** “Affect, however, is a term we usually use when speaking of the arts. Art tends not to have such an instrumental use. It is hard to say what art is for or against; its value often lies in showing us new perspectives on our world. Its impact is often subtle and hard to measure, and confusing or contradictory messages can be layered into the work. Indeed, good art always contains a surplus of meaning; something we can’t quite describe or put our finger on, but that has an impact upon us nonetheless. Its goal, if we can even use that word, is to stimulate a feeling, spur us emotionally or alter our perception. Art moves us.” Stephen Duncombe. “Affect and Effect: Artful Protest and Political Impact”. In *The Democratic Public Sphere*, eds. Henrik Kaare Nielsen, Christina Fiig, Jorn Loftager et al (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2016): 433–452, 440.)

**34** Rajagopalan and Bharucha. “Sahridaya”.

**35** Rajagopalan and Bharucha “Sahridaya”.

**36** “Affect, however, is a term we usually use when speaking of the arts. Art tends not to have such an instrumental use. It is hard to say what art is for or against; its value often lies in showing us new perspectives on our world. Its impact is often subtle and hard to measure, and confusing or contradictory messages can be layered into the work. Indeed, good art always contains a surplus of meaning; something we can’t quite describe or put our finger on, but that has an impact upon us nonetheless. Its goal, if we can even use that word, is to stimulate a feeling, spur us emotionally or alter our perception. Art moves us.” Duncombe. “Affect and Effect”, 440.

“And, as recent developments in cognitive science suggest, we interpret our world less through reasoned deliberation of facts, and more through stories and symbols and metaphors that allow us to “make sense” of the information we receive (Lakoff 1996). As such, when it comes to stimulating social change, effect and affect are intertwined.” (Duncombe, “Affect and Effect”, 441.

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**Sandra Chatterjee** is a choreographer and scholar (Culture & Performance/ Dance Studies). In her artistic work she is interested in direct exchange with the audience and wants to involve senses less considered in dance (e.g. smells and their political dimensions). Recent choreographic projects include: *Dance with the Stars #1*, *SWEAT – Smells of Labour, Smells of Racism und Smells of Coexistence - The Bee of the Heart*, as well as *Noor Inayat Khan: Performance Miniatures*. She is co-organizer of the platform *CHAKKARs – Moving Interventions* ([www.chakkars.de](http://www.chakkars.de)) and co-editor of the eZine *Moving Interventions* (<https://chakkars.de/de/ezine/>). Recent publications (selection): with Haitzinger, Nicole: “Evocations of the Sun in Modernity. Performing Egypt between Egyptomania, the Avant-Garde, and Identification.” (In *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies* 4, 2024); “Writing for Change: Critical Perspectives in Artistic and Scholarly Practices as Calls to Action.” (In *Routledge Handbook of Music and Migration: Theories and Methodologies*, eds. Wolfgang Gratzner, Nils Grosch, Ulrike Präger and Susanne Scheibhofer. Routledge, 2023); “Von Spannungen, Widersprüchen und einem double bind”. (In *Double Bind postkolonial: Kritische Perspektiven auf Kunst und Kulturelle Bildung*, eds. Maria do Mar Castro Varela and Leila Haghighat. transcript Verlag, 2023); [www.sandrachatterjee.net](http://www.sandrachatterjee.net).

## Sasapin & Ding-Yun

SASAPIN: Curation is tricky and powerful, and I feel I need to be cautious when I'm performing the act of curating. It involves both the idea of selection and care. While "select" is a word of action—clear and instructive in itself, care is a concept - intangible and not always visible.

### How do we put care on the agenda?

#### What does it look like in action?

DING-YUN: I prefer to observe and see focused observation as care. During discussions, I tend to adapt to each other. Especially in our culture, it usually takes a few back-and-forth exchanges before people's real opinions and thoughts come through. I like balancing everyone's viewpoints or at least understanding what matters most to each person. I believe in the Taoist concept of "wu wei"—leading by doing nothing "unnatural". It's a way of life that's about making precise judgments by going with the flow of the situation. But sometimes it's tough—we still have our expectations and hopes. I almost treat it like the ultimate form of self-cultivation (haha)

"Selecting" is such an interesting process, especially when we're selecting a person rather than a piece of work, selecting the way that we take care of, not the suggestion to adopt. People are constantly changing but work mostly stays the same. So, what I'm often most curious about is whether their past practices have opened space for others to come in and whether they have strong beliefs or ideologies. Sometimes, people with overly fixed stances may not necessarily be the best choice.

SASAPIN: I began with bringing together all the frames: Taiwan and Bangkok, ADAM and BIPAM, River, you, and I. The theme "Theirborhood" came with the intention to continue ADAM's legacy of deepening queer conversations and practices, combining with what Taipei and Bangkok as cities could offer in this light. I also put in BIPAM ingredient which is Southeast Asian flavors into the mix, while you and River brought along knowledge and intuition of artists.

I guess the first manifestation of care—curation—here was when we, along with Mei-Yin and Lin-Hui, did not give in to the complexity of the selection process. Long meetings on Zoom, extended discussions because we didn't want any opinion silenced, coordinating 20x20-minute interviews with artists across different time zones, more meetings post-interviews, and then the final list.

DING-YUN: I think what's important is that we've created a space where everyone feels safe and comfortable enough to fully express what they want to say and share their opinions as openly as possible. That feels like a big goal we're working towards.

SASAPIN: Then it was the research program design. For me, I asked myself, what would be the queer ways of getting to know Bangkok or even Thailand? And because I'm hardly an expert to answer that, I invited the artists I trusted to lead the investigation. When I heard from you that you modeled the Taipei plan after the Bangkok, I felt deeply honored and grateful that you not only trusted the proposition, but also excited to add your own narratives and imagination onto it.

SASAPIN: Then it was the people, the artists. Curation of the experience, both artists, our own, and the public whom the artists would meet. Looking back, it seems clear that the Bangkok phase was focused on connecting with each other and being as open as possible, while the Taipei phase was more on how and when to challenge oneself, digging deeper into what was really artistically and personally impactful, when to push and pull, when to ask and when to give.

SASAPIN: Ding-Yun, do you want to propose an exercise or a question?

How do we continue, support,  
and connect with each other after the lab?





# Artists as Curators: Collective Actions and Community Engagement in East Asia

## River Lin

In her article titled *From Content to Context: The Emergence of the Performance Curator*<sup>1</sup>, American performance scholar Bertie Ferdman features a “curated” incident that occurred during the Edinburgh Festival’s *The Theatre of the Future forum* in 1963 as an introduction. Without any prior notice, the work *Play of Happening*, directed and organized by theater maker Ken Dewey, comprised a series of happenings such as a chandelier adorned with sheep bones hanging from the ceiling, a naked woman pushed into the space, unexpected, tapped voices. The happenings catalyzed a sense of discomfort and disruption among audience members.

As a response invited by the forum’s organiser to the discussions at the forum, this “unconventional” theater performance demonstrated Dewey’s critical reflection on the structure of “traditional” theater-making and audience engagement. By deconstructing how normative a theater play was made and integrating the notion of “happening” coined by Allan Kaprow in the context of visual art, Dewey’s intervention, as interpreted by Ferdman, elucidates the contemporary role of curators, about the creation of meaning through the mediation of works within specific contexts—addressing the how, why, and for whom a work is framed and received. Following this case, Ferdman then contextualises a trajectory of curating performance while situating “performance” within the interstices of visual and performing arts.

Ferdman’s contextualization of approaching performance curation and the work of a performance curator reminds me of what (performance-based) artists have often proposed and enacted. They engage in critical inquiry and challenge the status quo by addressing what has yet to occur, disrupting established settings, and orchestrating a collective assembly of individuals and live actions within specific temporal and spatial contexts.

In many places in East Asia, the conceptualization of performance curation and the role of curators within academic and artistic institutions has predominantly been influenced by Western-centric translations and cultural exchanges from the 1990s. It wasn’t until the 2010s that museums, theaters and festivals began to adopt the term “curating performance” and embed the position of “performance curator”.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the historical background and evolution of the arts sector in this region diverge from the Eurocentric frameworks. In many instances, the modern cultural infrastructure of policies, arts education, cultural institutions, and funding systems has been young or still doesn’t exist nowadays. With a lack of institutional invitations for artists to engage in artistic or curatorial innovation, very often, in terms of “curating”, artists just “do” and do it together. Artists DIY(ed) festivals, initiatives, gatherings and projects to create their own cultural spaces outside institutional realms.

This writing brings together three artist-curated cases from the postwar period, namely Wang Molin’s project *October* (or *Shiyue* in Chinese Mandarin) in Taiwan in 1987, Mit Jai Inn and his collaborators’ Chiang Mai *Social Installation* in Thailand from 1992 to 1998 and the early practices of the Gutai, founded by Jiro Yoshihara in the late 1950s. Through the cases, I’d examine how they have cultivated a potential under-

standing of performance curation and the role of curators (and its history), (re-) positioning that the concept of curating is characterized as an artistic practice, emerging from the specific cultural contexts of this region, rather than being solely a product of the empowerment by art institutions. This perspective highlights the potential for cultural agency and community engagement inherent and embodied in artists' practices.

### October

In 1987, During Taiwan's political transition towards democracy and the early stage of martial law's end, the National Chiang Kai-shek Cultural Center (now the National Theater and Concert Hall) was inaugurated in Taipei. Its opening performance was Goujian's *Restoration of the Nation* shown on the 25th of October—the date celebrated as the Republic of China's "Retrosession Day". This programme conveyed an ideology rooted in nationalism and patriotism as Chiang Kai-shek lost in the civil war with Mao Zedong's People's Republic of China and retreated the "Nation" to the island of Taiwan in 1949 following Japan's colonial rule. Clearly, the establishment of the National Theatre in Taipei served as an agenda for political propaganda.

On the same day of the National Theatre's opening, activist, theater critic and maker Wang Molin convened a gathering of emerging theater and performance artists, including troupes Rive-Gauche Theatre, Ruin Circle Theatre, and Notebook Theatre<sup>3</sup>, to stage *October* over two consecutive days at an abandoned site along the coast of Sanzhi, a suburb remoted from the capital.<sup>4</sup> The performance took place in a dilapidated house located at the intersection of land and sea, characterized by its unkempt and open-air environment with muddy terrain. performers, dancers, writers and video artists from the three collectives collaboratively deployed a series of actions and plays. Notably, Li Huanghsiung, the director of Rive-Gauche Theatre, crafted a play<sup>5</sup> that interwove selected passages from Gabriel García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* with excerpts from short novels authored by former Red Guards during Mao's Cultural Revolution, among other texts. The intentions and thematic statements of this performance were distinctly articulated.

Wang retrospected this event in 2018 and stated that Taiwan's post-war period from the 1950s to the 1980s was shaped by a Cold War-era, anti-communist, and martial-law surveillance regime. Through *October*, the artists endeavoured to investigate questions of self-identity, including how their cohort, aged twenty to forty, were impacted by historical and cultural dynamics, and how they were related to concepts such as statehood, martial law, democracy, and political asymmetries between the left and right ideologies.<sup>6</sup>

From the late 1980s, particularly following the end of martial law, numerous practitioners in the cultural and artistic sectors—including visual arts, theater, and literature—intensified their advocacy for freedom of speech in opposition to the dictatorship. This advocacy was frequently manifested through performances conducted in public spaces and on the streets. Within this context, *October* emerged as a curated collective initiative that united members of the theater community and others. Wang played a pivotal role in assembling artists to collaboratively curate this event, which involved determining the structure of each work, including live performances and installations, developing movements and scores, and situating the challenges faced in theater-making. This initiative also sought to resist the dominant ideology of political correctness as endorsed by national arts institutions. For the first time, this event saw theater groups in collaboration in the history of Taiwan's burgeoning experimental theater movement emerging in that era.



## Chiang Mai Social Installation

In late 1992, following the violent suppression of the Black May protests in Thailand, artists Mit Jai Inn and Uthit Atimana initiated, with Navin Rawanchaikul and a group of artists and activists, launched the *Chiang Mai Social Installation* (1992-1998)<sup>7</sup>. Akin to *October*, which aimed to make things happen in alternative settings, this six-year project, as a 4-edition DIY artist-run independent festival, consisted of exhibitions, performance actions, and public speeches and discussions staged in everyday locations such as cemeteries, temples, public squares, private flats, and canals.

As articulated by Simon Soon, “The genesis of CMSI is intimately connected to Thailand’s modern art history and the institutional challenges that it faced by the early 1990s”<sup>8</sup>. Historically, the Italian sculptor Corrado Feroci (later known as Silpa Bhirasri) established Thailand’s Silpakorn University in the 1940s under and with the support of the monarchy, introducing Western art techniques into public education and founding modern Thai art. By the 1960s, Bangkok had emerged as an artistic power center, with elite collectors establishing private galleries, further cementing the influence of institutional art ecosystems. In contrast, the young artist community in Chiang Mai, a relatively peripheral region, utilized the CMSI to create avenues for artistic expression and discourse through grassroots “art festival movement”. Gridthiya Gaweewong has noted that CMSI exemplified a departure from the traditional model in which the arts serve national ideologies, advocating for autonomy and emancipation.<sup>9</sup>

Mit recounted that returning from the University of Applied Arts Vienna to his hometown of Chiang Mai, he was eager to collaborate with fellow artists in a manner reminiscent of a sangha (พระสงฆ์), a Buddhist term translated into English as “a social entity” or “community”<sup>10</sup>. His objective was to integrate the sense of artistic “freedom” he had encountered in Europe, which included the practice of exhibiting artworks in non-gallery environments, into a dialogue with the local realities of Thailand. In pursuit of artist-to-artist collaboration, Mit and his colleagues at Chiang Mai Social Installation sought to facilitate organic programming that eschewed fixed agendas, author-centric projects, and censorship.<sup>11</sup>

Through the series of festivals, artists took over public and private spaces to showcase artworks such as paintings, sculptures and installations, creating alternative exhibitions and soon attracting many international artists to participate.

While the format of the festival had garnered well-received, notably, Mit and Uthit further challenged the festival itself to fringe out gatherings by initiating another project, *Week of Cooperative Suffering*, an engaging and durational night-walk performance.

The inaugural week, which took place in 1995 strategically between festival editions, immersed festivalgoers in the social and communal contexts of Chiang Mai. Participants traversed various locations throughout the city, including riversides, red-light districts, migrant-worker neighbourhoods, slums, and abattoirs, gaining insights into the city’s urban and economic formulation. This initiative facilitated the festival’s community-engaged practice, breaking free from the artists’ echo chamber and fostering connections with a more diverse and broader segment of the everyday populace.

The practice of Chiang Mai Social Installation demonstrated a collective effort among artists to cultivate their community and celebrate their work through the device of an art festival. In the 1990s and beyond, a period marked by the emergence and proliferation of numerous arts biennales—including the Gwangju Biennale in 1995, the Shanghai Biennale in 1996, the Taipei Biennial in 1998, and the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale

in 1999—this temporary collective represented a significant model of artist-led curation during a time when contemporary art in the region had yet to become institutionalized.

### The early works of Gutai

The early activities of the Gutai Art Association in Western Japan during the late 1950s, led by Jiro Yoshihara, also exemplified collective-curatorial practices exploring alternative spaces for artistic expression. Founded in Ashiya, a city situated between Osaka and Kobe, the group staged experimental exhibitions with performance-based and participatory actions in 1955–1957, oscillating between Ashiya and Tokyo. At the time when Eastern-Japan Tokyo took the epicentre of the art scene and modernist art predominated in Japan's post-war artistic landscape, Yoshihara encouraged a group of young artists to challenge the idea of “newness” and “originality,” urging artists to create “art that no one has ever made before”<sup>12</sup>.

In pursuit of new aesthetic languages of their own, this call for transformation precipitated significant performative works such as Atsuko Tanaka's presentation of wearing an electric dress in an exhibition opening (*Electric Dress*, in the 2nd Gutai Exhibition, 1956), Saburo Murakami's act of running through framed papers (*Passing Through*, in the 2nd Gutai Exhibition, 1956), Kazuo Shiraga's foot-painted artworks, Sadamasa Motonaga's production of smoke on stage (in Gutai Exhibition on the Stage, 1957), and Shozo Shimamoto's action of throwing paint-filled bottles to create paintings (in the 2nd Gutai Art Exhibition, 1956). Through these interventions, the artists challenged the established boundaries of exhibition-making, embodying ephemerality and collective engagement within their artistic practices. By foregrounding the performative processes in these action-based works, Gutai effectively blurred the academic distinctions between visual and performing arts; the artist's corporeal presence became a means to “curate” and interconnect objects, bodies, time, and space.

Through *The Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Midsummer Sun* in Ashiya Park in 1955,<sup>13</sup> and the *Gutai Art Exhibition on the Stage* at Osaka's Sankei Kaikan Hall in 1957, the group experimented with spatial conditions of “processing” and “performing” art, particularly in the latter case by Motonaga's work expelling and filling the venue with smoke, introducing a pioneering concept of theater-exhibition.

In the interim, Gutai engaged in self-curation and organization of exhibitions and publications to cultivate their own experimental discourses and methods in dialogue with the visual arts community, which presented artworks in normative settings. Gutai's early works contributed not only to the development of interdisciplinary arts in the Japanese post-war context, but also to the practices of self-proclaimed curation. They informed and foregrounded artist-centered and process-oriented production. Gutai's artistic and curatorial practices nurtured a sense of community among its members, which is mirrored in the collaborative ethos of many artist-run initiatives in the following eras.

The three cases examined in the context of postwar periods in their respective locales inspired relevant initiatives and actions throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. During this time, artists collectively interrogated power-asymmetric cultural communication of the everyday and globalisation and proactively questioned what art can “do” with socially engaged acts.

For instance, activist endeavours of the Tokyo artist community continued the spirit of early practices of Gutai and other initiatives.<sup>14</sup> In 1989, amidst Japan's bubble economy, the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art was established as the first public art museum dedicated to contemporary art, in the early 1990s, the proliferation of private galleries with high rental centralized the art market and community excluding spaces for young artists. The Ginburart in 1993, a guerilla art project in Ginza, and Shinjuku Shonen Art in 1994, spearheaded by Masato Nakamura and fellow artists, organized collective actions and performances in the streets of both districts. Playfully and ironically, during the event of Ginburar, for instance, Makoto Aida acted as a beggar to sell his artwork in front of a gallery. Concurrently, a parade named *Decorative Tour*, resembled a Shinto ritual, connecting both object-based and live works of several participating artists through spontaneous actions.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, *October*, as a reference point, would inspire an understanding of the trajectory of Taiwanese theater and performance curation. During the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, artists increasingly initiated and curated events in the Taipei art scene, taking the form of art festivals, and challenging dominant institutional narratives.

A pertinent example of this trend is the *Taipei Broken Life Festival*, curated by Wu Zhongwei in 1994, alongside artists Jiang Shifang and Li Shiming. This festival took place in an embankment beneath the Yongfu Bridge at the city fringe of Taipei. The curators built scaffoldings to host a large-scale, anarchist-style underground arts festival featuring a diverse array of works including theater, performance art, noise, and video art. The festival counteracted the dominance of cultural elites controlling mainstream performance spaces, standing in stark contrast to the *Taipei International Arts Festival* organized by the National Theater and Concert Hall in the same year<sup>16</sup>.

In Taipei's theater community, the Critical Point Theatre, following the passing of its founding director Tien Chi-Yuan in 1996—a prominent figure in Taiwan's LGBTQ+ movement—self-curated and organized the Plays in *Our Room Festival* from 1997 to 2005 in their apartment. This initiative preserved the troupe's collective spirit by showcasing the work of its members, thereby creating a safe space for the theater community and fostering many young talents. This festival and many other artist-run initiatives by Critical Point Theatre positioned the troupe itself as a commune, engaging the young generation of the LGBTQ+ community in the contemporary theater scene during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Another significant event was the *Not-Popular-At-All Superstars Festival* (1995-1996), curated by the Walker Theatre at the Walker Café, a coffee shop run by the troupe's members. With the ironic festival title, they brought together artists and amateurs from across theater, dance, music and beyond to present their work collaboratively. Many pieces featured in this festival provoked and engaged with societal conditions in the context of Taiwan's transition to democracy a decade after the lifting of martial law. In 1996, performer Xu Yahong initiated the *Taiwan Women Theatre Festival* at B-Side Bar with female artists such as Wei Yingchuan, Fu Yuhui, and Tu Shihhue to reclaim space in a theater scene dominated by male voices. The lesbian contemporary theater scene in Taiwan grew from here, and no matter what the sexual orientation of those participating artists and curators, this pioneering festival exemplified a community-based practice that curated and contextualized the community into a discursive progress of cultural activism.

From the Chiang Mai Social Installation to the cases in Tokyo and Taipei in the 1990s, outside institutional settings, “curating art festivals” could have been understood as an artistic practice. Festivals are live embodiments of crafting gatherings for the community, cultivating artist-to-artist cultural spaces. Under socio-politically conditional and conventional resources, festivals have become new stages on which artists open up a broader performance space while addressing the lack of diversity in the arts.

Curating festivals therefore serves as cultural performances and artist-to-artist collaborations. For artists, regardless of discipline, performance has become a strategy they employ to direct ways things go, choreograph how the actions and programs move, and advocate their autonomy while resisting what’s been confined or homogenized as an artist community, through staging the liveness of the artist’s body.

Curating performances can then function as cultural agency, responses, disruptions, and negotiations with specific social, artistic, and (non-)institutional frameworks. The notion of performance-making as curatorial practice in such artist-led/artist-run cases has manifested the intersectional understanding of performance curation and artistic practice. Rethinking Ken Dewey’s performance as a curation, and how Gutai, Chiang Mai Social Installation, *October*, and the other listed gathered artists as collective and collaborative curators, there is scope for contextualizing performance curation as collective action and community engagement. Such practice has negotiated the binary relationship between the center and periphery of power dynamics in cultural infrastructures and institutions, with a tendency to diversify cultural and social spaces and discourse. Performance curation, therefore, is a community-based process that prompts long-term engagement between artists and the general public and fosters specific social and artistic transformation.

## Notes

**1** Bertie Ferdman, “From Content to Context: The Emergence of the Performance Curator,” in *Theatre* 44, no. 2 (2014): 5–19, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

**2** See, for example, Sachiko Namba, *Curating Contemporary Art in Japan: 1950s to the Present*. Tokyo: Seikyusha (Japan), 2012. And also I-Wen Chang, “Choreographing Exhibitions: Curating Performativity in Taiwan,” in *Curatography: The Study of Curatorial Culture* 3 (2021).

**3** During the 1980s, Rive-Gauche Theatre (河左岸劇團), Ruin Circle Theatre (環墟劇場), and Notebook Theatre (筆記劇), among others, comprised predominantly of university students, demonstrated a notable and proactive involvement in addressing social issues through their theatre works.

**4** See: Chee-Hann Wu, “Artists and the Unruly Bodies: Performances in 1980s Taiwan,” in *Taiwan Research Hub at University of Nottingham*, February 27, 2023, <https://taiwan-insight.org/2023/02/27/artists-and-the-unruly-bodies-performances-in-1980s-taiwan/>.

**5** Li Huangsiung, *Monologue in a Ruin: Sea Gazing in a Moonlit Night*, 1987. See a fragment of its video documentation: <https://www.eti-tw.com/work/82NumT6pq5bQebw7i>.

**6** The event *October* was expanded and re-staged as a work commissioned and presented by the 2018 Taiwan Biennale: *Wild Rhizome* curated by Gong Jow-Jiun and the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts. See the video documentation of its thematic symposium <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9Pb1hydWE0>.

**7** See: David The and David Morris, eds., *Artist to Artist: Independent Art Festivals in Chiang Mai 1992-98*, (London: After All, 2018).

- 8** Simon Soon, "Images Without Bodies: Chiang Mai Social Installation and the Art History of Cooperative Suffering," in *Afterall* 42 (2016): p. 36-47.
- 9** Gridthiya Gaweewong, "Curatorial Practices and Small Narratives: A Case Study of Chiang Mai Social Installation and Its Trajectory," in *Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 34, no. 2 (2015): p. 145-168.
- 10** "How I Became an Artist: Mit Jai Inn," *Art Basel*, [May 22, 2021], accessed December 8, 2024, <https://www.artbasel.com/stories/how-i-became-an-artist-mit-jai-inn?lang=en>.
- 11** "Interview with Mit Jai Inn," *Comingsoon Pavilion*, Bangkok Biennial 2018, accessed January 5, 2025, <https://www.comingsoonbkk.com/mit-jai-inn>.
- 12** See: Ming Tiampo, *Create what has never been done before!* Third Text, Routledge, 2007.
- 13** Alexandra Munroe, "To Challenge the Midsummer Sun: The Gutai Group," in *Scream Against the Sky: Japanese Art After 1945*, ed. Alexandra Munroe (New York: Harry N. Abrams; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 83–124.
- 14** Mitsui, Naoki, "The Originality of Japanese Contemporary Art," in *Annual Bulletin of the Department of the Science of Living* 56 (2013): 1–9.
- 15** Reuben Keehan, "The Ginburart: Institutional Critique in the Absence of Institutions," in *Active Withdrawals: Life and Death of Institutional Critique*, ed. Biljana Ciric, Nikita Yingqian Cai (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2016), [p. 129-146 ].
- 16** Wei Yu, "On the Rim of the Taipei Basin, 1993–1995: Trash, Noise, and the Experiment of Local Government-Sponsored Art Exhibitions," in *Exhibition in Becoming: Taipei County Art Exhibition and Experimental Art, 1992–1997*, ed. Chiang Po-shin (New Taipei City: New Taipei City Art Museum, 2022), p. 136-158.

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# Collective and Collaborative Curation: An Overlooked Topic in the Performing Arts

## Sigrid Gareis

In Western contexts it is surprising that collective or collaborative curating in the performing arts has received little attention to date, especially when the visual arts explicitly embraced the “collaborative turn” in the 2000s<sup>1</sup>.

After all, it is a well-established truth that theater should be viewed as a collective and collaborative art form. Theater and dance studies have repeatedly reinforced this idea with well-founded arguments. To mention just two examples: The concept of “Immediate theater” (Peter Brook)<sup>2</sup> reflects the necessary close connection between all those involved in the theatrical process, whereas more recent research on collectivity are focusing on collaboration processes of creation and reception that occur before, during, and after the performance.<sup>3</sup> Even the anthropologist Victor Turner integrated theater into his concept of the liminal/liminoid, which characterizes rituals in transitional phases during which communities come together and form new social bonds.<sup>4</sup>

Although the demand for collaborative working and management models has recently become very loud, in general, this discussion is still in its infancy with regard to curatorial programming at festivals or in theaters. So far, the topic has rarely been discussed centrally by performing art institutions. It is worth especially mentioning the one-day symposium *Collective Curating*<sup>5</sup>, curated by Eva Neklyaeva, which took place in Tallinn in August 2023. As a result of this discussion, Marta Keil’s revised keynote speech from the symposium is available online, offering valuable insights focused on questions of work ethics.<sup>6</sup>

In order to open up a broader discussion on collective or collaborative curating in the performing arts, this article—with a view to the interdisciplinary readership of this publication series and from a Western perspective<sup>7</sup>—would therefore like to set out rather basic thoughts and parameters for the discussion, which will then be differentiated and expanded in the issue itself, and hopefully also in future discussions. Since explicit literature on collective curating in the performative field is still very limited, it is often necessary to draw on personal, with almost forty years of curatorial observation of the field.

### Use of Terms and Differences Between Disciplines

In theatrical practice, the terms “collaborative” and “collective” are used to describe different aspects of collaboration. Collaborative usually refers to the way in which different individuals or groups (e.g. directors, actors, dramaturges, set designers) work together. When it comes to the collective nature of theater, however, the focus is primarily on the shared experience and sense of community in the interaction of a group of people (e.g. actors and audience)—be it during a performance or in specific work contexts that are organized on the basis of equality and the principle of equal rights.



When applied to the curatorial field, both collaborative and collective curating involve shared responsibility for selecting, programming, and setting of the theme of an event. In collaborative curation, however, this is usually communicated through shared authorship, mentioning the names of all contributors. Whereas in collective curation it is articulated with a single unified voice, putting the community before the individual. The choice of a collective form of collaboration also signals a critical stance toward power dynamics and market influences.

In the context of *oncurating.org*, which is primarily aimed at a readership of the visual arts, differences between disciplines should at least be outlined briefly here for interdisciplinary understanding: The most significant difference, to put it bluntly, is that in theater the production process is inherently collaborative, whereas in the visual arts it is primarily the representation process that is organized in a collaborative way. Consequently, collaboration of whatever kind has a much more essential and comprehensive significance for artistic creation in the theater; whereas in the visual arts it tends to focus on secondary areas such as exhibitions or the art market (although clear artist collectives such as Gelitin or SUPERFLEX exist there, too).

The examination of the “institution” and appropriate working configurations is also much more focused on reform within the theater today, while in the visual arts, it often adopts a more subversive, market-critical stance that aligns with countercultural tendencies. For instance, despite the significant reform efforts initiated by the 1968 generation, the concept of institutional critique remained largely unknown to the performing arts until the 2010s.<sup>8</sup> Discussions surrounding authorship or “multiple authorship” (Boris Groys) also play a much lesser role overall, as these concepts are generally taken for granted in theater. In independent theater, collective forms of work are not so much counter-models as they are alternative approaches. They have become common as artist groups (e.g. She She Pop or Rimini Protokoll), but have so far hardly been able to establish themselves in the curatorial field.<sup>9</sup>

### **A Focus of Discussion: Hierarchy in the Theater**

Central to the theatrical discussion are above all aspects of a pronounced hierarchy in the theater sector, which stands in contrast to this essential necessity of collaboration in the theater, or representing its flip side. The debate around collective or collaborative work primarily addresses issues of power and its potential abuse, particularly in public theaters, but also extending to specific cases such as companies like Rosas (led by Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker) and Jan Fabre/Troubleyn, where instances of abuse have come to light.

A distinctly pyramidal organizational structure in the theater business is consistently and often fundamentally questioned – be it by interest groups such as the Ensemble Network or, more recently, in a variety of guidelines and manuals<sup>10</sup>. This scrutiny particularly targets the traditional dominance of the artistic director (“Intendant”). Collective management models are not only seen as an effective antidote in this regard; in recent years, they have increasingly emerged as progressive alternatives in practice<sup>11</sup>, with varying degrees of success (e.g. Gessnerallee and Theater am Neumarkt/Zurich, Kunstenfestivaldesarts/Brussels, NTGent). Additionally, horizontal organizational structures are being explored, as exemplified in this volume by the Belgian model VIERNULVIER. The discourses of the visual and performing arts are also currently merging, with instituent artistic practices being demanded for the structural transformation of this institution, even for the conventional municipal theater.<sup>12</sup>

### **B Focus of Discussion: Selection Processes**

Collective and collaborative approaches furthermore are propagated especially for any kind of curatorial selection process in the design of event programs in the dance and theater sectors. This concern is especially prominent among the younger generation of curators, as observed in our Salzburg degree program *Curating in the Performing Arts*. For Fiona McGovern, “selection” is a central and crucial aspect of the curatorial process: “The moment something is selected, something else is not selected. For me, ethical considerations start at this point. They should therefore be intrinsic to curatorial practice.”<sup>13</sup> Against this background, younger curators today are increasingly rejecting decision-making processes dominated by a single autonomous individual. Unlike previous generations<sup>14</sup>, we can recognize today a rather natural inclination towards collaborative curation, both in the young visual and performance practitioners.

To democratize and open up selection processes—measures such as mandatory open calls, diverse juries or “first come, first serve” policies and, above all, transparent communication of both the selection criteria and the results of any selection process are being specifically proposed and demanded. Additionally, it is noteworthy that the younger generation is drawing inspiration from the Freetekno movement that emerged in the 1990s. This movement consciously organizes its festivals and events as “Temporary Autonomous Zones”, operating in a decentralized and non-hierarchical manner based on principles of solidarity, hospitality, and free admission.<sup>15</sup>

### **C Focus of Discussion: Diversification and Decolonization**

Another key area of discussion for collective and collaborative approaches revolves around diversification and decolonization. In the organization, ensembles, and management structures, the demand for gender and culturally mixed teams that integrate different abilities has been increasingly enforced in discourse, but has so far been implemented to a limited extent in theater practice. Aside from notable exceptions like Eva Doumbia at Festival Afropéa, Kwame Kwei-Armah at Young Vic, or Julia Wisert at Theater Dortmund, management positions in the theater sector across Europe remain predominantly white and male. Particularly in the municipal theater system, it is noticeable that with a recent trend towards diverse ensembles, diversity “in front of the stage” is much more pronounced than “behind the stage”, which reveals certain tokenism tendencies within the theater sector. It can also be observed that, in the realm of curation within the performing arts, there are not many transcultural teams to be found. Conceptual or political concerns of European festival directors about showing “the world” from an individual, Eurocentric perspective tend not to be verbalized. Thus, the artistic director or curator in theater on a global stage often still appears as a singular instance of meaning-making. Transcultural teams, such as those at the Biennial de la Danse Lyon 2025, or ongoing non-European guest curatorships at the Spielart Festival in Munich, remain exceptions. The discourse surrounding transcultural curating in the visual arts since the 1990s<sup>16</sup>—along with the problems, challenges and opportunities it presents—in general remains relatively unknown, thus underscoring the need for a broader curatorial debate within the performing arts.

### **D Focus of Discussion: Institutional Mission Statements, Codes of Conduct or Voluntary Commitments**

Recently, an increasing number of theaters and festivals have adopted specifically committed mission statements, codes of conduct, or voluntary commitments that address how their institutions engage with issues of diversity, anti-discrimination, solidarity, environmental sustainability, good governance, and commitments to democracy and social participation.<sup>17</sup> With regard to collaborative curating, the statements

tend to emphasize, in general, the creation of a non-discriminatory working environment that safeguards employee well-being and promotes fair cooperation with all institutional partners. In some cases, specific forms of co-determination are defined (e.g. annual general assembly at the Theater am Neumarkt) or concrete methods of internal and external conflict resolution (e.g. confidential advisors and internal/external prevention advisors at the Kaaithheater) are outlined. Targeted de-hierarchization is discussed in specific instances, such as the efforts of VIERNULVIER or the establishment of an ensemble council at Theaterhaus Jena<sup>18</sup>.

Curatorial (selection) principles are addressed in tendency only in isolated statements within mission statements. The Festival Theaterformen, for example, defines its program selection in a transparent and politically correct way: “A curatorial principle governs the selection of the invited productions, which is why the selection also implies the exclusion of other artists and productions.” In contrast, the Wiener Festwochen, which chose public debate, i.e. not discussion among employees, for the creation of its mission statement, are focusing on curatorial plurality: “A versatile programme needs versatile perspectives. Programme design must not be the privilege of a small group of curators. The Free Republic of Vienna will therefore introduce an alternating advisory committee for the programme with local and international expert members.” Overall, however, transparent statements on how exactly the content of the specific program is developed in the respective institution remain rare in the analysis of mission statements. Compared to mission statements from earlier decades that emphasized artistic orientation through terms like experimentation, innovation, interdisciplinarity, and artistic research, today’s mission statements primarily focus on ethics and have thus become more socio-political. However, curatorial questions about selection and the *modus operandi* of program design and knowledge production are still very often excluded from these discussions. Thus, significant political and curatorial aspects can be said to remain relatively unaddressed in the art processes.

### Desiderata of the Debate

The curatorial discourse on collaboration and collectivity in the performing arts exhibits a number of desiderata, and it would be desirable if specific aspects of collaboration and collectivity were discussed more explicitly in the future. Some key points that warrant deeper investigation are listed here:

With Beatrice von Bismarck, the definition of curating as assembling, connecting or linking—especially objects, information, people and spaces—in the sense of a desired creation of meaning and knowledge production<sup>19</sup> has found widespread acceptance. While reflection on program design is generally underdeveloped in performative art, the visual arts have thus already potentially anchored the collaborative element in their basic definition of curating. An overall more in-depth curatorial discussion could broaden and substantiate the discussion in the theater sector, which is currently very one-sidedly focused on structural reforms. Above all, the widespread figure of the presenter/programmer in the field would need more scrutiny. This refers to the type of programmer who, on the basis of personally accumulated knowledge and experience as well as their own taste, creates artistic programs and conveys them to an audience under the best possible organizational, publicity and technical conditions.<sup>20</sup> His/her/their autonomous position and ultimately also the general criticism of curatorial approaches in the performative field seem to push important epistemic and content-related questions concerning collectivity and collaboration into the background.

This is probably why actor constellations in the programming and design of festivals or theatre programs are currently viewed almost exclusively from a power-critical perspective. Program design as a specific form of knowledge production, on the other hand, has not yet been discussed centrally in the performing arts.<sup>21</sup> Interdisciplinary teams are relatively rare in the theater sector<sup>22</sup> and when they do exist, they tend to be installed on a project-related basis. Advisory expert committees or advisory boards with interdisciplinary expertise—such as those set up by Bernd Scherer for the HKW in Berlin—are rarely found. In recent times, other forms of knowledge have been presented on stage or in discussion formats in a more representative form, but normally fail to fundamentally question existing orders of knowledge, for example through long-term collaborations or a specifically selected organizational working structure.<sup>23</sup> As already mentioned above, diverse teams with different voices and experiences are currently appearing more frequently. However, they often still exhibit significant imbalances in their power dynamics.

Policy-centric and transnational structures are found in European dance and theater almost exclusively in temporary EU network projects. Long-term, content-focused forms of organization such as Transit, a collectively operating curatorial structure of autonomous local cultural institutions that constantly navigate trans-locally between languages, mentalities and local and global cultural narratives in their joint activities, would also be desirable for the theater sector.<sup>24</sup> Especially in times of accelerated nationalism and cultural isolation, long-term transnational curatorial cooperation could have a much stronger political impact.<sup>25</sup>

Although participation is a major topic in our field, the involvement of the audience in curatorial processes and strategies could be discussed more strongly and systematically in the performing arts. Approaches such as audience advisory boards—see, for example, the above-mentioned initiative of the Wiener Festwochen—do exist, but there is a lack of exemplary projects such as *Together We Curate* in the visual arts, which were then also methodically evaluated.<sup>26</sup>

The aspect of infrastructure criticism (Marina Vishmidt) is also not yet a central topic within the theater sector. The often invisible or historical grown infrastructural conditions, such as architectural conventions or resource dependencies, that determine our specific institutions are still not given enough attention in the theatrical discussion. In relation to collaborative and collective work, for example, it could be examined in more detail how spatial design, forms of communication or technical equipment of theater institutions can shape, determine or support working relations or specific forms of work in theater.

Last but not least, it is also the vulnerability of the world that should prompt us to make a joint effort. Today more than ever, the fragility of the human and natural environment requires a collaborative or collective approach—what alternative models of corporate management such as the Economy for the Common Good (which by the way was developed by a dancer: Christian Felber) already take into account.<sup>27</sup> With reference to Mark Terkessidis, collaboration can be seen as a flexible adaptability to a constantly changing environment.<sup>28</sup> In this regard, the theater discourse tends to focus strongly on concrete technical and administrative structural measures – an emphasis that is well-justified by initiatives like the *Theater Green Book* or programs such as *Carbon Footprinting in Cultural Institutions* of the German Bundeskulturstiftung.

However, from a curatorial perspective, these efforts could be expanded further. For example, considerations on post-humanity and poly-subjectivity (e.g. Rosi Braidotti, Nicolas Bourriaud, Bruno Latour), which actively involve non-human actors, are still rarely raised within the curatorial discourse of the performing arts. Additionally, alternative knowledge systems are yet not applied sufficiently into the ecological restructuring of both hardware (buildings) and software (mentalities) within the theater sector. Here the discussion in the visual arts seems to be more advanced: Drawing inspiration from Spain's Mar Menor, the largest saltwater lagoon in the EU that recently gained legal personhood, the workshop event titled *Commoning Collective Care: Curating on the Move* (organized by TBA21 Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary and OnCurating), for example, explored curatorial methods in Summer 2023, that also focus on the development of alternative practices and tools rooted in local knowledge, Indigenous viewpoints, and sustainability narratives.<sup>29</sup>

### Future Evaluations

In light of this discussion, which is still in its early stages and supported by a very limited empirical database, conducting methodological evaluations of collaborative and collective curating in the performing arts sector is nearly impossible at present. Current studies on institutional organizational forms in theater, such as the large-scale international research project *Configurations of Crisis*<sup>30</sup>, primarily focus on methods for reducing hierarchy and preventing abuses of power, without specifically taking alternative models into analytical focus. Therefore, it would be beneficial to have a range of well-founded individual studies that explore collective or collaborative processes and institutional forms within theater. And parallelly, it seems, even a need to get more speculative as a methodology to break through into new spaces.

In any case, however, the trend towards collaborative and collective working seems fortunately irreversible, at least for the near future. Collective and collaborative curating is likely to be more than just a passing trend. In a metaphorical sense, the negatively connoted English expression “A camel is a horse designed by a committee” encapsulates this idea: despite all the dangers and drawbacks, collaborative or collective working/curating is to be seen as the potential order of the day and the future. For it is the camel that survives where the horse has long since perished...

### Notes

1 Maria Lind. „The Collaborative Turn“. *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, eds. Johanna Billing, Maria Lind, Lars Nilsson (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007): 15–31.

2 Brook, Peter. *Der leere Raum*. (Berlin: Alexanderverlag, 1983). Original English version: 1968.

3 Kurzenberger, Hajo. *Der kollektive Prozess des Theaters* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2009).

4 Turner, Viktor. *Vom Ritual zum Theater: Der Ernst des menschlichen Spiels* (Frankfurt/M.: Campus Verlag, 2009). Original English version: 1982.

5 Link to symposium programme: <https://elektron.art/projects/other/symposium>, accessed January 10, 2025.

6 Marta Keil. “Collective Curation: On Breaking some Spells.” <https://saal.ee/en/magazine/collective-curating-on-breaking-some-spells-694/>, accessed January 10, 2025. See also article of Marta Keil in this publication.

7 Simultaneously, Sandra Chatterjee was invited by the editors to bring a non-European perspective to the discourse on collective curating.

8 Pirrko Husemann. “A Curator’s Reality Check: Conditions of Curating Performing



Arts". In *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schaffaff, Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012): 273.

**9** Unfortunately, the curatorial collective Unfriendly Takeover, established in 2000, has found few imitators in the field of the performing arts. Former collective member Florian Malzacher addresses this in his article in this issue.

**10** Website of Ensemble-Netzwerkes: <https://ensemble-netzwerk.de/enw/>, accessed January 10, 2025. Examples of handbooks and voluntary commitments: Alexandra Baybutt. *Equity in Working Conditions in Dance*. (EDN, November 2023), [https://www.ednetwork.eu/uploads/documents/237/EDN%20publication\\_Equity%20in%20Working%20Conditions%20in%20Dance%202023.pdf](https://www.ednetwork.eu/uploads/documents/237/EDN%20publication_Equity%20in%20Working%20Conditions%20in%20Dance%202023.pdf), accessed January 10, 2025, or Deutscher Bühnenverein. "Wertebasierter Verhaltenskodex" (2021). <https://www.buehnenverein.de/de/presse/pressemitteilungen.html?det=620>, accessed January 10, 2025.

**11** See e.g. Thomas Schmidt's contribution in this publication or his statment at: <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/machtstrukturen-im-theater-die-alleinherrschaft-der-100.html>, accessed January 10, 2025.

**12** Fadrina Arpagaus. "#Do-it-ourselves: Institutionen machen als künstlerische Praxis". Website of Kulturpolitische Gesellschaft e.V. <https://kupoge.de/blog/2022/03/01/arpagaus/>, accessed January 10, 2025.

**13** Isa Lange. Interview with Prof. Dr. Fiona McGovern and Prof. Dr. Johannes Ismael-Wendt (January 29, 2020). <https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/neuigkeiten/ethiken-des-kuratierens-kuratieren-ist-ein-auswahlverfahren/#:~:text=In%20den%20aktuellen%20Diskussionen%20um,über%20die%20Ethiken%20des%20Kuratierens>, accessed January 10, 2025.

**14** See e.g. Frie Leysen. "Searching for the Next Generation: Frie Leysen & the Kunsten-FESTIVAL," interview by Daniel Mufson (2002) published at his blog, <https://daniel-mufson.com/interviews/searching-for-the-next-generation-frie-leysen-the-kunsten-festival/>, accessed January 10, 2025.

**15** I would like to thank our students for this paragraph, especially Elisa Müller, Jeanette Petrik, Johanna Roggan and Marie Samrotzki for their thoughts and suggestions. About Freetekno: Christiana Breinl. *Free Tekno: Geschichte einer Gegenkultur* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2012).

**16** Start of this discussion: Gerado Mosquera. „Some Problems in Transcultural Curating“. In *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press in association with the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994): 105–112.

**17** More detailed statements can be found, for example, at Kaaithheater/Brussels (<https://kaaithheater.be/en/policies>), VIERNULVIER/Ghent (<https://www.viernulvier.gent/en/pQ4rWUY/mission-and-vision>), Theaterformen/Hannover & Braunschweig (<https://www.theaterformen.de/ueber-uns>), Wiener Festwochen (<https://www.festwochen.at/wiener-erklarung>), Kampnagel/Hamburg (<https://kampnagel.de/profil/leitbild>), Theater am Neumarkt/Zurich (<https://www.theaterneumarkt.ch/haus/wertebasierter-kodex/>), Bündnis internationaler Produktionshäuser (<https://produktionshaeuser.de/selbstverpflichtung/>). All accessed January 10, 2025. The resp. quotes are taken from these sources.

**18** <https://www.theaterhaus-jena.de/how-to-ensemblerat.html>, accessed January 10, 2025.

**19** Central idea in many of Beatrice von Bismarck's publications.

**20** See e.g. Chris Dupuis. "Dance Curation as Chorographic Practice," *Dance Articulated* 6, no. 1 (2020): CHOREOGRAPHY NOW: 89–110 or Sgirid Gareis. "What Is a Curator in the Performing Arts?". In *ONCURATING.org* 55 (January 2023): *Curating Dance : Decolonizing Dance*, eds. Sigrid Gareis, Nicole Haitzinger, Jay Pather: 6. <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-55.html#Y9kadS1Xa3U>.

- 21** See here article of Gwendolin Lehnerer in this publication.
- 22** E.g. Künstler:innenhaus Mousonturm/Frankfurt a. M. or HAU/Berlin have music curators in their teams.
- 23** See e.g. Nora Sternfeld. “That Certain Savoir/Pouvoir: Gallery Education as a Field of Possibility.” In *It's All Mediating: Outlining and Incorporating the Roles of Curating and Education in the Exhibition Context*, eds. Kaija Kaitavuori, Nora Sternfeld and Laura Kokkonen. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013): 3.
- 24** Elliot Jenkins. “Power in Numbers: The Collective Curatorial Practices of Transitzit.” [https://www.academia.edu/36486075/Power\\_in\\_Numbers\\_The\\_Collective\\_Curatorial\\_Practices\\_of\\_Transitzit\\_pdf](https://www.academia.edu/36486075/Power_in_Numbers_The_Collective_Curatorial_Practices_of_Transitzit_pdf), accessed January 10, 2025.
- 25** See also the article by Thomas Schmidt in this volume.
- 26** Niki Nikonanou & Thouli Misirloglou. “‘Together We Curate’: Cultural Participation and Collective Curation”. In *Museum & Society*, March 2023. 21(1) 31-44
- 27** <https://christian-felber.at/buecher/die-gemeinwohl-oekonomie/>, accessed January 10, 2025.
- 28** Mark Terkessidis. *Kollaboration* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2015).
- 29** <https://tba21.org/CommoningCollectiveCare>, accessed January 10, 2025.
- 30** [https://www.krisengefuege.theaterwissenschaft.uni-muenchen.de/das\\_forschungsprojekt/index.html](https://www.krisengefuege.theaterwissenschaft.uni-muenchen.de/das_forschungsprojekt/index.html), accessed January 10, 2025.

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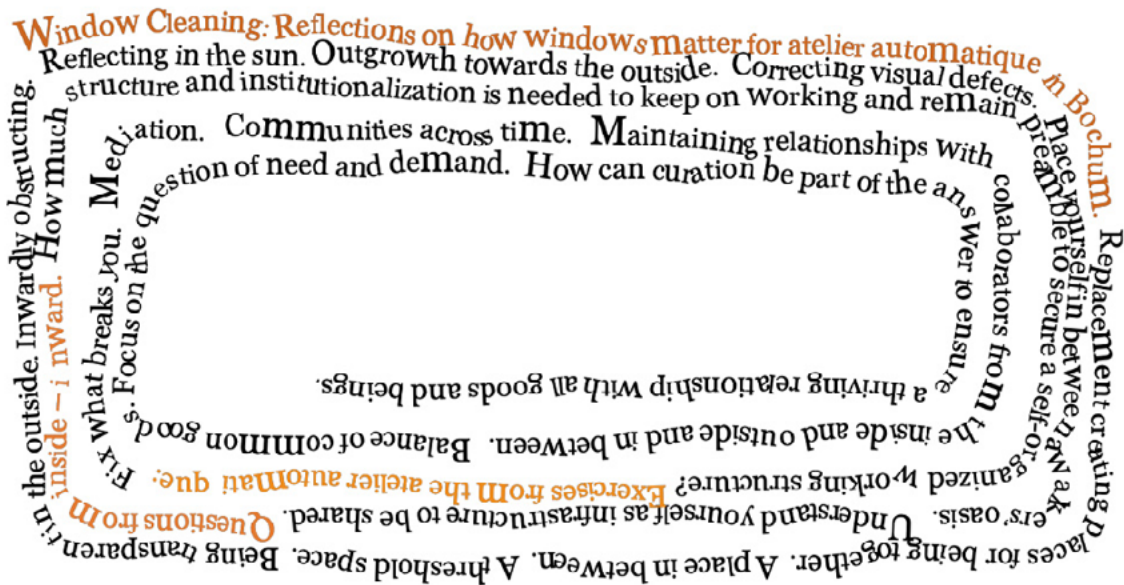
**Sigrid Gareis** is curator and social worker. She was co-director of the Salzburg Curation Course in the Performing Arts, founding director of Tanzquartier Wien, Akademie der Künste der Welt and involved in the founding of several European festivals.



**Julia Nitschke**

This is an invitation to follow our stream of consciousness and find between those lines, that shall imply one of our windows, a hint, an exercise, or an orientation giving answer.

And for some of you this window can be used as an oracle. Close your eyes and follow the lines in circles. Stop when you feel here is the answer. The word you're pointing at, is your answer.



Dear reader,

*Atelier automatique* is an independent art space in Bochum. The *atelier automatique* is not a collective, yet the space and its maintenance are organized collectively. We exist for almost seven years. At the latest since the pandemic, we recognized how our windows matter to create spaces in between. That's generally a good place to be and a good starting point for our work. In between. Meaning between not being an institution yet enjoying institutional reputation. Being in-between gives us flexibility in thinking and organizing. But it also requires a lot of movement in terms of organizing infrastructures. It produces energy as well as taking energy. It takes up a lot of time, which is rewarded with trust. For all of us, in between means that we don't work full-time in the atelier. We are regularly looking through our windows from a distance.

By Julia Nitschke

[www.atelierautomatique.de](http://www.atelierautomatique.de)



# Curated Relations: East Asian Collaborative Models in Contemporary Performance

## Freda Fiala

The performance *Sticky Hands, Stitched Mountains* opened the main program of the 2024 *Kyoto Experiment Festival* (京都国際舞台芸術祭, KEX) through an artistic-curatorial dialogue. Staging the process of relating to each other and learning about each other's artistic and sociocultural backgrounds, Anchi Lin (林安琪, Ciwas Tahos) and Nanako Matsumoto (松本奈々子) developed a proposal for a queer-feminist geopoetics: Matsumoto, a well-known contemporary dance artist in Japan, recounts how she and Ciwas<sup>1</sup>—an Indigenous artist of Atayal/Itaral and Taiwanese Hō-ló descent—met in Taipei and gradually developed a working relationship that culminated in this piece. While Matsumoto speaks, Ciwas tears down large slices of handmade paper from frames where they were drying, piling them into a mountain beside her. She later explains her action as “creating a mountain cross-border”. The stage itself resembles an exhibition, with carefully selected objects that embody this attempt: a camphor tree (native to both Japan and Taiwan), garden gloves suspended over a water basin like an ancient well, and sheets of handmade paper.<sup>2</sup>

Intricately interwoven with references, *Sticky Hands, Stitched Mountains* grounds itself in pan-ecological research and a queer interpretation from narratives in the Atayal legend *Temahahoi* and the Japanese mythological figure Yamamba (山姥). Matsumoto performs movement patterns inspired by Yamamba from Noh theatre, dragging her foot in circular motions as she explores themes of rejection, fear, and disgust projected onto Yamamba's solitary “female demon” in the mountains—revealing these attitudes as reflections of misogyny within patriarchal structures.<sup>3</sup> This figure intersects with *Temahahoi*'s stories, which likewise feature secluded women inhabiting a mountain space. The handmade paper on-stage highlights a sensitive theme in Ciwas' ancestral research: the role of Japanese anthropologists in recording Atayal and other Indigenous Peoples' histories, as Japan's ethnological research intensified during its Pacific colonial expansion. These written records have an ambiguous significance because, unlike the Atayal oral histories, they have provided the artist with insights into cultural narratives that are otherwise inaccessible to the embodied memory of largely urbanized and Sinicized Indigenous communities in Taiwanese society.

*Sticky Hands, Stitched Mountains* exemplifies not only the collaborative potential of artistic endeavors but also reflects a growing commitment to collectivity in curatorial practices across the region in recent years. It marks the first co-production between two major organizations, *Kyoto Experiment*—a festival held annually in Japan's historic capital since 2010—and the Taipei Performing Arts Center (臺北表演藝術中心, TPAC), a landmark institution of Taiwan's democratic era which opened in 2022.<sup>4</sup> The latter's annual “Asia Discovers Asia Meeting for Contemporary Performance” (ADAM, 亞當計畫) originally enabled the artists to meet, with Matsumoto participating in an edition guest-curated by Ciwas in 2023. ADAM embodies a commitment to intra-Asian dialogue as a foundation for regional collaborative practice, focusing on artistic peer networking.<sup>5</sup> Each August, it disrupts the Taipei Performing Arts Center's proscenium

model by leaving its three stages “empty”,<sup>6</sup> while filling rehearsal studios with a cohort of international creators—artists and artist-curators—who engage with curators, programmers, and producers to present work-in-progress. Established by River Lin (林人中), ADAM, which is discussed in more detail below, operates as an artist-led model where past participants can co-curate subsequent editions. Its integrative, collectivizing dynamic seeks to offer a perspective on transforming not only how performance-making works, but also how social and professional relationships in the field are understood, created and sustained. Exploring Kyoto Experiment and ADAM, which is affiliated with the Taipei Arts Festival (臺北藝術節), this article traces two collectively curated frameworks that not only expand but partially invert the roles of artist and curator, reimagining performing arts production and festival organization in contemporary East Asia. By exploring the interplay between artistic research and curatorial processes, it analyzes how these frameworks structure collaborative practice, ultimately broadening the discourse on artist-curator dynamics within institutional contexts.

### **The festival as a platform: Collective curation in Kyoto Experiment since 2020**

Since its founding by Yusuke Hashimoto (橋本裕介) in 2010, *Kyoto Experiment* has established itself as a major platform for theater, dance, and cross-disciplinary performance in the Kansai region, while presenting a predominantly European international program. When he decided to hand over the position of director after a decade, Hashimoto recognized the need to distribute curatorial responsibilities to further engage with the festival in relation to local geography and proposed that the festival be placed in the hands of a collective directorship. Since 2020, it has been led by the trio of Yoko Kawasaki (川崎陽子), Yuya Tsukahara (塚原悠也) and Juliet Reiko Knapp (ジュリエット・礼子・ナップ). Although curatorial decisions are now made collaboratively, the model has drawn on each of their individual strengths: Tsukahara, an artist from the *contact Gonzo* collective, in dramaturgy; Kawasaki, the festival’s longtime production manager, in organizational management; and Knapp, who is bilingual in Japanese and English, in international communications. They expanded the concept by creating space for artistic research and expert discussions, alongside the performance program.<sup>7</sup> With the inclusion of these research-based formats, the festival’s relation to the Kansai region has come into focus—to question its potentials and differences from the Kanto region, where the capital, Tokyo, is situated and where the majority of arts resources and international networking have been concentrated.<sup>8</sup>

### **ADAM’s roots in the “performance art festival” and the “performing arts market” model**

Although the ADAM platform was only launched in Taiwan in 2017, the *Taipei Arts Festival* has been an established event since the late 1990s. During the construction of the Taipei Performing Arts Center—a new cultural landmark in Taipei—a strategic decision was made to integrate the festival into the center in 2018. ADAM thus emerged to increase the international visibility and networks of both the festival and the new institution; working with an annual theme and two main formats, an “Artist Lab” and a “Gathering”. The Artist Lab is a three-week artist residency where regional and local artists get to know each other, participating in discussions, workshops and field trips. As suggested above, a multi-year circulation allows former participants to return the following year to either present the next step in their work-in-progress trajectories or to act as facilitators for the next edition of the Lab.<sup>9</sup> Following the Lab, the Gathering invites a cohort of international professionals and collaborators to Taipei, where participating artists present work-in-progress performances, among other networking formats. Unlike in Kyoto, these formats are not part of the festival program itself but



form an extended research and conversation base. Combining residency and work-in-progress presentations, ADAM draws on artist-led practices in performance art (such as the work of Seiji Shimoda (霜田誠二), Lee Wen (李文) and Boris Nieslony),<sup>10</sup> but is also linked to the development of more market-driven networks in the region and beyond.<sup>11</sup>

To understand this shift in curatorial engagement—marked increasingly by collaboration and networking in recent years—one must consider the broader historical context. Taiwan's path to democratization, initiated by the lifting of Martial Law in 1987, has coincided with a sustained commitment to enhancing the international visibility of its arts sector. Retrospectively, the period from the 1990s to the 2010s reflects what Chen Ya-ping (陳雅萍) terms the “aesthetics of the Eastern body” that emerged alongside a rising market for Taiwanese modern dance defined by troupes such as Cloud Gate Dance Theater (雲門舞集), U-Theatre (優人神鼓) and Legend Lin Dance Theatre (無垢舞蹈劇場).<sup>12</sup> While their portrayals of an exoticized “East” have rightly drawn critique, the ongoing debate around practices of Othering also brings to light the genuine attempts during this period to redefine cultural identity and forge distinct artistic approaches within Taiwan's emerging democratic landscape. Since the 2010s, a younger generation of artists has increasingly recognized the need to address these troupes' “trade show structure” (商展系統, *shang zhan xitong*) approach, where large-scale international tours and structurally imbalanced co-productions with Euro-American directors and local casts often dominated.<sup>13</sup> Following a range of attempts, the ADAM platform emerged in response, proposing new pathways for collaboration by emphasizing artist-led curation.<sup>14</sup>

### Out of Asia: Intra-Asian referencing and curatorial work

Collaborative curating has gained traction in Asia over the past decade more generally, particularly for fostering intra-Asian co-productions. Despite ongoing challenges to regional equity, initiatives like the *Indonesian Dance Festival* (IDF) and *Bangkok International Performing Arts Meeting* (BIPAM) reveal similar curatorial approaches. Expanding such comparisons to include visual arts and grassroots collaborations could further explore relational curatorial practices and cross-regional solidarities.<sup>15</sup> The “crossing methodologies” employed in these intersecting frameworks provoke a rethinking of localized responses to global issues, navigating boundaries of nation, culture, language, and (de-)colonial trajectories.<sup>16</sup> A comparative approach offers promising potential for exploring the interdependent dynamics between different curatorial practices in contemporary performance. By exploring a spectrum ranging from more formalized institutional models to informal, collaborative ones, such an approach can shed light on how these diverse practices shape understandings of curation, collaboration and co-curation in selected cases.<sup>17</sup> While comparisons could in principle include similar examples from Europe, this would expose the limitations of a “global perspective” and highlights the importance of particularising and “provincializing” regional contexts of collaboration.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, Shih Shu-mei's (史書美) call to reframe comparative studies states an important point in critiquing the Eurocentric bias in traditional comparative frameworks, which often portray the “East” as an unknowable “Other” or as a precursor to the “West”. Such a vertical model imposes a rigid hierarchy that organizes various cultural expressions along a developmental continuum, implicitly positioning them within a trajectory toward a singular ideal or ultimate form. In response, Shih advocates for a Relational (capital “R”) rather than hierarchical approach, encouraging a shift from traditional, vertically structured toward an interconnected view that emphasizes simultaneity, structure, and interconnection.<sup>19</sup>



The example of *Sticky Hands, Stitched Mountains*, which developed over a two-year period within diverse co-production frameworks, highlights a complex research-based approach that, given its political sensitivity regarding colonial histories, could have easily taken a problematic direction.<sup>20</sup> It demonstrates that transnational collaboration or co-production structures are not predefined pathways but rather evolve as case-by-case projects within frameworks that embrace the collective dimension and require a great deal of dialogue and trust between those involved. In the broader Asian context, several factors shape these frameworks, with geographical distance and socio-cultural diversity being particularly significant. In the absence of overarching funding schemes for intra-regional artist networks and performing arts production—especially those equally accessible across countries—production methods tend to be agent-centered and context-specific. Addressing these practices, therefore, requires recognizing how strongly they are shaped by geographical and historical conditions, as well as by the tension between national dependencies on cultural funding policies and broader international structuring processes designed to foster cross-border collaboration (e.g. Taiwan's New Southbound Policy). Curators in this context occupy a complex and often paradoxical position that, in the words of Chua Beng Huat (蔡明發), can lend “good reasons for bad practices”.<sup>21</sup> Their work, drawing on local and empirical insights, is still frequently appropriated to reinforce or expand “global” Western terminologies and curatorial frameworks. The discussion of *collaborative aspects* in such work introduces a similar challenge, as it risks falling into essentialist comparisons. It also seems only fair to note here that I am writing as a white European woman entering a non-European context. Although I bring years of study and experience in the region, I recognize that such writing inherently risks becoming yet another “centering machine” within theory discourse. This awareness, as it is addressed, won't prevent at least an attempt at decentralization as the horizon of this task of writing, which may be far out of reach, but remains productive to strive for precisely in this sense.

### Moving towards collective curating

The above considerations suggest that decentralized, collaborative curatorial practices have gained momentum as alternative models within the interregional pathways of artistic collaboration discussed—shaped by a recognition of the limitations inherent in singularly authored concepts. ADAM exemplifies this shift, serving as a platform where principles of “curating curators” have taken shape. Here, artists are encouraged to engage in networking activities, with the role of artist-curator designed to support their growth as artists rather than to cultivate them as formal curators. This model emphasizes community as a counter-narrative to globalized frameworks of art and performance, as each year's artist-curator shapes themes based on their own artistic trajectory, deepening the shared knowledge of regional performance practices and centering embodied, locally rooted epistemologies.<sup>22</sup> Expanding beyond Taiwan, ADAM's 2024 edition, titled *Theirborhood*, marked its first trans-regional collaboration with Bangkok International Performing Arts Meeting (BIPAM), setting a precedent for future partnerships, including one with Australia's Asia TOPA in 2025. In this light, the 2024 *Kyoto Experiment* edition also exemplifies the shift towards decentralizing curatorial practices and anchoring them within regional contexts. Yet, this year's festival program also faced setbacks in this direction: nearly half of the performances were part of *Dance Reflections*, a francophile “festival-within-a-festival” curated by Serge Laurent and sponsored by Van Cleef & Arpels. This sub-program featured French works that were generally accessible but also included pieces that would have required more careful curatorial attention, particularly in the context of presenting them in Japan. One such example is *Bombyx Mori* and *Loïe Fuller: Research* by Ola Maciejewska, which, while inspired by Fuller's *Serpentine Dance*, entirely failed to engage with Fuller's

European tours of Japanese performers such as Sada Yacco (川上貞奴), who were promoted through an exoticized Japonism.<sup>23</sup> *Kyoto Experiment's* decision to include *Dance Reflections* as part of the program could certainly be interpreted as an attempt to bolster the festival's reach, despite the challenge of maintaining artistic integrity.

The persistence of such problematic frameworks underscores the urgent need to consider curating as a relational, situated and dialogical endeavor. While in recent developments in Asian regions, **collaborative** approaches to institutionalized curatorial practice have become more prominent, these also reflect the pursuit of a **collective** dimension—as an aspirational paradigm. In reimagined non-Western contexts, such practices often carry the hope of dismantling entrenched structures and artist-curator hierarchies, while opening up to horizontal concepts of networking that stimulate intra-regional epistemologies and emergent practices of mutual engagement. The shift towards collectively curated, relational practices thus offers a crucial opportunity to rethink not only how artistic visibility is constructed, but also how curatorial interactions themselves are shaped and nurtured, and to develop organizational practices that are more attuned to the complex, layered nature of intersecting contexts.

## Notes

- 1 Anchi Lin (Ciwias Tahos) uses a double name in both Chinese and Atayal. The use of the abbreviated first name “Ciwias” instead of the last name “Tahos” follows Atayal cultural practice.
- 2 Taiwan was a colony of the Japanese Empire from 1895 to 1945. During this period, Japanese anthropologists conducted extensive ethnographic research on the island, with a particular focus on Taiwan's Indigenous Peoples.
- 3 The artists' references further include the film *The Ballad of Narayama* (檜山節考), an adaptation of a novel by Shichirō Fukazawa's (深沢 七郎), which addresses the legendary practice of *ubasute* (姥捨て), whereby elderly female individuals were taken to a mountain and abandoned to die. Additionally, references encompass the hypothesis of a pan-Asian “evergreen broad-leaved forest culture” (照葉樹林文化論), as well as agricultural produce like taro and the sociocultural protocols surrounding them, such as the historical restriction that allowed only men to consume this root vegetable.
- 4 Additional support was provided by the Japan Foundation.
- 5 Koichi Iwabuchi, “De-Westernisation, Inter-Asian Referencing, and Beyond,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (2014): 44–57. Takeuchi Yoshimi, “Asia as Method,” in *What Is Modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*, ed. Richard F. Calichman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). Kuan-hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). Rossella Ferrari, “Asian Theatre as Method: The Toki Experimental Project and Sino-Japanese Transnationalism in Performance,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 61, no. 3 (2017): 141–164. Kyoko Iwaki, “On (Not) Being Useful: The Art of Drifting in Asian Contemporary Theatre,” *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 41, no. 1 (2021): 95–110.
- 6 In reference to the edited volume *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity As Curatorial Strategy* by Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2017).
- 7 Newly developed formats include *Kansai Studies* and *Super Knowledge for the Future*.
- 8 While Japan's other major international performing arts festival, the Tokyo Festival is not the focus of the article, its format of Asian Performing Arts Farm (APAF) should also be mentioned. Originally launched in 2002 as the “Asian Performing Arts Festival” to promote cultural exchange among Asian regions, the program was rebranded twice, and is now called “Farm.”

**9** The ADAM 2020 and 2021 “pandemic editions” were exceptions to this model, as they did not work with an external/guest-curator and were curated by River Lin.

**10** While this article cannot explore this task in full detail, the Anglophone terminology used here recognizes the need to reroute and recontextualize the definitions of the umbrella terms “performance art” and “contemporary performance.” Performance art is commonly translated into Chinese as *xingwei yishu* (行為藝術, lit. “behavioral art”) or *xingdong yishu* (行動藝術, specifically used by some artists in Taiwan), while contemporary performance is rendered as *dangdai biaoyan yishu* (當代表演藝術). These terms refer to overlapping yet distinct practices, which can be differentiated largely by their level of interdependence with institutions – performance art often remaining more independent, whereas contemporary performance, aligned with performing arts, tends to be more interdependent. A broader definition must also anchor performance art more firmly within the history of visual art, while contemporary performance suggests the intersection and conflation of visual and performing arts practices. In Japanese, the common term for contemporary works is *pafōmansu* (パフォーマンス), which is also used to refer to “performance art” practices.

**11** In this regard, the Yokohama International Performing Arts Meeting (YPAM, formerly Tokyo Performing Arts Market, TPAM), founded in 1995, has been an important reference model, and since 2015, has also strengthened its focus on intra-Asian co-production.

**12** See Chen Ya-Ping, *Dance History and Cultural Politics: A Study of Contemporary Dance in Taiwan, 1930s-1997* (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2003); Chen Ya-Ping, “Shen-ti Wen-hua: Discourses on the Body in Avant-Garde Taiwanese Performance, 1980s–1990s,” *Theatre Research International* 43.3 (2018): 272–290.

**13** See Chang, Yu-yin 張玉音, ‘Shengtaixi’ geng shi yi zhong shidian zhuanhuan de caoyan: Lin Renzhong tan biaoyan yishu de cezhan yishi 「生態系」更是一種視點轉換的操演：林人中談表演藝術的策展意識 [“Ecosystem” as an Exercise of Perspective Shifting: River Lin on Curatorial Awareness in Performing Arts], *ARTouch* (23 October 2023): <https://artouch.com/people/content-121310.html>.

**14** Former initiatives include the Huashan Living Arts Festival (華山藝術生活節, 2010-2013) and the Taiwan Performing Arts Connection (表演藝術國際交流平台, tpac; renamed CO3 Performing Arts International Exchange Platform, 2015-2017).

**15** See Rossella Ferrari, *Transnational Chinese Theatres: Intercultural Performance Networks in East Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 284.

**16** Given its quest for international recognition, Taiwan still occupies a special place in such discussions: Given its complex settler-colonial history and multi-ethnic society, community has been central to shaping its democratic socio-cultural and political landscape. These efforts have integrated local and Indigenous cultures into Taiwan’s broader cultural industries and positioned arts administrators as mediators between different stakeholders. This emphasis on community-building aligns with Taiwan’s assertion of sovereignty in the face of pressures from its more authoritarian neighbor.

**17** To include contexts of collaborative curating in Europe in production houses such as Komuna Warszawa, Gessnerallee in Zurich, Tanzfabrik in Berlin, Kaaithheater in Brussels and festivals such as SAAL Biennale, Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels and Spielart in Munich, among others.

**18** See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

**19** See: Shih, Shu-mei. “Comparison as Relation.” In *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, eds. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 79–98.

**20** While Kyoto Experiment has so far been spared from right-wing intervention, the political backlash against the 2019 Aichi Triennale (“After ‘Freedom of Expression?’”)

has raised new awareness of the threat posed by nationalist activists and algorithmically amplified hate speech in Japan's art circles.

**21** Chua Beng Huat, "Inter-Referencing Southeast Asia: Absence, Resonance and Provocation," in *Methodology and Research Practice in Southeast Asian Studies*, eds. Mikko Huotari, Jürgen Rüländ and Judith Schlehe (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2014), 273–288, 273.

**22** ADAM's themes have been highlighting a commitment to socially-engaged art and an emphasis on Indigenous and Queer art practices: "Performativity of the In-between" (2018), "Performing (with/in) Communities: Relations, Politics, and Dynamics" (2019), "Shilin Study" (2021), "Landing" (2022), "Watering Intimacy" (2023), and "Theirborhood" (2024). Throughout these iterations, River Lin has consistently served as lead curator, providing a steady anchor to the approach in each year's theme.

**23** See Stanca Scholz-Cionca, "Japanesque Shows for Western Markets: Loïe Fuller and Japanese Theatre Tours Through Europe (1900-08)," *Journal of Global Theatre History* 1.1 (2016): 46–61.

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## Kyoto Experiment

When the three of us took over the festival direction of *Kyoto Experiment* in 2020, we decided that we didn't want to rely too much on creating a single conceptual framework for each year. The reason for this was twofold: we often felt this kind of curation provided "answers" to the works presented and conversely limited how audiences encountered the works; as our curation is collective, we wanted to represent the messy and often contradictory conversations we had with each other instead of a carefully curated concept. For our first edition we therefore decided on no one theme or concept.

After finishing this first year and speaking to various colleagues and audience members we reflected and realized that the festival was too sprawling and people didn't know where to start. We decided that actually something was required, some kind of hint or lead in. So, we decided upon setting something we now call our key phrase. The term is not a thematic label or all-encompassing framework, nor does it neatly cover everything in the festival lineup. It is a suggestion or question to prompt new ideas and perspectives about the works. A key, a path, or perhaps a lens through which to explore the festival. Below are our key phrases for our second-fifth editions. They are all every day Japanese words.

*Kyoto Experiment 2021 Autumn: moshi moshi?!*, is a Japanese phrase used when answering the phone. We felt this phrase encapsulated the idea of the existence of a voice, one coming from a body and yet at the same time disconnected. We also thought of it as a question or an address to a yet unheard other. A voice is a sound powered by the lungs and sent out through the mouth. It can be speech but also a roar, a cry, a sigh, a laugh. A human voice by definition belongs to a specific human body, an individual. It is therefore inherently personal and lies at the heart of one's identity. The 2021 Autumn edition of *Kyoto Experiment* explored ideas around various kinds of unheard voices, be it the inner voice, voices of past and future, nonhuman voices, or the relationships between voice and the body or the collective voice and the body.

*Kyoto Experiment 2022: New teku teku* is a term we conceived. *teku teku* is a Japanese word that expresses walking. The "new" adds a sense of reinterpreting and rethinking *teku teku* after a major shift. The reasons people walk and move across a space, or go from A to B, change with the times. In the society in which we live today, people walk and move around for a variety of reasons. We walk to take a journey or pilgrimage. Walking can be a political act by marching or protesting. Or we walk not for a particular purpose but just to organize our thoughts in our mind. The act of walking is the body moving in a space, and yet through this simple act, we are able to look back on the past, to reexamine the present, and to scrutinize the future.

*Kyoto Experiment 2023: maze maze*, a Japanese term pronounced "ma-ze ma-ze" and literally meaning "mix mix." Major prompts that led us to this framing of *maze maze* were the ideas about language (including body language), inheritance, and identity that we can see in several of the works included in the 2023 program. We discussed how these concepts don't pose singular questions about authenticity, but rather intermix different things. When thinking about identity and attributes, we tend to start with nationality, ethnicity, and language. Reflecting on those points of departure in terms of *maze maze* may allow us to interpret contemporary society in alternative ways. The works deal with questions and subjects related to language as a second language, forms of body language



like dance and gesture, and how these are passed down to others, and concepts of cultural purity and how culture changes as it transmits and circulates. More broadly, we considered how cultural and social identities are constructed or deconstructed, and then the ways in which power structures and hierarchies impinge on this.

*Kyoto Experiment 2024: ētto ētto* (an everyday Japanese expression meaning "um" or "er" in English). On first hearing *ētto ētto*, it might have slightly negative connotations. Perhaps it signals someone is unsure, unconfident, or even uncomfortable. Despite this, *ētto ētto* is useful in conversation for both speakers and listeners. It is an example of something called a filler or discourse marker. Fillers have no inherent meaning, but they signal something to the interlocutor. *Ētto ētto* can be the sound of a person processing information, trying to recall a memory, or pondering something they are unsure about, and at the same time, sharing this with their conversation partner. It is an empty space without meaning. A space for negotiation and of not knowing. The 2024 festival featured a lineup of works that posed various questions about negotiating the space between the individual and the collective, the self and the other, as well as how we shape numerous different histories and memories (personal, cultural, and political) and the act of reconstructing these (or choosing not to) in dialogue with the past.

By Kyoto Experiment  
<https://kyoto-ex.jp/en/>

# Curatorial Turns: From Cities to Island/Archipelago— From Collaborative to Collective

## Helly Minarti

Working as an independent curator/dramaturg in the field of performing arts, I curated two projects in the past six years (2018-2024). The first, *Jejak-旅 Tabi Exchange: Wandering Asian Contemporary Performance*, is a traveling platform designed to connect two cities in Asia through a set of critical questions. The 2018 edition connected Yogyakarta (Indonesia) and Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia); the subsequent and the last, took place in Roxas City (the Philippines) in mid-January 2020 and Naha (Okinawa/Japan), forced to go online in 2021. The second project, *The Sea Within* (2023-24), was framed under *Cruising*, a new curator's residence at the *Taipei Arts Festival* (TAF), introduced by artist/curator River Lin in his first edition of the festival. These two projects followed a certain trope of curatorial inquiry, in the sense that the first informs the latter, by critically turning the gaze from mega "Asia" arts projects in Asian metropolises, to cities, thus questioning the claiming/projection of (so-called) Asianess, to expand it into the notion of island/archipelago that contextualizes parts of Asia into Oceanic discourse. Both employed the modes of collaborative/collective curating which somehow has become one of the key features within a specific context it is practiced.

### A practice sans the name/naming

Curating (dance/performance) is something I stumbled upon. Coming from a peculiar context in which contemporary arts practice was (and in many ways remains) a flux that is still finding its footing within a larger experience in society such as Indonesia, curating was an unnamed practice where modern arts infrastructure, and its instruments are still finding a shape (often blunted by bureaucracy). The national arts policy still very much puts emphasis on either forging a sense of national unity or valuing the arts within the logic of creative economy. Artistically and aesthetically, this makes **spectacle** the ingrained language of arts "events" as reflected in the recently introduced arts funding. In response to this context, curating—in my personal experience—started as an unconscious act, something that I seemingly did rather instinctively.

The curator as a figure first emerged in the field of Indonesia's visual arts, with artist Jim Supangkat (b. 1948-) declaring himself as one in 1991. He was actually preceded by the late Sanento Yuliman (1941-1992)—a critic/scholar—who was part of the selection committee for Indonesia in the *Asia-Pacific Triennial* in Brisbane in 1993. In the field of performing arts, the closest word for curator is "artistic board"—indicating a collective instead of a single figure—as it was implied, for example, to the *triennial Art Summit Indonesia* (1995-2016), then the one and only international festival for contemporary performance, funded and organized by the government. Another example is the *Indonesian Dance Festival* (IDF), an independent dance-community-run event, which employed an artistic board since its inception in 1992, and started inviting international curators in 2006.

The “stumbling upon” happened with the questioning of curating “Asian” contemporary dance, here curating dance itself had been situated in cross-cultural dialogues. The invitation came when I was in Beijing from Marie Le Sourd to co-curate the 2nd *Asia-Europe Dance Forum* in Berlin, pairing with Bettina Masuch in 2004. Back then, “dance” curator was an unheard profession in Indonesia, although a deeper look into the past, the practice itself has always been in place—sans the naming. My positioning was exposed in the German dance scene as an “Asian” dance curator while “Asia” contemporary dance was still an uncharted territory. The basic problem is that contemporary dance in Asia was not only well-mapped but also not so discoursed as in Europe; and this created imbalance (at times tension, too) in this exchange-based platform.<sup>1</sup>

A decade later, in 2014, I returned to Jakarta after years of study, reconnecting with the arts scene in East Asia, especially through *TPAM: Performing Arts Meeting* in Yokohama. I revisited the idea of Asianness, a concept representing the desire to center contemporary performance in Asia, which gained momentum in the early 21st century. The Japan Foundation has led such initiatives since the 1990s, and in 2014, they launched a six-year arts grant scheme tied to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, focusing on Southeast Asia. That year, Yokohama also buzzed with the launch of the Asia Culture Theatre (ACT) in Gwangju, South Korea. Curator Kim Seoung-hee invited six regional curators to collaborate on a season, acknowledging, “I can’t curate this all alone. It’s too big.” I was fortunate to serve as one of the guest curators.

Having encountered all these projects around “Asianness” in collaborative curating, back home, I joined the Jakarta Arts Council (JAC)<sup>2</sup> as Head of Programme, as one of a kind unlike any other (see Minarti, 2019). It was a form of collaborative curation by peers from various disciplines and experiences, in a way. At JAC, we saw our involvement as a form of activism: how to integrate the importance of our artistic presence through collaboration in the city that operated more and more towards neoliberalism. In contrast, all those new Asia platforms were clearly production-oriented and thus, market-driven. Their birth somehow signalled a desire to go alongside the European model of theater/festival circuit that is operated through a system of co-production and co-presentation. Meanwhile, Indonesia and most of Southeast Asia—even larger Asian—contexts work on idiosyncratic planes of local cultural politics.

So, what can the act of collective/collaborative curation do in the midst of such differences, when it comes to “curating the Asian”?

### **Jejak-旅 Tabi Exchange: Wandering Asian Contemporary Performance<sup>3</sup>**

Amidst navigating through this new Asia euphoria, Japanese producer and curator Akane Nakamura at *precog*, Melbourne-based Malaysian dramaturg Lim Howngean and I engaged in critical conversations of “doing something” in light of the new Japan Foundation Olympic arts funding scheme aimed at performing Asianness. We brought our respective different experiences as well as anxiety to the table.

As for my anxiety, I remember expressing being rather disillusioned with the market-driven development in big cities in Asia. We decided to design a project moving in the opposite direction. If Asia is a canvas, those mega theaters and projects were the ones swaying big brushstrokes across it, while we were more curious to first look at the finer yet bolder lines of the existing artistic and cultural pulses/processes by connecting two (small, preferably not the capital) cities in Asia—through a series of critical questions. By moving from the notion of “nation” to (smaller) cities, we hoped to understand the complexities of a very particular context/connection in Asia. The platform’s name,

*Jejak-旅 Tabi Exchange: Wandering Asian Contemporary Performance*, reflects the intent (of discovering) as well as the form (a traveling one).

Acknowledging the intertwined histories from the past to the most recent, we paid tribute to some linguistic affinity in the region. Hence, the word “jejak” shared by Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian) and Bahasa Malaysia (Malaysian) bears a nuance in its meaning. In Indonesian, *jejak* means footstep while in Malaysian, to step. The Chinese character 旅 is shared by Mandarin *hanzi* and Japanese *kanji*, pronounced “lu” in the first and “tabi” in the latter, which means to travel/traveling. The “wandering” is a tribute to the practice of a distant past, i.e. the traveling troupe of early “modern” theaters in the Netherlands East Indies that became Indonesia (Cohen, 2006). We also debated whether to put the Asian *before* the Contemporary or *after*; and we somehow settled with the first. It’s strange to now think that if I could turn the clock back, I would have chosen the latter.

We managed to pull off two editions: connecting Yogyakarta (shortened Jogja) and Kuala Lumpur (KL) in 2018 and Roxas City and Naha in 2020/2021 respectively. Starting with Jogja and KL<sup>4</sup>, we then examined the commonalities to connect both cities, and we came up with a set of questions around the tradition vis-a-vis modernity as interplayed through performance practices for the first edition; and the impact of American imperialism for the second.

The key step was to collaborate with curatorial partner(s) and/or presenters in each city, those we chose from our closest network (at least one of us knows them rather well). For sure, their trajectory which reflects their politics of engagement in the arts, matters most. In Jogja, we worked with Cemeti: Institute for the Arts and Society, an artist-run space. In KL we partnered with ASWARA (Academy of Cultural and National Heritage) and DPAC (Damansara Performing Arts Center), a private-run space in Selangor (in the capital outskirts).

Jogja and KL have a totally different dynamic and logic when it comes to artistic practice shaped by its milieu. Hence, we purposely designed our program to be small-scale so we could observe the minutiae, allowing intimate conversation and close exchange to root in. For example, we opted for a solo or duet work by Pichet Klunchun and Padmini Chettur, arguably two Asian choreographers who then were most presented in Europe but not so much in Southeast Asia—clearly not yet in both cities. We thought these small works were more relevant to our region than those coveted by the international festival circuit. In Jogja, we even managed to build an accompanying archive exhibition for each choreographer to fill in the context. Thus, we had to work with the artists closely; together, investigating their own trajectory and how to lay it out to the public. The other events focused more on presenting work/research in progress by artists and workshops and discussions (public and closed ones).

The second edition is to connect the context of the Philippines and Okinawa, with a set of questions around the impact of American imperialism. This edition proved to be the toughest project I ever carried out. The curatorial partner, Manila-based artist collective Green Papaya, proposed a particular theme and location, which is the annual reenactment of the 1985 massacre in Escalante, a small rural city on Negros island of Visayas archipelago, by Teater Obrero (Workers Theater). Thus theater and activism became the highlight of this edition with some historical revisiting to the influence of PETA (Philippine Educational Theater Association) who introduced theater for grass-root activism in Southeast Asia in the 1980s-1990s.

Howgean resigned, thus I and Akane decided to spend a year researching—by visiting Okinawa and the Philippines at least once, if not more frequently—with the means we found ourselves from various sources, including personal ones. The Philippines was going through extremely rough patches under the rule of President Rodrigo Duterte during which the controversial EJK (extrajudicial killing) was applied, and the Negros Island of the middle Philippines was severely affected by escalated violence of unspoken nature. For safety reasons, we had to detour from the original plan of holding it in the provincial capital of Bacolod City and Escalante (1.5-hour drive) on the island, to Roxas City on Panay Island in mid-January 2020, when the pandemic was looming over.

Geographically, Bacolod City is only 156 km from Roxas City, but the socio-political outlook of these two cities can't be more contrasting although both islands are part of the Visayas archipelago. Hence, transporting a specific discourse to a different location was challenging, despite the fact it was still in the same country. Such tension was heightened with the contour of the region itself with our trip being clouded by a volcano eruption and a typhoon—which is also an integral part of the experience working in this part of the region.<sup>5</sup>

The pandemic made it impossible to hold the last edition in Naha, with Masashi Nomura as the co-curator, so we held it online in 2021. Curatorially, we tried to playfully use “Zoom” as the medium, making it more three-dimensional by activating the physical sites—a studio in Jogja run by a theater community, the home/office in Manila, the museum in Roxas City and a theater studio in Naha—as locations, designing them to be more spatially engaging. We also played the featured performance—a theater piece—on an adapted screen for the whole week to give viewers enough time to watch, prior to the Zoom event.

### The Sea Within

In retrospect, curating for me is always collaborative—whether with (individual) fellow curators or a collective. In *Jejak-旅* Tabi Exchange, working with curatorial partners for each of the four cities was an inherent curatorial practice. When fellow curator River Lin of *Taipei Arts Festival (TAF)* invited me to do the first edition of *Cruising*, a curator-in-residence program he created for *TAF*, it was already a collaboration from the onset between him and me. I then proposed *The Sea Within* as a subsequent curatorial inquiry after the *Jejak-旅* Tabi Exchange. Informed by the experience of co-curating the latter, I invited Watan Tusi (choreographer, Hualien/Taiwan), Ginoe (visual artist, Bacolod City-Manila/the Philippines), and Sayaka Uehara (photographer, Naha, Okinawa/Japan) to work within this project, with research assistant Lin Chihyu (Taiwan) who acted as an interlocutor of the complex local context. River Lin helped shape the framework.<sup>6</sup>

*The Sea Within* started off with a month's residency in Taiwan in August 2023. I simply offered my curatorial concept dealing with the notions of island/archipelago, and, both together and individually, we roamed around certain cities in Taiwan, meeting artists and communities, collecting and sharing thoughts, impressions and other critical notes in between. The curatorial objective was set to create a “work,” but River Lin and I had earlier agreed that the “work” could be redefined and not limited to a “finished” performance. At the end of the residency, our group did a performative research presentation with arts professionals in attendance (guests of ADAM) designed by River Lin himself.



Upon returning to our respective homes, these key five members started working away from each other—the artists on their individual projects—but with an awareness of a shared concern and findings. We met online regularly for eleven months, updating each other on the progress. I soon added an Indonesian artist Densiel Lebang (choreographer, Jakarta) since she already was doing resonant research on the theme on the South Sulawesi island of East Indonesia. These artists brought up research questions and inquiries particular to each locality vis-a-vis the research residency in Taiwan that revealed some threads connecting the past and present of the region: at times harking back to the entangled colonial past (such as the connection of Okinawa and Formosa—to refer them as island/archipelago) or simply unveiling a more organic past encounter, such as between people of those islands in the north Philippines and southern tip of Taiwan, indicated by linguistic affinity and revived skills of boat-making. Such immediate exchange could only be enabled within a collaborative research experience.

Questions around indigeneity as perceived, and culturally politized in the respective national context surfaced too, calling for further inquiry. Island/archipelago sometimes becomes the point of self-identification, such as in the case of Ginoe (of Visayas archipelago) or an embraced worldview such as the case of Uehara (of Okinawa). For Tusi, the relatively new shift of policy that privileges indigenous people in Taiwan doesn't blur the fact that the subsequent wave of colonization by the American Christian ministry, Japanese and Han Chinese deeply ingrained both in the consciousness of "I and the self" as woven into the daily cultural fabric.

Exactly a year later, at the next edition of *ADAM*, the three original artists—and Lebang first joining in the flesh—met in Taipei during the *TAF*. This time, for two weeks, we were preparing each individual work-in-progress presentation. Like in the previous year, my curatorial proposal was just something to stimulate a conversation for the artists to respond to and expand.

As a result, we transformed a studio to be an imagined archipelago between which the audience could do island-hopping. My role was simply to create and hold the space for in-depth conversation—including in the social space—to take place if not rooted in. This proved to overcome not only the language barrier (English, Mandarin, Japanese, Indonesian) but after a year spent working "together," it was almost second nature for us to connect our larger, idiosyncratic contexts of the island/archipelago (of Taiwan, Okinawa, Visayas, South Sulawesi).

It started with Watan Tusi's solo. He collected the post-typhoon debris on the Hualien beach, from under which he dragged the mythical giant as a metaphor for a hidden if not erased Indigenous narrative. We then moved to the performative photographic installation of Uehara, who extended her travel to southern Taiwan during this trip, retracing Japanese or Okinawan past trails. Towards the end, the signature tune of *budots* music of the Visayas filled the room, with Lebang volunteering to be a *budots* dancing girl to accompany Ginoe's interactive choreography stamp installation, a reference to his growing up learning folk dances through dance notation. It closed with Lebang's makeshift "ship"—a metaphor for the *Phinisi*, the Buginese iconic sailing boat of South Sulawesi. She dragged it around, on which top dancer Daniel was balancing. Alongside these performative works, we decided to compile our writing into an accompanying e-book<sup>7</sup>, for those interested to know an in-depth context.

In hindsight, my curatorial projects outside Indonesia have always been collaborative (with other fellow curators) since the aforementioned Asia-Europe Dance Forum in 2004. It has been morphing into collective practice in latter cases - more in an organic

manner than intended—and Jejak-旅 Tabi Exchange (2018-2021) is one of those, especially the Roxas City (2020) edition in which I and Akane Nakamura invited the artist collective Green Papaya to co-curate from scratch. The Sea Within (2023-2024) marks a different turning, firstly from a previous deliberation of the notions of Asia as in a Lacanian desire into Oceania discourse (still) at work. In terms of “collaborative/collective curating,” perhaps what was differently exercised in The Sea Within—as a kind of sequel of Jejak-旅 Tabi Exchange—is the fact that the nature of the project started with a collaboration between two curators who created a base for the engaged artists to collectively embody the curatorial framework. If the act of curating is not only about caring for the content but also caring for the context (Fredman as in Eckersall and Fredman, 2021:3), The Sea Within relied on the experience of sharing a common space/time, doing it as a micro-, impromptu collective, since there were various entangled contexts at work with Taiwan’s as the site for the encounter. Naturally, this makes the caring for the ‘structure and the form’ (ibid, 2021), less crucial, at least at that stage of artistic inquiry.

## Notes

**1** I reviewed this experience in detail in “*Eurasia: Second Asia-Europe Dance Forum: Mapping Some Sites of Mis/Understanding*” (*Wacana Seni: Journal for Arts Discourse*, vol. 5, no. 2006) and reprinted with personal commentary in *TURBA: Journal for Global Perspective in Arts Curation*, no. 3:2, Fall 2024.

**2** Following its peculiar history unique to the city of Jakarta, it was not like any other arts council since its twenty to twenty-three members selected every three years are arts practitioners (many work independently) and are assigned to program/curate by working side by side with the bureaucrats who are the caretaker of the Jakarta Arts Centre (named Taman Ismail Marzuki or TIM).

**3** See the archives: [www.jejak-tabi.org](http://www.jejak-tabi.org) and the downloadable post-event E-book: [https://jejak-tabi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Footprints\\_JTE-2018-2021\\_English-Ver.pdf](https://jejak-tabi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Footprints_JTE-2018-2021_English-Ver.pdf).

**4** I particularly wanted to move away from a capital as a core intent, opting for cities like Ipoh and Melaka for the Malaysia part, but Howngean argued that KL, despite being a capital, didn’t have any international arts events as yet.

**5** Taal volcano in Batangas, near Manila, erupted on 12 January 2020—less than a week before we, organizers, had to fly into the Philippines, and a small typhoon flew through Roxas City just one day before we landed, enough to crash the facade of the local museum, one of our venue partners.

**6** The idea for *The Sea Within* was significantly formed through another conversation with a different set of colleagues with whom I co-founded *APARN* (Asia-Pacific Artistic Research Network) in 2019. In late 2020, I was invited to convene a panel at the inaugural *APARN symposium*, titled *Rebordering Archipelago* in which I presented the research of four artists, two were part of Jejak-旅 Tabi Exchange. This platform also exposed me to two archipelagos: the Visayas in the Philippines and the Okinawa in Japan, which for *The Sea Within*, provided the contexts to look into in depth.

**7** See, E-Book of *The Sea Within*: [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-Zlloi6Z1jr-JcWqO\\_I0xpi07RjHhgmt?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR3eSBxuKznT7imt120X9J8sYoeLLqjJHMMyo0xX5gFDzrn8aCerH6WZ-huI\\_aem\\_PkcD6O1g-DO9TceEvanwRQ](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-Zlloi6Z1jr-JcWqO_I0xpi07RjHhgmt?fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR3eSBxuKznT7imt120X9J8sYoeLLqjJHMMyo0xX5gFDzrn8aCerH6WZ-huI_aem_PkcD6O1g-DO9TceEvanwRQ), accessed on 2 November 2024.

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**Helly Minarti**, Jakarta-born dance scholar/curator in Yogyakarta, rethinks radical strategies connecting practice & theory. Her work explores choreography historiographies & eclectic body knowledge.



# Dance as Dialogue: The Collaborative Practice of the ModaPerf International Biennale Interview with Zora Snake Gwendolin Lehnerer

*The ModaPerf International Biennale, established in 2017, serves as a platform fostering connections between art, society, and education while facilitating international dialogue. As a “crossroads” for reflection and exchange, it addresses key issues of our time. The MODAPERF festival (Movements, Dances, and Performances) was founded by the Cameroonian choreographer and performance artist Zora Snake in Yaoundé. It has established itself as an international and professional platform. It provides space for artistic encounters, training, dialogue, knowledge exchange, and the discovery of young local talents. At the same time, it fosters cultural development in cities like Douala, Yaoundé, and Dschang by making art accessible to “everyone.” MODAPERF is seen as a place for socially engaged art, creating connections and strengthening dialogue with Cameroon’s urban and civil societies. With its concept as a traveling festival, the Biennale connects urban and rural spaces, creates encounters with a broad audience, and builds sustainable relationships. In conversation with Zora Snake, the founder of the Biennale, we explore the vision, challenges, and significance of this groundbreaking project.*

**Gwendolin Lehnerer:** Zora, as an internationally active performer, choreographer, and founder of the *ModaPerf International Biennale* in Cameroon, which over the last seven years has become a platform for artistic encounters and the *collective exchange* of dance and culture, I like to center our discussion on these *collaborative aspects* of *ModaPerf*. To begin, could you share the original vision behind the festival and how the idea emerged from this spirit of exchange and shared creativity?

**Zora Snake:** Yes, I’m excited to talk about this. I am a choreographer and performer, and the creative mind behind the *ModaPerf Festival*. The idea for this festival came from my own journey into dance, and of course from the desire to share the art form that has moved me so deeply with others. I come from hip-hop dance, but I quickly discovered that dance is much more than just movement – it’s a language, a tool to express the unspeakable. Dance is not only a personal form of expression, but also a *collective experience* that creates a strong bond between people. For me, the body is a profound means of communication.

*“Dance is not only a personal form of expression, but also a collective experience”*

The ModaPerf Festival was meant to be a place where people could experience this deeper meaning of dance together. It should be a space that allows for *collective dialogue* and the coming together of artists and communities. We wanted to create a space where not only the art form is celebrated, but also where a multicultural and community-based dialogue between different cultural backgrounds and artistic perspectives could take place. It’s about not just celebrating dance but viewing it as a unifying element between diverse people and cultures.



*“The festival should be a space that allows for collective dialogue and the coming together of artists and communities.”*

It's important to me that dance doesn't just happen in theatres or closed spaces but is directly integrated into society. We do performances in various neighborhoods and villages. This way, we can directly engage with people and involve them in the creative process. This enables a collective dialogue and exchange, where topics like Cameroon's past, the war, and social challenges are addressed. People should be given the opportunity to reflect on their history and think about how they can shape our future together.

**GL:** How do collective practices play a role in this direct engagement with neighborhoods? Could you provide more details on what this looks like in practice and how the community is involved in the creative process?

**ZS:** Collective practices play a fundamental role in the relationship between residents and artists, particularly through the involvement of local leaders and decentralized territories. This includes the participation of indigenous authorities in preserving values and heritage, as well as in transmitting ancestral legacies as a foundation for creativity across Africa. It also involves the engagement of primary and secondary school educators, university professors, and rectors, who connect students, thinkers/researchers, and artists on questions rooted in our history and artistic approaches that uncover the unspoken.

Strengthening ties with activist associations focused on human rights, ideologies, and proposals for shared development is another essential aspect. This involves a complementary artistic approach between artists and associations.

Additionally, there is a focus on training and cultural access for “ALL AUDIENCES.” This framework aims to educate and transmit knowledge, further contributing to social education through dance.

**GL:** You've also described the festival as an international project that promotes collaboration between Cameroon and other countries. How does this international dimension of the festival work in terms of collectiveness?

**ZS:** The festival is more than just a local event in Cameroon; it aims to foster a global dialogue. We bring international artists, historians, and scholars to Cameroon to work together and discuss. In the past, for example, we've worked with dancers and anthropologists from Europe and Africa. We want to connect perspectives from different parts of the world and think about how to work together for a better future. It's not just about cultural exchange, but also about the political and social dimensions that art and dance can have when used as tools for change.

Here, reflecting on how to work together means opening a space for a non-condescending dialogue, to avoid repeating the history already written by the victors.

It involves reflecting on social urgencies that are not tied to the divisions of social classes, geographical boundaries, or capitalist powers, but rather on the question of the future of our humanity. Just because Africa does not speak about ecology does not mean there is no climate emergency, for example.

**GL:** What challenges have arisen when working with so many different people, cultures, and disciplines?

**ZS:** It's not easy, especially in a country like Cameroon, where there are political and social tensions. It's often difficult to find support, and it requires a lot of creativity and endurance to gather the necessary resources. But working with artists, scholars, historians, and the local population is very valuable, even though there are logistical and financial challenges. It requires a lot of organization, and it's important that we have structured support from national and international partners. A good example is the collaboration with the French Institute (who support us in the South-North dialogue process with a financial contribution), which helps us organize the festival every year. But there is also a need to build sustainable financing and long-term support.

**GL:** You've chosen the festival format as a place for dialogue and as a unifying gathering between the power-asymmetry of cultural infrastructures and discourse from various historical backdrops. How does the interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach shape the festival and your work?

**ZS:** This is indeed an important part of the festival. *ModaPerfis* is not just a dance festival – it's a space where different disciplines converge to look at art as a whole and experience it in a collective context. In addition to dance, we also work with artists from music, theatre, literature, and even the social sciences. I believe that art should not be viewed in isolation, but as something that touches the community as a whole.

*"It is a space where different disciplines converge to look at art as a whole and experience it in a collective context."*

The festival acts as a place for a creative process that involves individual artist and the entire audience and community of dance and beyond. For example, in some editions of the festival, we've also included the perspectives of anthropologists and historians to explain the historical and cultural context of dances. This helps audiences see dance not only as an aesthetic form but also as a medium that deeply impacts the identity of a people and sparks a dialogue about history.

A nice example of this is how we view dance as part of our cultural DNA. Cameroon, with its ten regions and over 200 traditional dances, offers an incredible wealth of diverse cultures. I use ritual dances that, for me as a creator and researcher, create connections contributing to ecological urgency, social cohesion, and preventive solidarity. They strengthen communities by preserving their history, values, knowledge, and science – far removed from Western influence. Dances such as N'Koungang, NKaa, Kang, Mébang, Samalè, and the Makounè, created by queens of secret societies, are examples of this. Africa is too diverse and rich to be reduced to just a few quotes. It still holds values that continue to be discovered in the 21st century.

Many of these ritual dances tell stories and reflect societal values. So, when we integrate them into our performances of the present time, it's not just about nostalgia or preserving customs. It's about integrating these traditions into the present and responding to the current societal challenges within the community. In this way, dance is a means and tool to deconstruct the historical legacy and also to suggest new ways of reading the society. It's a collective process where the community is actively involved in the creation and reception of the art.

*"It's a collective process where the community is actively involved in the creation and reception of the art."*

**GL:** The festival is described as a travelling platform between different cities in Cameroon. What logistical and infrastructural challenges does this pose?

**ZS:** The biggest challenge is adapting to the different local conditions. Each city has its own cultural peculiarities and requirements, which means we constantly must adjust to ensure the festival is equally accessible and meaningful everywhere. But this challenge is also an opportunity to gain new perspectives and enrich the festival each time. It's a collective task, and each city contributes to the festival's growth and development through its participation and support.

**GL:** You've described the festival as a model of partnership that fosters collaboration between the Global South and North. What forms of collaboration have you cultivated, and how has this supported the international dimension of the festival?

**ZS:** Our partnerships go far beyond purely artistic collaboration. We work with organizations that advocate for human rights and social justice, using the festival as a platform to raise awareness about societal and political issues. These partnerships are crucial in shaping the festival as a global space for the exchange of knowledge and resources. At the same time, we place great importance on ensuring that the dialogue between the Global South and North is balanced and respectful. It's not just an exchange of resources; it's a shared process in which every partner – whether local or global – takes on active responsibility.

**GL:** How would you describe the impact of the festival on society in Cameroon and perhaps also on the African contemporary dance scene overall?

**ZS:** The festival has definitely made a difference in Cameroon, and that's something I'm very proud of. First of all, it has helped broaden the understanding of dance as an art form. In Cameroon – and in many other parts of Africa – dance was often reduced to folkloric, traditional performances. There were not many platforms that dealt with dance as a contemporary art form. Through the *ModaPerf* Festival, we were able to raise awareness that dance is a vibrant, evolving part of our culture that still has a strong societal relevance today.

The festival has also helped establish dance as a serious art form, not just in the entertainment field, but as a collective space for political and social reflection. Dance is a mirror of society – it can address tensions, tackle deeply rooted issues, and create a space for dialogue. We've seen this not only on stage, but also in our exchanges with people on the ground. We've always tried to broaden the audience and not limit it to just the “cultural elites,” but to reach out to the broader population.

*“The festival as a collective space for political and social reflection.”*

Africa faces a variety of challenges, from political conflicts to social inequalities. For me, dance is a tool to not only reflect these issues, but also to develop solutions and new perspectives – in collective engagement. It's about showing society that dance is also a collective space where we can confront these deep issues. In this way, the festival contributes to changing the perception of dance as an art form and establishes it as a serious tool for societal transformation.

*“Dance is for me a tool to not only reflect these problems but also to develop solutions and new perspectives – in collective engagement.”*

**GL:** You've described dance as a *"tool for transformation."* What does that mean for you concretely? How do you experience this transformation, both on a personal and societal level?

**ZS:** Transformation always starts with us, but it happens through exchange. Dance creates a space where we can connect with each other on a deep level. It's a place where we can reflect on who we are and who we want to become. For me, the most important thing is that this transformation doesn't stop at the individual level. It's a process that takes place collectively.

On a societal level, dance is a means of giving voice to those who are not heard. For example, through the festival, we address the current social and political issues in Cameroon. These are things we would often rather not talk about openly – but dance can create a space to reflect on them. When we take these issues onto the stage, we give them visibility. For me, dance is an active force for transformation that starts from the grassroots level and connects to larger social movements.

*"Dance is an active force for transformation that starts from the grassroots level and connects to larger social movements."*

*In the end it's all about collaboration.* Because only by working together can we ensure that our art is not just entertainment but an instrument for social change. The festival is a space where people can experience the power of transformation through art and actively participate in creating something bigger than themselves.

**GL:** Zora, thank you for sharing your insights and experiences with me. It's clear that the *ModaPerf Festival* is much more than just an artistic platform—it's a space of political and social reflection, a collective experience, and a transformative tool for both individuals and society.

**ZS:** This is why we go even further, exploring through performance—an artistic tool that delves deeply into our concerns to reveal possible pathways for "emerging from the great night," borrowing from Achille Mbembé. Performance remains a medium for questioning and generates significant social debate in Cameroon. Performance as a lens for the "urgency to act" in the face of the world's powerlessness that speaks to us. This is why "Mouvements" is envisioned by its creator as a social, political, economic, feminist, and racial movement... where each era dances the density of its existence. "To exist is to perform the instinct of life." Hence MODAPERF (Movements, Dances, and Performances). Thank you very much for the opportunity to share this with you. I'm grateful for this platform to discuss how important dance can be in shaping society.

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**Zora Snake** is a Cameroonian choreographer, performer, and dancer, as well as the founder of the Compagnie Zora Snake and the international festival *MODAPERF* (Movements, Dances, and Performances). A prominent figure in the contemporary African art scene, he blends his roots in the Bamiléké people, the aesthetics of urban dances like hip-hop, and the political history of his country in his work. His performances transcend cultural and societal boundaries, drawing inspiration from the myth of sacred animals in Bamiléké tradition. Through his art, he seeks to move the world, make political issues visible, and challenge both mind and body.

This is not a space for instruction, but for you to explore—whether as a team or on your own. Turning the tables shows no love for physical wisdom. Lyrical structures are omissive, their answers are horizons of refraction. A careful navigation could be given: Neurodiverse people will be in your audience, perhaps your curatorial team will include neurodivergence. These witnesses to the experiences you are about to create are as individual as neurotypical people, from some perspectives even more so, with common traits on individual scales. This exercise, transmitted to the reader as a poem, is an invitation to embrace the neurodivergent experience through poetic emulation. Sensuous routines fabricated through the enactment of the exercise might allow a glimpse of a non-species-normative thrownness, often entangled in co-morbidities. This exercise is a first attempt to feel, routinise, and live this transferred knowledge as a catalyst for a more nuanced curatorial endeavor.

**Raimund Rosarius**

### **Fabric Sensuous Routine**

I  
 search for shades  
 immerse yourself in soothing textures  
 hear in muted pastel  
 think of poetry as clouds: dispersed  
 voluntarily omit in favor of sense/s

II  
 create the most repetitive repetitions  
 make understand that repetition is the subject  
 (identify a warmth that's cooling  
 re-arrive at sensation  
 through the shades)

III  
 value punctuation: dispersed  
 punctuation be your heart  
 your details, your smaller pictures  
 your rhythm in body worth  
 the rabbit hole of variations

IV  
 design masks that express  
 conformity: stacked  
 those masks could be  
 your gait  
 ° ° °

V  
 precision in your masks: summarized  
 imagine years like tally sheets  
 of pushing through the mask  
 vapor electrically live

This exercise is informed by my curatorial as well as artistic practice as a neurodivergent member of SANPANG Art Collective and my cooperation with artist Meng Xiangxia on our *Cloud Re/Sonance* project.

**By Raimund Rosarius**

<https://raimundrosarius.com/>



# "Does it work? Not always. Is it perfect? Far from it. But they do"<sup>1</sup>

## Interview with Róise Goan on horizontal working structures at VIERNULVIER in Ghent Sigrid Gareis

*In 2017 the art center VIERNULVIER (formerly Vooruit) started a profound and detailed initiative to anchor horizontal working structures in their organization. With 350,000 visitors a year, VIERNULVIER is one of the most important arts centers of Flanders. Situated in the center of the Belgian city of Ghent, it offers a broad mix of cultural activities, including dance, theater, performance, literature and music.*

*We asked artistic coordinator Róise Goan how the artistic program develops collaboratively within this extraordinary working structure of VIERNULVIER.*

**Sigrid Gareis:** "VIERNULVIER is not a model, however, but an attitude" is a kind of motto on your website. This indicates a clear vision that you are pursuing. Could you describe this attitude in more detail?

**Róise Goan:** If we are honest, I think this statement relates more clearly to the former name of our venue: *Vooruit* (long story: we had to react and change our name because the Flemish socialist party, with whom we share our roots, decided to change their name to Vooruit without consulting us). *Vooruit* means *FORWARD*, *Allez! Let's Go! Avant!*, and beyond the progressive surface message of forward-looking arts practice, I think *Vooruit* speaks to an underlying attitude in the house of 'let's give it a shot'. There is a very strong appetite, across the teams in our house at VIERNULVIER, to try new things, and to say yes, wherever possible. This attitude has led to a lot of innovation, happy surprises and joyful discoveries in not just the work we present, but the way we work with artists and the way we work together in our team. It has also on occasion led to mistakes and messes, sometimes attempting to run before we have learned to walk a particular path, but I think the underpinning curiosity and commitment to teamwork prevails.

**SG:** Your restructuring into a horizontal organizational model has attracted a great deal of international attention and recognition in the field of the performing arts. How could the characteristics of your collaborative structure be summarized in a few words?

**RG:** I wasn't here when this happened, so in a way my retelling is something like folklore. But I arrived as the guest dramaturg within a year of this action in 2017. The reorganization of the VIERNULVIER team followed an internal crisis related to the management of the organization. At that time, the team took the courageous decision to make public, and open up their thinking and strategy in creating a new model for the organization. In a really beautiful gesture, they applied a programmatic dramaturgy to

an internal strategic process, involving the team, the stakeholders, the audience and the city in rethinking, mostly the HOW of the organization. This program was called *Blauwdruk* (English: Blue print), and it lives in all of our internal processes—horizontal organizing, cross-disciplinary teams working thematically, a commitment to minute-taking and transparent reporting on activity, a commitment to our network in the city of Ghent, an understanding that our program includes everything that happens in our building and not just the program that our artistic team creates, a rich mix that lives in our core communications message: *Nothing for everyone, something for everybody*. That said, we understand the way we work as a consistent movement *towards* horizontality. The project has not been achieved, and it is a consistent challenge that motivates the organizational engine.

**SG:** What prompted you to take this initiative?

**RG:** What prompted the team at VIERNULVIER to take this initiative was really a call back to our socialist roots and a desire to consciously challenge and flatten hierarchies in our structures, in the way we work, in our approach and attitude to programming. This reorganization coincided with VIERNULVIER becoming one of nine "Kunstelingen" in Flanders—national cultural institutions—and it is telling that at this moment, the organizational instinct reached towards sharing power, transparency and creating access wherever possible.

**SG:** In your horizontal organizational model, you work specifically with different teams, roles, mandates and consultation methods. Your self-description on the homepage also emphasizes that "everyone at VIERNULVIER who feels the impact of the program volume may help decide on the agenda [...]". How does this affect the curatorial work in your institution in concrete terms? Or, to put it another way: how does the content-related and conceptual work develop in a horizontal structure? And what does this mean for your daily working practice and your (collective?) curatorial decisions?

**RG:** In truth, this relates largely to the program as a totality, which is a mix of program generated by our artistic team, program that comes from our network partners, and the program that comes from venue hires. Our colleague Lies Vanborm, coordinator of program and production, leads our various teams in planning our seasons in such a way that there is enough space, at different times, for advance artistic planning, and more short term reactive opportunities that come to the table on a weekly basis through cross-team "intake meeting". On a curatorial level, we regularly make our program with partners and practice co-curation, whether it's with concert promoters for one-off gigs or series', university departments on annual calendar events.

With regard to festivals made in collaboration with a range of partners, the process varies. For example, the upcoming *Openbare Werken*, co-curated by the partners of the Tot in de Stad! network of organizations working with artists over long trajectories in the city, we are bound by shared co-creative practices that prioritize process over final outcome, and are largely situated extra-mural.

With *GIF*, the festival is made with a range of other institutional partners in the city, it is largely driven by a common understanding of each other's work, and knowing that by working alone, we would not achieve the desired outcome for either artists or audiences.

In both instances, the co-curation is underpinned by the collaboration of a round table, where we understand that different partners bring different gifts to the table, and we attempt to practice equity in the way programs are formed.

Within our own team, we meet weekly to update each other on artistic and practical questions and try and take two longer moments per year to consider the bigger artistic picture with a reflective eye.

**SG:** How do you see VIERNULVIER's "attitude" in the European institutional context and what makes it different?

**RG:** VIERNULVIER is perhaps less concerned with questions of exclusivity than is present in the European institutional context. We are a big house in a small city and our primary goal is always to *make the thing happen*. The solution in making the thing happen is usually found in the instinct to partner up. We regularly work with our colleagues in NT Gent, Campo, Opera Ballet Vlaanderen, Democrazy and others to make artists' projects happen that we wouldn't succeed in presenting alone.

Furthermore, there are no white gloves in our house, and if you come and see a show in our theaterzaal, you will likely get a whiff of the beer spilt at a party the night before from the back staircase. That is the attitude of our house - it all happens here, and we try and respectfully make room for all kinds of cultural experiences, without making a hierarchy of value around them.

**SG:** In order to further deepen your transformation process, you have been setting up a working group to include, in addition to employees and suppliers, resident artists, audiences, platform partners and neighbors in your decision-making processes in the future. Your goal is—as you put it on your website—to establish "a kind of parliament of VIERNULVIER". This process began in mid-2022. What is the current status?

**RG:** This is not quite where we are. As I understand it, when the organization was renamed, a plan to create this biennial parliament of stakeholders was mooted but has not yet come to pass. In mid 2022, the first iteration of the VIERNULVIER "jong panel" (English: Young panel) was formed, and a second cohort took up their place in September 2023. After their first year of working, they have presented us with how they see themselves, which is really as a critical think tank for the organization. This is an evolving project; the "jong panel" organize themselves to meet monthly, and they also attend staff meetings at VIERNULVIER and are part of other cross team meetings, including the current "group of 15" we have, tasked with creating and delivering an anti-discrimination policy and plan for the organization. Two members of the group have also been elected to our board of directors.

**SG:** You are also focusing on the idea of viewing VIERNULVIER as a "platform" rather than an autonomous institution. What exactly does that mean? How are artists and artist curators involved in curatorial decision-making processes?

**RG:** How we understand this is that we have a responsibility to work in partnership wherever possible. Whenever we start a new project or program, the first question is "who is the right partner for this?"

As mentioned in an earlier question, our *intake* process allows space for lots of questions that come to us to find a place in our program, and for all intents and purposes, to the broad audience of 350,000 who attend events here annually, there is no distinction between an event that has been programmed by our artistic team and something that was proposed by our network, or another organization that hires the space.

With regard to artists and artist curators, at this moment in time, there are no defined roles for external artist-curators, but our artists-in-residence ("huisartiesten") and organizations-in-residence are part of an ongoing dialogue with our artistic team about our program. All of the programmers on our artistic team also have their own artistic practice, which informs our work.

**SG:** A member of your young board is quoted in a university masters thesis as follows: "Does it work? Not always. Is it perfect? Far from it. But they do." Where exactly are the problems of a horizontal organizational structure in practice? How do you deal with them?

**RG:** Where to start?!? Again, I think it's important to say that we do not consider ourselves as a horizontal organization but rather one that strives towards horizontality. I agree with the quote above—our structure is far from perfect. And yet, in trying to match the HOW of our work to the values of our house, it is the best we have and we work on improving it every day, with the unilateral commitment of the team to doing better, and not sitting on our laurels.

Some of the problems we encounter include:

- the additional time it takes to have the meetings to ensure broad consensus and the inclusion of all voices that want to participate
- when that participation is allowed and encouraged, it means you have to come good on the promises you make to listen, which sometimes means rolling back on promises or agreements that are made with other parties in response
- reaching consensus or making a decision without consensus when decisions need to be made
- addressing conflict or disagreement in the absence of hierarchical mandates
- acknowledging that there actually are hierarchical mandates within our organizational structure
- identifying and naming power that is invisible but being enacted in decision making
- supporting artists to navigate working with an organization where there are many points of contact (we have good workflows to deal with this but they too are a constant work in progress)
- when you have a vision for the house that is not only about what is on your stages but how you work, it intrinsically means that the work is never done, and this can be exhausting, and it's hard to know where to draw boundaries
- when you have a vision for the house that is not only about what is on your stages but how you work, you will inevitably make mistakes and fail to meet the standards you have set for yourself
- working in an organizational structure like this is not easy for people early in their career; with a flattening of hierarchy there also comes a lack of entry-level opportunities to learn on the job.

How we deal with all these problems, and a lot of others to boot, is by naming them and a continued project of trying to address these problems in our daily work, and via annual bench-marked actions that are led by the coordination team. As well as the art we present, the desire to constantly improve this imperfect and evolving project is something that really drives the organization and all of the team who work here.

**SG:** Do you have any specific advice for colleagues who would like to embark on a similar transformation process?

**RG:** I think it's really worth considering whether you are willing to do the work, and whether you can engage in the healthy conflict and sometimes difficult conversations needed to be able to work in this way. You will also need the resources to staff adequately, and I think something that works in VIERNULVIER's favor is that our salaries are determined via national service grades that are applied across the arts and in other sectors. In other countries, where there is more autonomy around salary levels, I think a lot of serious and open conversations would need to take place about money and power to make a new organizational structure moving towards horizontality.

Another feature of our work here is that we, and the artists we are hosting on any individual day, are provided with lunch, that most of the team eat together daily, and I think this shared table, and moment of collective hospitality adds to the renewed and daily commitment of collaborative, respectful and equitable working in our house.

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## Notes

**I** Swinnen, Nienke. *Exploration of whiteness and decolonization in the arts sector: Case-study VIERNULVIER*. Academic Dissertation at Ghent University, 34. [https://libstore.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/003/119/098/RUG01-003119098\\_2023\\_0001\\_AC.pdf](https://libstore.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/003/119/098/RUG01-003119098_2023_0001_AC.pdf), accessed January 10, 2025.

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**Róise Goan**, born in Dublin, has been Artistic Coordinator with Kunstencentrum VIERNULVIER since May 2023. From 2019, she was the artistic director and co-ceo of Artsadmin in London, one of the UK's leading production houses for interdisciplinary art projects. She has worked as an artist, producer and programmer with numerous arts organizations. Róise studied Drama and Theatre at Trinity College Dublin and graduated in 2004. In 2008 she was appointed director of the Dublin Fringe Festival, where she founded Fringe Lab. Highlights of her freelance career include artist development collaborations with Prime Cut in Belfast and two applications for European Capital of Culture. In addition to her work in the performing arts, she has written for television, most notably for the TG4 series *Aifric*. She was appointed to the Arts Council of Ireland in 2022.





# On Letting Go<sup>1</sup>

## Marta Keil

Collective curation is not a miracle solution that can transform our field overnight. But it can work well as a provocation - and a potential political proposal - for rethinking how we work, and, perhaps, how we build and maintain social relations. In this sense, collective curation can attempt to break the spell of socio-economic exhaustion embedded in curatorial practice: always competitive, always alienated, always under pressure to set the new trend, and, as a result, always too tired to imagine how things could be otherwise.

What if the practice of collective curating invites those who, at first glance, do not fit the “job description”? What do we need to get rid of in order for their ideas, imaginaries, and urgencies to emerge and take all the space they need?

In 2022, I was invited to join *The Shake Down* project, initiated by Bek Berger (back then artistic director of New Theatre Institute of Latvia) and Alexander Roberts (artistic and managing director of Rosendal Theater in Trondheim), which involved ten teenage curators co-curating two international festivals: Homo Novus in Riga in September 2022 and Bastard Festival in Trondheim in April 2023. Over a period of fifteen months, the young curators from Latvia and Norway, accompanied by four external mentors and four festival directors and producers, explored what curatorial practice could entail, discovered the local contexts of the two cities, interviewed various artists and conceptualized, prepared and hosted an artistic program of their choice.

I collaborated with the young curators as one of their mentors (although it often felt more like they were mentoring me!), which became one of the most nourishing curatorial journeys I’ve been part of. This was thanks, of course, to the passion, inquiries, and curiosities of the young curators — but also to the fact that we, as mentors and festival teams, had to learn how to hold the space together as a temporary collective curatorial body. At the same time, we had to step back from some of the routines that usually guide our work. This required us to learn how to let go: how to say goodbye to some of our habits, ways of thinking and modes of working that we may have taken for granted, and been quite attached to.

I have noted this experience of letting go of old patterns as five ingredients in a farewell meal recipe. Each ingredient is accompanied by some observations about how to prepare for both the disruptions each farewell may bring, and the new flavors they might make room for.

Of course, there are many ways to turn this recipe draft into a full farewell meal. The final flavor will always vary – depending on how you choose to stir the ingredients, which spices you add, and whom you’ll be sharing the meal with.

1. **Routines.** Look at the routines that underpin your daily curatorial practice. Perhaps you have shaped them yourself, perhaps you have followed an institutional pattern encountered when you started your work. How formalized these routines are? Do they take the form of a written protocol or are they more of a habitual practice for getting things done? Who do these rules actually serve? Abandoning familiar paths can seem intimidating because they offer a safety net. When invit-

ing a collaborator unfamiliar with production procedures, disruption to efficiency is inevitable. The encounter between the young curators and the institutional structures challenged the pace of the latter's work, namely the rhythm of decision-making, the production processes and the flow of communication. All this required reflection, clarification, renegotiation. Why this way, why now, how could we do it differently? Efficiency was disrupted, but this rupture in linear, productive time became exactly the moment when we could ask: who does this efficiency work for? To be able to ask this question, however, it is necessary to make sure there is enough time and space to reflect together what has happened: to acknowledge the gaps, the anxiety and fatigue they might provoke, and to see the potential of new ones that can emerge. What ways of working and procedures got unestablished on the way? What new, more restorative and nourishing routines could we think of?

2. **Curatorial ambition.** Does your curatorial practice revolve mainly around working with the artists and art practices you admire? Sharing curatorial task with many may lead to a programme proposal that, at first glance, feels challenging to fully identify with. But curating has never really been about realizing one's own vision alone, has it? Ambition is closely linked to passion - it helps create a bold, coherent curatorial framework and supports the effort to turn one's own ideas into reality. But if it becomes too dominant, it can also narrow the perspective. What surprises and new encounters can arise when we set aside our ambitions, at least for a while, and invite someone to co-curate, whose idea of a good, bold program differs from ours? What can we learn? Let's wait for the moment when we see how what they have co-curated resonates in unexpected, unusual ways. Take a look at the audience they have gathered, an audience we may rarely see in our venue, in our district, in our field. Host a good party for them.
3. **The figure of an individual expert.** Letting go of the image of the curator as an individual expert may take time and effort, as it is deeply embedded in the myth that has shaped the contemporary art world in Europe: the modernist figure of an autonomous, talented individual. A charismatic leader, an omnipotent specialist — so well-connected, so well-informed. A super-powered person who seemingly never gets tired. If they do, it means they are too weak for their job. How many times have we heard that — from colleagues, from employers, at schools? Saying goodbye to this model of curating can feel frightening: what if it's seen as a defeat, as proof that you really are not good enough? But the weight of this transformation will not rest on your shoulders alone. Once you begin shifting your practice toward a more collaborative one, you're no longer the only person who provides, cares for, and maintains the space — it becomes maintained by many. You will still feel tired, disillusioned, anxious, lost at times. But now, you'll also be able to step back when needed — others will hold the space until you return. And perhaps, at last, you'll have companions to walk with you along the path you've always dreamed of, but never dared to chart. That is the real superpower.
4. **Expertise.** Letting go of the dominant understanding of curatorial practice as something reserved for "experts" or "professionals" (whatever that may mean) is likely to be met with distrust. After one of the festivals co-curated by teenagers, a critic argued that we had taken space that should be reserved for professionals. That came as no surprise: initiatives such as *The Shake Down* are often seen as excessive, perhaps even threatening to established ways the performing arts field operates. And rightly so. They risk shaking dominant patterns and create space for

new ones to emerge. This process will, inevitably, stir discomfort and provoke anxiety from time to time. Be prepared for a backlash. Reach out to your allies, and become many to counter it. These alliances and friendships may turn out to be the most nourishing ingredients of this meal.

- 5. Loss of old patterns.** The process of letting go of the old patterns needs time and space. They were useful at times: they protected us from falling, they supported the coherence of the practice, they made sure the favorite spices were always at hand. We might have gotten used to the flavors they formed: they felt good, known, comfortable. But letting go of them could open space for other, perhaps even more nourishing ones. And for the tastes you would have never imagined otherwise.

While weighting all these ingredients in your hands, think what else would you need to add to your farewell dish? Create your own list, and think about the tablecloth and lighting.

What would you need to let go of in order to make more space at your table?  
How do you set the table, how many plates?

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### Notes

**1** With thanks to Jacopo Lanteri, Barbara Raes and Alexander Roberts for the conversations and collaborations that helped shape these thoughts.

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**Marta Keil** (PhD) is a dramaturge, curator and researcher, collaborating with various European institutions and artists. She currently works as tutor at DAS Theatre at the Academy for Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam University of the Arts.





KYOTO EXPERIMENT



# Polyphonic Horizons: Connectivity as a Curatorial Paradigm

## Gwendolin Lehnerer

In this article, I aim to address a gap in the discourse on collective curating that pertains to dealing with diverse knowledge systems. The question I wish to discuss is how and whether communal working methods – particularly collective, transdisciplinary, and collaborative approaches – can contribute to the emergence of polyphonic knowledge landscapes, and which conditions and key concepts play a role in this process. How might one conceive a polyphonic knowledge landscape? What epistemes underpin it? And how can the urgency of collective, transdisciplinary learning be understood as a prerequisite for its development?

Based on these questions, I wish to propose the thesis that the concept of *connectivity*<sup>1</sup> can serve not only as a foundation and infrastructure for exploring communal, future-oriented practices but also as an analytical tool to examine the parameters of a polyphonic knowledge landscape in curating.

As Gesa Ziemer demonstrates, the reason for this lies “in a paradoxical development in the relationship between the individual and the collective, which describes an increasing individualization within our society while simultaneously maintaining collective needs.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, this concept can help navigate the “tensions within the collective,” where “intensive collaboration is pursued consciously and deliberately despite heterogeneity and the temporality of activities.”<sup>3</sup>

Following this thesis, I will use the concept of connectivity to examine contemporary examples from the curatorial field that employ collective, transdisciplinary, and collaborative practices to highlight the potential of polyphonic knowledge landscapes and underscore the urgency of collective learning as the basis for their development.

### Connectivity and Polyphonic Knowledge Landscapes:

#### A Mycelium of Diverse Perspectives and Voices

First, I would like to outline how connectivity and polyphonic knowledge landscapes can be conceptualized: A fitting metaphor for this is the mushroom and its mycelial network. Through its mycelium, the mushroom is deeply connected to its ecosystem, forming a kind of collective intelligence that links it to its surroundings and ensures its (survival) capabilities.

In a polyphonic knowledge landscape, connectivity symbolizes the mycelium: it embodies the interconnection of diverse perspectives, weaving together the complexity and diversity of different practices, cultures, and knowledge systems, and making them perceptible. Connectivity, as both a social and technical phenomenon, thus creates realities.

For me, a polyphonic knowledge landscape—inspired by a polyphonic aesthetic—can be imagined as a knowledge landscape “of multiplicities and differences, engaging with various practices, situations, and rhythms. An anti-universalist endeavor of differentiated complication and complicity,”<sup>4</sup> in the field of curating, which includes themes of sustainability and alternative knowledge systems.

This knowledge landscape contrasts with “the cosmopolitan aspiration of a *sensus communis* or the well-meaning but no less colonial gesture of incorporating ‘foreign’ persons and positions through situating and partiality,”<sup>5</sup> as suggested by Sofia Bempeza, Christoph Brunner, Katharina Hausladen, Ines Kleesattel, and Ruth Sonderegger

in their polyphonic aesthetic. Conceptually imagining such an undertaking means detaching from the Western canon of disciplines as the prevailing classificatory category, or expanding it, intertwining with other knowledge systems, and forming new knowledge collectives.

As an alternative to the “traditional concept of ‘society,’” Bruno Latour develops the concept of the “collective,”<sup>6</sup> which he defines as the ongoing entanglement of “material, social, and discursive entities.”<sup>7</sup>

These new collectives—as starting points for polyphonic knowledge landscapes—could, following Bruno Latour, include what has previously been excluded: marginalized voices, animals, objects, and the environment. At the forefront is the combination and connection of different constellations. Latour’s aim of expanding collectives is coupled with the hope of giving voice to entities that have so far been ignored or overlooked.

Within such an imagined assemblage of a new collective in the curatorial field, the curator enters as a node of selection, a site of meaning-making, and sometimes as a disruptor in an otherwise egalitarian space – particularly when they impose or dictate collaborative working relationships from a position of power, i.e., from the outside. In this sense, I am interested in examining the connectivity underlying collective, collaborative, or transdisciplinary practices in curatorial work – and investigating whether the trajectory of the genius curator, who determines the curatorial knowledge landscape, (still) points toward a collective, collaborative, or transdisciplinary communal process, and what role learning plays in its evocation. Is there a transformative potential here that can generate a future-oriented and speculative polyphonic knowledge landscape? And what forms of connectivity can be identified as the foundation of these practices? To explore this, it is worth revisiting the precise definitions of the terms underpinning these communal practices.

### **Collectivity versus Trans-disciplinarity: Differentiation and Potentials in Curatorial Practice**

Collective, transdisciplinary, and collaborative forms of working are characterized by their communal nature, often within a specific context. It is their coming together that gives them their resilience and leads to a redefinition of the relationship between the individual and the group, where the interplay of knowledge, hierarchy, and power plays a decisive role. The objective, besides artistic, scientific, or curatorial processes and insights, is often a transformative aspiration to critique, open up, or expand established structures or approaches.

In all three practices, there is the potential to integrate other knowledge systems. This allows for permeability across disciplines, enriching them with other knowledge systems that can be reflected in working methods, techniques, and forms of collaboration – in their rules, values, and principles.

In this sense, it is important to revisit how these terms are used: the concept of transdisciplinarity originally comes from the history of science but has been adopted due to its adaptability in the arts and curatorial discourses. Transdisciplinarity is a research approach<sup>8</sup> that promotes collaboration across the boundaries of individual disciplines to address complex societal and scientific problems.<sup>9</sup>

This approach makes it possible not only to integrate knowledge and methods from other academic disciplines but also to include actors outside academia, such as artists, activists, policymakers, and the public, in the research process.<sup>10</sup> Transdisciplinarity is also deeply embedded in curatorial approaches and artistic concepts. It frequently appears as a key term in programs, festival descriptions, or calls for papers. In cultural practice, “transdisciplinary themes are among the self-evident hallmarks of a contemporary practice aligned with current times.”<sup>11</sup>

Transdisciplinary practices foster encounters between different perspectives and knowledge systems, thus opening up new resonance spaces. Collective working practices are closely linked to trans-disciplinarity, as they too place communal work at the center to advance processes; however, they differ significantly in the form of their connectivity.

As I observe, there is a stronger focus on community and care relationships, which seem to be favored by collective working practices. Their form of connectivity can develop into a kind of *complicity*,<sup>12</sup> which usually does not play a prominent role in transdisciplinary processes. Yet, their configurations do not necessarily need to be transdisciplinary in orientation. Their form of knowledge production is a collective knowledge-in-process, developed through the participation, expertise, or individual experiences of members, with decision-making processes and rules collectively determined. Knowledge is often created communally and is egalitarian.

The goals and purposes of collective working methods are not necessarily solutions, as in transdisciplinary processes, but instead have various orientations and objectives. As Marta Keil emphasizes, collective approaches ideally practice:

[...] solidarity instead of competition, question the figure of an individual genius, experiment with various ways of (re)building relations with collaborators and with the publics, focus more on a practice than a singular presentation, take a risk of inviting the unknown to take space, [...]<sup>13</sup>

Collectivity, therefore, emphasizes not only collaboration and knowledge exchange—not just connectivity—but also the importance of respect, care, and solidarity among people within the collective and with their environment.<sup>14</sup>

Collaborative practices – whether in general as associations of institutions or actors – do not necessarily involve the inclusion or invitation of the unknown. However, they too promote the involvement of other actors and process-oriented knowledge forms in the context and process of knowledge production.

All three practices can thus be compared based on their connectivity, as all three involve “intensive and deliberate collaboration despite heterogeneity and the temporality of activities.”<sup>15</sup>

Additionally, a collective need can be observed, which is practiced in varying degrees. But how can these group processes be learned and fostered, and how can connectivity be increased toward a collectively conceived polyphonic knowledge landscape?

With the concept of connectivity, I aim to explore the infrastructures, relationships, or rules within such projects that contribute to the formation of new knowledge communities or collectives through curatorial processes. Such an approach helps decipher the complexity and structures of collaborative, collective, or transdisciplinary processes and grasp their multifaceted interconnections for a future-oriented polyphonic knowledge landscape.

### **The Challenge of Connectivity:**

#### **Pathways to Promoting and Shaping Polyphonic Knowledge Landscapes**

Group processes, in general, require significant empathetic and personal commitment, which in turn entails greater vulnerability. Even when these processes are designed and functioning in a connective way, careful attention is needed to prevent them from failing. The actors carry situated knowledge and a specific or nonspecific vulnerability that must or should be taken into account. In this sense, it is necessary to repeatedly review communication habits or structures—part of technical and social connectivity—and align them with the specific goals of communal work processes. This applies equally to transdisciplinary, collective, and collaborative practices.

## The Body Reloaded

The inclusion of the body in group processes opens up new perspectives on connectivity as a condition for communal practices. Here, the body becomes an essential interface connecting individuals and groups. In somatic approaches, the body is utilized as a medium for presence, empathy, and resonance. This enables an embodiment of connection that goes beyond mere cognitive understanding, touching on physical and emotional levels that facilitate sensitivity to conflicts within the group and promote collective action. Another concept is that of “embodied communality.”<sup>16</sup> This shows that community is not created solely through language or ideas, but also through non-verbal communication like touch, movement, and shared physical experiences. Moreover, incorporating somatic practices allows for recognizing diversity within a group. Different bodies and perceptions are experienced and integrated into the process, promoting an inclusive community practice.

A compelling approach is proposed by Nicole Haitzinger. She develops a *toolbox for somatic practices* that can actively contribute to embodied community. According to Haitzinger, somatic practices can serve as a toolkit in curatorial contexts, first to “unlearn” entrenched social patterns and a “habitual stance” in the curator/artist relationship and second to “unlearn” rigid attitudes towards canon and aesthetics.<sup>17</sup> In this approach, connectivity is not only conceptualized but also physically and emotionally experienced, making it a transformative foundation for collective action. Other evocative examples of embodied communality in new collectives include the *School of the Jaguar*<sup>18</sup> and the *School of Mountains and Water*<sup>19</sup> (Amanda Piña). These projects create platforms for a diverse knowledge ecology, offering space for alternative forms of sensing and understanding that are practiced collectively and polyphonically. The *School of the Jaguar* explores relationships between humans, animals, and plants in Amerindian cultures, creating a space for dialogue between different knowledge systems. Indigenous elders, artists and scientists collaborate with participants to question and deconstruct universalism. The *School of Mountains and Water* organizes performative mountain hikes that combine discursive, educational, and artistic practices. Both projects curate encounters that strengthen diverse perspectives and foster collective being. These projects rely on connectivity and collective processes to enable new forms of learning and action. They allow cultural and ecological connections to be experienced, constellating different knowledges—including those involving humans, animals, and plants—as equals, and acknowledging varied perspectives. Overall, these projects create platforms where connectivity and collectivity go hand in hand to experiment with new polyphonic knowledge ecologies, imagining them as parts of an embodied community and a new collective.

## Knowledge Theater Reloaded

For me, an essential feature of connectivity—besides the body as an interface—are the spaces of encounter, whether physical, digital, or imaginary. These spaces are the condition for a polyphonic knowledge landscape, as they bring together diverse actors, enabling the physical or digital convergence of various knowledge systems. In the curatorial field, these spaces include real venues such as museums, theaters, festival sites, and site-specific venues, as well as curated—constructed—spaces within these venues. I want to describe all these spaces as *knowledge theaters* because they offer the possibility of experiencing the macrocosm—the world—polyphonically within the microcosm of a festival, program, or discourse series, to play out futures and test transformations.

Two examples of knowledge theaters demonstrate their fundamental role as conditions for connectivity in collective and transdisciplinary curatorial practices. The first

example is part of the program of *documenta fifteen* and illustrates how collective practices can form a polyphonic knowledge landscape that prepares futures together and makes practical utopias tangible.

The second example of a knowledge theater is a multidisciplinary platform whose purpose lies precisely in involving the community and exchanging knowledge and art.

### **ZukunftsDorf22**

*documenta fifteen*, curated by the curatorial collective *ruangrupa*, exemplifies how such a knowledge theater can manifest: Inspired by the central motif of “*lumbung*,” the Indonesian word for a rice barn where surplus harvest is stored for the community’s benefit, the *ZukunftsDorf22*<sup>20</sup> emerged through Kassel’s Common Good Economy group.

The idea was to create a space for encounter and exchange that advanced ecological, social, and economic transformation in society. The *ZukunftsDorf22* considered itself a collective that connected people and initiatives interested in sustainable, socially just, ecological transformation.

The aim was to create a network for the Kassel region based on communal benefit, collective processes, and long-term commitment. The *ZukunftsDorf22* sought individuals and groups willing to actively contribute to a “village organism,”<sup>21</sup> align their work with principles of cooperation, participation, and co-production, and embed themselves in a lasting sustainability network.

Together, they aimed to make an experimental and experiential space accessible to all, embodying a “practical utopia”<sup>22</sup> in the *ZukunftsDorf22*.

The convergence of artistic and social practices in collective collaboration for societal transformation is paradigmatic for both their connectivity—bridging the diverse fields of actors—and the collective need to shape alternate futures together.

### **Savvy Kwata Limbe**

The second example is *Savvy Kwata Limbe*<sup>23</sup> in Limbe, Cameroon, established by *Savvy Contemporary: The Laboratory of Form-Ideas* in Berlin, in collaboration with various actors in Cameroon. *Savvy Kwata Limbe* is a multidisciplinary and multifunctional platform in Limbe—a library and community space as well as “a place for the preservation and transmission of knowledge situated beyond the book.”<sup>24</sup>

It is a curated space of encounter and a “network of teachers, students, activists, artists, workers, and traditional leaders in Cameroon that employs decolonial educational and artistic tools to engage the community at the grassroots level.”<sup>25</sup>

Kwata provides a space for communal interactions, whether on collaborative, transdisciplinary, or collective levels, as well as for a “being-with” and “thinking-with,”<sup>26</sup> centering collective needs.

Kwata also fosters the exchange of knowledge, contributing to a polyphonic knowledge community—a knowledge theater where “knowledges and in pursuit of the preservation of traditional practices around arts and crafts, culture, and education”<sup>27</sup> are transmitted and preserved.

*ZukunftsDorf22* and *Savvy Kwata Limbe* are just two of many examples<sup>28</sup> where spaces of encounter serve as enabling spaces for connectivity and thereby for new knowledge communities in the curatorial and global landscape.

I also understand knowledge theaters as alternative “learning spaces” that exist outside traditional educational institutions such as academies, schools, and universities, appearing in festivals, village squares, and artistic or curated programs. They actively contribute to not only preparing but also enabling polyphonic knowledge landscapes. They are part of the evocation of how collective, transdisciplinary, and collaborative practices can be practiced.



## Engagement with Learning Spaces and Collective Knowledge Production

The transnational research collective *topsoil*<sup>29</sup> has delved into these learning spaces and the processes of collective knowledge production. They develop questions surrounding individual and collective learning experiences, their diversity, and the relationships formed within and around these learning spaces. These questions address the environments and experiences that make learning possible. They serve as a step toward approaching the question of what forms of coming together are required to meet collective needs and enable polyphonic knowledge landscapes and learning spaces.<sup>30</sup>

Learning spaces, as meeting points, are also crucial in fostering learning and shaping new collectives. Here, the transformative moment of connectivity leading to collectivity takes center stage—a dynamic particularly reflected in projects such as the *School of the Jaguar* and the *School of Mountains and Water*.

## Rules of Connection: How Guidelines Foster Connectivity and Collectivity in Collaborative Work Processes

In addition to knowledge theaters as spaces of encounter, normative forms like rules and guidelines can play a pivotal role in promoting connectivity and collectivity in collaborative work processes. These structures not only facilitate the interaction of diverse actors but also help leverage differences as transformative forces. This is evident in practices such as recognizing diversity, accepting varying time horizons, and creating spaces for counterpositions.

Such frameworks support the inclusion of the body and a conversational culture that does not enforce consensus but fosters dialogue, mutual understanding, and respect. This approach can also reshape and redefine the curation of knowledge theaters and learning spaces, generating connectivity and fulfilling the need for collectivity.

One example is the “Score for Conversational Culture”<sup>31</sup> from the *2024 Curating in the Performing Arts program*, which illustrates how guidelines can structure collaboration while also serving as tools to promote connectivity. This and other approaches align with the concept of connectivity as they lay the groundwork for shared practices and strengthen connections across diverse knowledge systems. Guidelines and frameworks, therefore, not only provide orientation but actively foster the emergence of a polyphonic knowledge landscape.

## Rethinking New Collectives and Polyphonic Knowledge Communities

Connectivity, it is argued, is not only a fundamental condition for collectivity but also the foundation for polyphonic knowledge landscapes. It enables connections between different perspectives, practices, and knowledge systems, forming the infrastructure for collaborative processes.

Forms of connectivity—such as somatic practices, learning spaces, knowledge theaters, or the establishment of guidelines and manifestos—create spaces for encounter, exchange, and collective action. These approaches not only transform curatorial practices but also foster collective agency by understanding differences as resources rather than obstacles.

The metaphor of “forest monoculture”<sup>32</sup> underscores the urgency of this reorientation. The intellectual monocultures shaped by Western modernity have constrained the diversity of our thinking and actions through homogenization and alienation. Connectivity acts as a counterproposal: it can be understood as a *mycelium*—a dense network of relationships and connections where collectives can grow as polyphonic communities. This kind of diversity and mutual learning counters monoculture and holds the potential to transform our relationships with one another and the environment. The goal of communal practices thus becomes the creation of polyphonic knowledge landscapes.

These landscapes represent a radical alternative to colonial and homogenizing orders of knowledge by integrating more-than-human entities into the ecosystem.

In this sense, connectivity and collectivity are deeply intertwined: connectivity facilitates relationships between diverse perspectives, while collectivity transforms these relationships into communal practices. The metaphor of mycelium highlights how diverse voices, rhythms, and practices can be interconnected to create a resilient, sustainable, and multilayered knowledge landscape.

This perspective calls for understanding collective curation and communal work as a *practice of care*—care that not only redefines the relationships between subjects but also strengthens the connection to the environment. Herein lies its transformative potential: to generate a forward-looking, speculative, polyphonic knowledge landscape that sees connectivity as its foundation and collectivity as its goal.

## Notes

**1** Connectivity here primarily refers to the creation and establishment of connections. Connectivity is both a social and technical phenomenon that shapes realities. Particularly, the sociologist and science theorist Bruno Latour has explored the concept as part of his Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and in the expansion of network thinking. “Connectivity is not a term meant to be reduced to digital networks. Rather, it concerns the fundamental principle of Latour’s sociology, which for him is an ‘associology’; it deals with the question of how associations—and thus connections—can be created,” in Urs Stäheli, “The Right to Silence: From a Politics of Connectivity to a Politics of Disconnection?” in *Soziale Welt* 67 (2016) 299–311, DOI: 105771/0038-6073-2016-3-299.

**2** Gesa Ziemer, „Kollektives Arbeiten“, in *Künstlerische Forschung. Ein Handbuch*, eds. Jens Badura, Selma Dubach, Anke Haarmann, Dieter Mersch (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2015) 169–172, 170.

**3** *Ibid.*, 170.

**4** Sofia Bempeza, Christoph Brunner, Katharina Hausladen, Ines Kleesattel, Ruth Sonderegger, eds., *Polyphone Ästhetik. Eine kritische Situierung* (Online: Transversal 2019), 7.

**5** *Ibid.*, 7.

**6** Georg Kneer, Markus Schroer, and Erhard Schüttzel, *Bruno Latours Kollektive: Kontroversen zur Entgrenzung des Sozialen* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016), 11.

**7** *Ibid.*, 11.

**8** See Harald Völker, „Von der Interdisziplinarität zur Transdisziplinarität?“ *Transdisziplinarität. Bestandsaufnahme und Perspektiven. Beiträge zur THESIS-Arbeitstagung*, eds. Frank Brand, Franz Schaller, and Harald Völker (Göttingen: Universitätsverlag, 2003), 9–28.

**9** See Anonymous, “Glossar Transdisziplinarität” in Zurich University of the Arts, accessed December 4, 2024, [Zhdk.ch/forschung/ehemalige-forschungsinstitute-7626/iae/glossar-972/transdisziplinaritaet-3841](https://zhdk.ch/forschung/ehemalige-forschungsinstitute-7626/iae/glossar-972/transdisziplinaritaet-3841). See Jürgen Mittelstraß, „Methodische Transdisziplinarität – Mit der Anmerkung eines Naturwissenschaftlers“, accessed December 4, 2024, <https://Leibniz-institut.de>.

**10** See Jürgen Mittelstraß, „Methodische Transdisziplinarität – Mit der Anmerkung eines Naturwissenschaftlers“, accessed December 4, 2024, <https://Leibniz-institut.de>.

**11** Defilia, Rico; Di Giulio, Antonietta eds., *Transdisziplinär und transformativ forschen*, Band 2, (Springer 2018), 40.

**12** “Finally, complicity means being an accomplice. It is based on a three-step process: Someone makes a decision, creates a plan, and puts it into action. A classic complicity is a small collective, usually between three and seven people. It is very action-oriented:

One acts, one creates results. The form of cooperation is subversive, complicities break rules,” Gesa Ziemer, “Among Accomplices. The old terms are not sufficient to describe the new reality of work – a conversation with Gesa Ziemer,” interview by Winfried Kretschmer, ChangeX. Thinking into the Future, September 2014.

**13** Marta Keil, “Breaking the Spell. How do you sustain your practice when the local ground becomes the hostile?” Accessed Novembre 2, 2024, <https://www.viernulvier.gent/en/pQPAESb/part-of-breaking-the-spell->.

**14** Donna Haraway, *Das Manifest für Gefährten. Wenn Spezies sich begegnen – Hunde, Menschen und signifikante Andersartigkeit* (Berlin: Merve, 2014).

**15** Gesa Ziemer, „Kollektives Arbeiten,“ in *Künstlerische Forschung. Ein Handbuch*, eds. Jens Badura, Selma Dubach, Anke Haarmann, Dieter Mersch (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2015) 169-172, 170.

**16** Thomas Alkemeyer, “Verkörpernte Gemeinschaftlichkeit. Bewegungen als Medien und Existenzweisen des Sozialen“ in Fritz Böhle/Margit Wehrich eds., *Die Körperlichkeit sozialen Handelns* (Transcript, 2010), 331-349.

**17** Nicole Haitzinger, Hanna Hedman, and Valerie Oberleithner: “Warm-Up Exercises for Trans-individual and Collective Curating” in *Collective Curating in Performing Arts*, OnCurating Issue 61.

**18** See Amanda Piña, “School of the Jaguar” in *nadaproductions*, accessed September 17, 2024 <https://nadaproductions.at/projects/endangered-human-movements/school-of-the-jaguar>.

**19** See Amanda Piña, “Scholl of the Mountains and Water” in *nadaproductions*, accessed September 17, 2024 <https://nadaproductions.at/projects/endangered-human-movements/school-of-the-jaguar>.

**20** *ZukunftsDorf22*, accessed December 5, 2024 <https://zukunfts Dorf22.org/>.

**21** Ibid.

**22** Ibid.

**23** *Savvy Kwata Limbe*, accessed December 1, 2024 <https://savvy-contemporary.com/de>.

**24** Ibid.

**25** Ibid.

**26** Donna Haraway, *Das Manifest für Gefährten. Wenn Spezies sich begegnen – Hunde, Menschen und signifikante Andersartigkeit* (Berlin: Merve, 2014).

**27** *Savvy Kwata Limbe*, accessed December 1, 2024 <https://savvy-contemporary.com/de>.

**28** Another example is the Modaperf Festival, whose focus on collaborative and transdisciplinary practices creates space for communal processes and, as I observe, aims to foster a polyphonic knowledge landscape.

The third example of a knowledge theater is the Modaperf Festival in Cameroon. Founded by choreographer and curator Zora Snake, who is represented here with an interview, the international biennial Modaperf was established as a festival in Yaoundé in 2017. It has since evolved into a significant platform for exchange and discourse within the performing arts in Cameroon. Through events held in various cities such as Douala, Dschang, and Yaoundé, the festival not only provides a transnational stage for the performing arts but also promotes collective dialogue, transdisciplinary exchange, and transcultural as well as international encounters. Participants from the fields of art and academia, as well as practitioners, farmers, and local communities, are actively involved and take part in the festival.

The festival thus becomes a connective meeting point and a knowledge theater where a future polyphonic knowledge landscape is being prepared. Other examples of such knowledge theaters, where different knowledge systems intersect, include the GGG-NHM at Spielart 2023 or ADAM 2024 in Taiwan.

**29** The collective was founded by Sofia Villena Araya, Deniz Kirkalo, and Amelie Wedel, in collaboration with Gerko Egert.

**30** Here are example questions from Topsoil on the online platform *Nocturne*: “List some learning spaces you have visited and continue to visit. Which of these spaces is the oldest? Think about the learning context. What objects do you remember? Who are the people who surrounded you? What is your relationship with them?” Accessed September 4, 2024.

**31** “Thoughts on Communication in Collaborative Curatorial Studies” By the participants of the university course *Curating in the Performing Arts* (2024/25). Put into words by Wiebke Jahns, Jeannette Petrik and Jan Struckmeier, in *Collective curating in Performing Arts*, OnCurating Issue 61.

**32** “Forest Monoculture: the brutal aspect of that set of values and systems of inclusion and exclusion, we here call pedagogies, can be expressed in the image of the forest monoculture: brought by European settlers to Latin America during the last 500 years, those monoculture forests [...] are a manifestation of the monoculture of the mind that Western modernity has traditionally expanded through many different tentacles, Western art being one of them,” in Amanda Piña, “Choreography as Curation, Curation as Cure,” in *OnCurating*, accessed Decemre 4, 2024 <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-55-reader/choreography-as-curation-curation-as-cure.html>.

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*SAVVY Kwata* is a multidisciplinary and multifunctional platform in Limbe, Cameroon. It is at once, a library and a community space, as well as a place for the preservation and transmission of knowledge which is situated beyond the book. We are a space for the published and the unpublished, the written, the spoken, the danced, sung, painted, sculpted and unrecorded. *SAVVY Kwata* engages with these and the many other practices which serve as the nesting grounds of hidden ancestral knowledges and in pursuit of the preservation of traditional practices around arts and crafts, culture, education and more broadly the cultural heritage of Cameroon, and the African world at large.



**SAVVY Kwata is a house for fading tales to regain their vibrance, a place for narrative arcs of indigenous tongues to be emboldened, a space for stories to flourish beyond the spine of a book and the bounds of beginning and end.**

In a moment of extreme and violent polarisation in Cameroon, the SAVVY Kwata team has come together to create a book club in Bamen-da, the heart of the current Anglophone crisis. Chinua Achebe noted in *Things Fall Apart* that "when we gather together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Everyman can see it in his compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so". We come together under circumstances of extreme duress and in the 8th year of an armed conflict which has ravaged our region and displaced hundreds of thousands from their homes. We come together in a context in which we refuse to be condemned to struggle on the basis of imported national identities and with a need for a greater understanding of ourselves as Africans before all else. We come together, in short, because it is good to do so.

To be corpoliterate means to listen closely to the witness of histories told through movement; to attune one's senses to the body's motions of and towards collectivity - to study transcendent dance which unstudies the bounds of language in a state of ecstasy. Corpoliterature acts as both a path forward, to expand our methods of explication, and a window into what has since been pushed aside, denied and restricted.



By Mokia Laisin and Abhishek Nilamber

<https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/pillars/savvy-kwata-limbe/>



# The Future of the German Public Theater within Europe: Collaboration Towards a Modern and Ethical Theater Ecosystem and Hybrid Curational Leadership Models

## Thomas Schmidt

The European theater system represents a diverse array of styles, organizational structures and interests. Within Europe, the German public theater system (*Deutsches Stadttheater*) in particular distinguishes itself as one of the oldest, largest and most hierarchical cultural systems, with 80,000 artists across the country and the highest proportion of taxpayer funding in the European context for theater operations at approximately 85%. Meaningful collaboration which utilizes the diversity of artistic, cultural and lingual assets to establish new modes of creation, presents a potential opportunity for positive artistic development across European nations – and ideally outside of Europe as well. Along with other national theater systems, the German public theater must examine itself from a critical lens in order to determine both its areas of strength and areas where it could learn from the practices of other countries. To be most thoroughly considered in this reflection is: *What is the most sustainable and ethical way to approach the development of contemporary theater?*

One of the results of my essay is that cooperation and collaborations are the most meaningful structural and artistic instruments, they are usually more sustainable than the fragile singular theater organization, which suffers from various problems, each of which severely damages the theater's operation. In collaboration, the original themes and problems can be temporarily negated and high-quality artistic productions and new structures can be created from them, thus accomplishing two tasks in one action. *Cooperation* and *collaboration* in the arts stabilize the usually fragile organizations. New structural and cultural forms develop in the cooperation of differently structured partners, and thus a broader resilience and openness for the ethical use of resources and each other.

Despite its rich history and ambition as a cultural institution, however, the German public theater is suffering. Symptoms are the decline in audience numbers across regions and a tendency to overproduce in order to win the audience back. This is followed by a general decline in cultural relevance and legitimacy and accompanied by an asymmetry of power within the organizations. Towards repairing these faults and improving the European theater system as a whole, intentional efforts must be made to modernize the German theater system. The majority of German theater organizations are no longer able to survive on their own and without changing their classic mode of production, as can be seen from the symptoms of the crisis shown above. I therefore recommend establishing meaningful cooperation between countries and their cultural systems, as well as between individual theaters / companies, in order to share resources, artists, facilities, productions and audiences. It is about a logic of sharing and a logic of showing the diversity of theater to people in German cities, which

have a very different demographic composition than thirty years ago, and about attracting new audiences.

Now, I would like to take a short excursion into the history of theater, which is by no means a detour, in order to return to this starting point later. The reason is obvious: For three centuries, theater systems in European context have developed in different directions. Roughly speaking, in addition to the very dense and personnel intensive German-speaking theater system, we have the Anglo-Saxon theater, which is very much oriented toward the en-suite operation of individual productions rather than a functioning ensemble theater system. In between, at various stages of development, are the French, Italian, and Iberian, the Scandinavian, Benelux, and the Eastern European theater systems, all of which have very few repertory and ensemble theaters, but a large number of visiting and touring theaters on a guest performance base. No theater system is perfect, however, because the high degree of specialization leads to a multitude of problems and great vulnerability and fragility. Because of the different starting points, the exchange between the theater systems could lead to completely new structural working conditions, from which new relationships to one another and food for thought for the structural and cultural development of one's own system could later develop.

The overall aim is to strengthen the organizational structures as well as the diversity of styles and the programmatic orientations to make theater operations and independent theater companies more resilient considering declining audiences and the political shift in many European countries. This will benefit audiences as well as theatre makers who have to deal with this new kind of artistic diversity. This leads to developments and new impulses that are urgently needed in many European theater systems, as theater makers and academics from a wide range of countries confirmed in interviews<sup>1</sup>. There is another aspect: the collaborative networking of organizations from different theater systems increases their resilience to impending cultural-political changes.

The development of artistic processes takes place in a fragile environment that is strengthened by collaboration and cooperation, by the exchange it promotes, by the learning effects associated with it, and finally by collaborative production processes that make it possible to bypass or strengthen one's own production capacities. Consider that if a company is banned in a country for political reasons, or destroyed for economic reasons, it or parts of it, artists and even productions can be absorbed and maintained in the networks created until the moment when changes and democratic developments occur again in the country of origin. Then the network partners help to establish a strong artistic relaunch.

Think of the sharp shift to the right in Europe and the need for international solidarity for artists working under difficult systemic conditions. Collaboration can help to mitigate political pressures and compensate for related material constraints, such as limited opportunities to present performances, financial losses due to performance bans, etc. These developments also raise the question of how theater systems in Europe and beyond can evolve in the globalized world and reduce their political dependence. Perhaps it is possible to open up new areas of possibility in order to one day realize cultural and artistic utopias.

### **History of the German Public Theater**

The current position of the German public theater can be further understood through its historical origins. In the 18th century, German theater culture made a defining transition from a system of traveling theater companies to a system funded individually by

the more than 250 royal courts across the country. Later on, physical theaters were established for localized companies and managed by noblemen acting as theater directors (*Intendanten*), who were appointed by the royalty of each region. The first national theaters appeared as a result of the influence of intellectuals such as Schlegel, Lessing, Goethe and Schiller, a shift which laid the groundwork for the public theater system as it exists today.

With the 1870 unification of the German empire, the second major pillar of the modern German theater system—private theaters—were established, with many private operations cropping up in cities such as Berlin and Hamburg. Hundred years later, public and private theaters were joined by a third pillar—independent theaters—the emergence of which was largely the result of a progressive national student movement. The movement sought to weaken regressive politics and retaliate against Nazis, who continued to occupy high government and university positions at the time. Independent artists, groups, and companies are technically state-funded but not state-controlled. They have retained their independence and are only marginally accountable to traditional cultural policy institutions (ministries, city cultural departments). They have absolute programmatic and organizational sovereignty, which means that they can establish, change or abolish themselves through their own power and will.

### Cooperation Issues Across Systems

While the establishment of public, private and independent theaters has resulted in a wide variety of operations and a rich offering of diverse theater, music and dance productions, it simultaneously poses a significant problem in its individualistic approach. Frankly speaking, the three subsystems of German theater do not work together at all, although they could and would gain many advantages from doing so. But they do not, because ideological reasons prevent this cooperation. Behind this lies a difference in access to financial resources.

Independent theater groups, in particular, despise and resist the work of public theaters, calling them backward and historically opportunistic, not modern enough, because they rightly feel that they do not receive enough financial support. But this artistic judgment is far too general and ideologically colored. It is not true in this form, because public theaters have developed enormously artistically in the last ten to fifteen years. At the same time, the first promising changes are taking place at the organizational level.

The last significant effort made towards the goal of a stronger collaboration between German theater organizations was a 2014-2020 initiative by the Federal Foundation for Culture (BKS) called the “double pass program” (“Doppelpass-Programm”), in which independent theaters were partnered with public theaters to co-create productions; however the venture eventually ended due to a lack of sustainability and the “partners” rejecting a mutual integration of practices.<sup>2</sup>

During this period, there were approximately twenty pairings between independent theater groups and public theaters over a two-year period, each “couple” receiving €200,000 in extra funding for joint artistic projects. The partners were free to develop one or more projects and present them to the public. The aim of the program was also for the partners to get to know each other better and perhaps learn from each other’s production methods and tools. Unfortunately, this did not lead to lasting relationships and sustainability, as the financial incentive of the partnerships disappeared after two years.

A discussion about the compatibility of production methods and processes of public and independent theaters is not unjustified, considering that many functions of the public theater system have not been reconsidered for more than hundred years, while the instruments of independent groups have continued to develop in a complete different and de-coupled direction that is nearer to the working conditions of anglo-saxon than German theater productions.

One philosophy which has unfortunately guided public theater operations for a very long time is the *GENIUS PRINCIPLE*, a practice which assigns all artistic and managerial autonomy to the *Intendant*, or theater director. During their terms of five or more years, theater directors have complete control over the whole organization, the theater program, aesthetics, activities of personnel and use of resources. Not only does this configuration make the efforts of between 400 to 500 employees per theater effectively invisible to the public, it also often attributes successes to the director only, while failures are passed down the hierarchy of employees.

There are many instances of directorships being extended indefinitely, with terms lasting as long as twenty-five years. One such case currently involves the former director of the Erfurt Theater, who has continually been accused of abuse of power and has yet to be held accountable for economic and managerial misconduct only. It is cases like these that underline the need for a change, a change in which directors serve the interests of the theater, rather than shirking their responsibilities and continuing to perpetuate exploitation.

### **A Tradition of Overproduction**

It was only with the transition from traveling companies to companies working directly at the court of the noblemen at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that artistic productivity became a relevant indicator in the German theater for the first time because of a much better access to resources. At that time, companies producing in one place were able to produce more new plays better and faster, and thus produce more new plays in a year, which was associated with general productivity growth.

As a representation of the royalty, theaters for the first time served as a measure of *DIS-TINCTION* and a means through which wealth and cultural taste were expressed. The later established *national theaters* continued this tradition, with the idea that prolific theaters bolstered the concept of a united German nation. Up until the 1960s, theater remained the primary field of German entertainment, with more than 50% of the population attending theaters regularly. In recent years, however, this number has dwindled drastically, with only 9% of the German population regularly visiting the theaters.

In response to thinning audience numbers, theaters have increased the frequency of productions throughout the year, particularly in an attempt to win back the youth, which has the lowest turnout among all groups. Thirty years ago single theaters held an average of twenty new productions per season; today, it is over twenty-five, which in combination with lower staff numbers has regressed both the quality of productions and employee morale. In effect, an increase in production has not only damaged theater standards and promoted exploitative practices, it has also not fulfilled its original purpose, considering that audience numbers have continued to decline and structural and cultural problems have increased.

### **Prospects for the Future of European Theater**

"Hope dies last" is an apt description of how much theaters across Europe still cling to antiquity. In Italy, the cradle of European music theater during the late Renaissance

and early Baroque periods, the number of theaters has tragically decreased from around 700 to under 300. In recent decades, France, Spain, Portugal and the UK have experienced a similar phenomenon.

As I mentioned in my introductory remarks, much like the different systems in Germany, the national theater systems around the world have historically distanced themselves from each other due to cultural differences, as in the case of countries with different national languages. But there are many more points of contact and connection than differences. European theater, for example, is based in all countries, with subtle modifications, on the same Greek theater tradition, which was reproduced on the Iberian peninsula in England of the Elizabethan era, in the time of Moliere in France, of Goldoni in Italy, and in the period of the *Traveling Theater*, the *Sturm und Drang* and the *Weimar Classics* in Germany. The common points of contact in theatrical creation should be sought and found together in order to establish a European theater from which to rise from tradition to a new quality of theatrical creation, which, in addition to artistic goals, should above all serve to mutually strengthen and increase resilience. The theater is a great cultural treasure, not only one of the oldest cultural techniques in the world and the place where artistic productions develop, but also an archive where the knowledge of many centuries and thousands of theater artists has congealed and is accessible to all of us today.

By ethical premises I mean a power-critical approach to structures, especially hierarchies, communication, organizational culture, contractual and financial relationships. Relating this approach to aspects of sustainability, collaborations should only be considered relevant and feasible if they obey certain basic rules that focus on the sustainable use of all resources, especially human labor, and the search for new, sustainable production methods.

I would suggest the following measures as a starting point in the process of structural change and reform of the German and the European theater system:

### **1) Partnerships and Guest Performances**

Public theaters would mutually benefit from forming partnerships with “twin towns” and regions in their European neighbor countries. They would serve as a means to build an understanding of each other’s unique cultures and strengths in artistry, production and management. This would also pave the way for co-productions and guest appearances by directors and artists between partnered countries. Dresden, the capital of Saxony in central Germany, is twinned with Coventry, Wrocław, St. Petersburg, Skopje, Ostrava and Florence, for example. Each of these cities has cultural institutions or academies for music and performing arts with which to collaborate and cooperate. This would serve to exchange knowledge and ideas and strengthen international exchange in artistic practice, beyond national borders.

### **2) Collaborative Festivals**

Festivals are fields where many collaborative efforts are already thriving. Especially over the last two decades, public theatres have seen and used festivals as an opportunity to increase systemic exchange and to reach out to new audiences<sup>3</sup>. New organizational forms of vertical and horizontal cooperation with invited private or independent guest productions, festival productions and independent producers have shown the new organizational possibilities for a “city theater of the future”. Especially public theaters have taken the opportunity to invite external producers and productions to



improve their artistic portfolio and their lack of know-how in the production of festivals and specific festival productions and to learn from them.

As the producer of an independent theater in the city of Erfurt (Thuringia) between 2003 and 2008, I also produced a large festival with our independent company every summer in the 2000s, with big Shakespeare summer theater productions and other smaller productions that complemented the festival. Soon after we were mentioned for the very first time by the national media, different public theaters and independent companies offered us to produce together with them. Their intention was fourfold: They wanted

- to learn from us how to handle complex and often site-specific productions
- with limited resources in a way
- that would allow to build a closer relationship with the people of the city, the visitors, the media, and the politicians, and thus
- establish the festival and the independent group for the long term.

The two structures strengthened each other, the festival strengthened the company and vice versa, and gradually the two merged.

At the same time, I was invited in addition to my duties at the independent company and festival, by the National Theater Weimar to take on the role of managing director under equally stressful conditions, such as financial shortages, the threat of a merger with a neighboring theater, and personnel cuts. My task was to apply this knowledge to the theater and not only bring the theater safely through the crisis. The objective was to develop and implement structural reforms and, with the help of politicians, to transform the Weimar National Theater within five years in 2008 into a state theater and thus secure it for the long term.

There are a number of examples in which public theaters have managed to successfully incorporate the originally rather independent festival forms and use them for their own purposes. Every June in Berlin, for instance, the Deutsches Theater Berlin hosts the Authors' Theater Days (ATT), a celebration of new drama written by upcoming authors and directors. Another success has been the FIND Festival hosted by Schaubühne Berlin, which through the work of curators has become a fantastic opportunity for theater professionals to network and refine programming for upcoming seasons.

Something similar, in a slightly modified and much more complex organizational form, takes place at the International Berlin Dance Festival "*Tanz im August*", where the organizer works with various stages in the city of Berlin to present a selection of the productions of the international dance companies that are currently in vogue. It is a hybrid form of vertical and horizontal national collaboration, within the framework of which an organizational platform is created on which current dance acts can be shown as part of over 20 international curated collaborations.

Theater festivals refer to regional, national or international as well as horizontal and vertical forms of cooperation. *International collaborations* obviously refer to forms of cooperation that systematically—and not randomly—cross borders in order to allow for a targeted programmatic expansion of perspectives and a greater artistic diversity. Horizontal collaborations are those that operate on the same organizational level as all other theaters or groups and thus complement each other. When a theater and a provider of technical, communication or advertising services have a business relationship, these are *vertical collaborations* in which certain stages of a production process—or in other words of a value chain—complement each other. For a better understanding, the theater production process should be broken down into its sub-services: preparation,

production, and presentation (the show), its marketing and distribution, including all communication services.

As a medium for the expression of new artistic signatures and styles as well as production formats and organizational forms, these festivals have proven valuable in shaping the ever-changing landscape of a modern European theater, particularly considering the many international reviewers in attendance reporting on influential performances and trends.

### 3) New Models of Organization and Management

There are some city theaters across Germany and the German speaking neighbor countries which have already begun a transition from the dichotomous *Intendanten* model to flat hierarchies and collective management (Zurich, Basel, Essen, Aachen, Schauspiel Halle and Wiesbaden starting from 2025). It is a beginning, some job openings at the top level in the theater industry now also call for teams to apply. However, these are still exceptions to the rule; for example, management positions at the state theaters in Berlin, Munich or Hamburg are not opened publicly at all, but are still awarded directly by the responsible Senator for Culture in the Berlin, Hamburg or Munich Senate without any consultation with the artists and employees of the respective theaters.

Some efforts have been stunted by prevailing ideas, such as an attempt at team management by artists at the Theaterhaus Jena by the Wunderbaum Companie. Cooperative efforts such as at the Dramatic Theatre in Erfurt are fairly new, where thousand people bought their city theater with equal rights. These efforts are admirable in their roundtable approach collectively hosting employees, stakeholders and spectators, this model has to prove if it will be sustainable. Due to the strongly competitive nature of the theater world, in which projects are coveted and production seasons are planned years in advance, a sense of urgency and conflict is often stirred up, leading to less opportunities for collaborative spontaneity. Cooperative organizational approaches, while no firm conclusions can be drawn as they have yet to be empirically tested, show promise in the realm of progressive managerial processes.

In my model of an ethical theatre, I focus very strongly on two aspects: The theater sees itself as a constantly learning and changing organization in which new participation methods are incorporated into operational and strategic decision-making. The latter in particular also guarantees a change and transformation of the theater organization, which in the future will give up all structural limitations and merge much more closely with urban societies. Theater has to give up its old vanities in order to open itself up to the respective local and regional peculiarities. Ethical theatre is based on a number of standards, above all limitation of power, ethical management and an ethical functioning of the theater processes in which no one is disadvantaged. The special thing, however, is that no two theaters are the same because different peculiarities are reflected at each location and incorporated into the model.

### 4) New Models of Curatorial Leadership

There should also be an “overhaul” of the type of theatre directors who mostly work and direct on the stage. In my opinion, theatre directors must above all develop a profile between leadership, creative management and curatorial expertise. As servant leaders, they should withdraw more and more from their own artistic productions and take responsibility for ethical curatorial practice.

The conclusion from this should be that the practice and tasks of managing, programming and artistically “leading a theatre from the stage”, which has so far been the preserve of one person, the so-called Intendant (Artistic Director/CEO), will be distrib-

uted among a whole group of decent leaders who link the various forms of management through their several practices. These various practices include:

- Artistic-curatorial practices in each of the individual theater genres (drama, opera, dance, concert) represented by their department curators,
- “servant” leadership practices that ensure a fair and objective distribution of resources and fair personnel management; Curatorial practices could also be applied here,
- technical leaders who take care of the areas of stage, light, sound, video, architecture, maintenance, security,
- artistic practitioners for the workshops,
- education-oriented curatorial practices to open up new communities, take up their interests and link them with those of the theater, to name just a few examples.

The same should happen in the field of *artistic direction and curation*. The 1990s and 2000s were a stronghold of lone actors. However, work in theaters and festivals has changed for the better, thanks to new critical discourses. It now follows an image of a clever division of power and labor, which I have called for and defined in my articles and books several times for the theater sector.<sup>4</sup>

The first stages of transformation are now beginning to affect the position of theater directors. But that is not enough. Teamwork should take place at all organizational levels, and artistic organizations should be seen as haptic units in which internal consultation takes place from bottom to top, and vice versa, as well as at the same level from team to team. There is no longer a need for lone directors, but rather for teams, a composition of specialists who do their work according to their expertise, and permanent, more generalist consultants who are brought together as a mutually beneficial unit at every important level of work. This redefines responsibility, multiplies knowledge and experience, and reduces power. If we apply this to the concept of curation, it would mean that in the future, specialist curators would work together with generalist curators (as consultants) at the decision-making level, so that highly qualified decisions, programs, projects and change processes would be initiated. The profession of the external consultant has thus become obsolete, making way for a new model and exciting new job profiles, but above all for a change in existing structures and power potentials.

## 5) Participatory Production Models

A potential step towards resolving unnecessary competition within the industry is introducing a *participatory production model*, in which all members of a theater cooperative or production team are granted the same participation and voting rights as the artistic director. Along with establishing a flat hierarchy, this would effectively separate all artistic decisions from administrative decisions, which would then diminish the probability of adverse effects on the creative process by managerial operations. It would also free up artistic teams to autonomously pursue new collaborations and projects, such as the company PRINZIP GONZO has achieved in their progressive four-person theater troupe. Their working principle is collaborative: four directors and scenographers work alternately in small groups or together in groups of four in projects that have a new, very immersive and audience-sensitive character. The audience is involved in their productions, for example in game formats such as their GAME OF LIFE and no longer sit still and spellbound on their chairs, but become active theater makers themselves.

## 6) Establishment of a Regional Funds and Rotating Stagione Systems

A core attribute of the modern theater is thinking beyond geographical boundaries to consider how theater communities can help and improve upon each other's operations. One approach to this would be to establish a *regional production distribution platform*, which would function as a collective fund. This model could assess resource distribution from the basis of need, match "sister" theaters, and reward those theaters working closely across borders with "extra funds".

Today, theaters produce in the expensive "repertoire system", i.e. a stage is rebuilt every day so that the audience can see a new play every day. From a sustainability and economic perspective, this is a much too expensive method, because it not only over-stretches resources and people, it also leads to a chronic system of overproduction. Overproduction means: Theaters are producing more and more to compensate for the demographically motivated decline in audiences.

If theaters could produce in the future in the "stagione system", however, these plays would be performed four to eight days in a row without rebuilding them every day and could then travel. Or at least the expensive stage sets could travel to other theaters so that the production costs can be shared. Here, sustainability would be strengthened above all through collaboration.

We could call this a "*rotating stagione system*", which could inhibit theaters across borders to jointly and multilingually produce the same show in a performance ring two to three times per monthly cycle. If this system was also overseen by a cross-regional fund, there could be further potential to disrupt established power dynamics and democratize curational input.

## 7) New (or Alternative) European and International Theater Networks and Meetings

The founding of European theater conferences with the explicit goal of collaboration would be a profound step towards overcoming old patterns and forming new relationships between European nations. Conferences could also be held on an international level, with the intention that even more integration of cultures, languages and artistic systems occur. Ideally over the next decades, these connections paired with modernization efforts would begin to take the form of initiatives such as international theater systems and schools, established for artists and professionals worldwide.

The new associations would go far beyond the existing organizations ITI and IETM<sup>6</sup>, which are already making initial approaches to international theater work. However, a new system would not stop at a mutual invitation and showing of international productions, but would focus on strengthening artists, artistic work and production networks, promoting the exchange of expertise and personnel, technology and stage sets across existing borders, and ultimately producing jointly and allowing the joint works to travel between countries and regions. In doing so, we are also returning to a certain extent to the "traveling theater" that was still unfinished in the 18th century, which collapsed when these companies suddenly settled at the royal courts, where they were lured by more financial resources.

## 8) Ethical Teaching Practices

Another field which could benefit from reformed leadership is theater in academics, an area in which many mid- to late-career stage theater professionals assume professorships. Unfortunately, these positions are sometimes taken by individuals who exhibit abusive power and ideological inflexibility, often to the detriment of students who would be best served with an open-minded view of the craft offering many different perspectives, styles and operational models. As someone who has worked in the

public, independent and academic realms of the theater field myself, I have witnessed firsthand the role that an overtly biased approach to professorship can play in pressuring the superiority of one dramatic canon or another, before a student has enough knowledge of theater culture to make an informed choice of their own. Particularly in the case of empowering the next generation of theater professionals, effective and ethical teaching practices must be carefully considered.

My ideas and proposals are just a first impulse on thinking of the future of theater; there are many more options to consider. I strongly suggest combining these proposals with my ideas of the *Ethical Theater* approach that consists of overcoming the structural problems and the asymmetry of power in theaters, as I explained in point 3). Only if all theater stakeholders work together on an equal base with equal rights and decisions to make, the Ethical Theater will be a success. This approach will be the best requirement for more cooperation, collaboration and teamwork between the European theaters in order to form a European theater of the future.

## Notes

**1** See e.g. my interviews with: Matteo Paoletti & Luca Ronconce (University Bologna); Nicolas Steemann & Benedict von Blomberg (Dramatic Theater Zurich/2020-24), Juliane Hahn & Michel Akanji (Theater Gessneralle Zurich/2020-24), Vânia Rodrigues (University Coimbra); Marta Keil & Aneta Glowacka (Uniwersytet Jagielloński Krakow); Dominique Thomann (Ballett Nacional de Chile); Marta Zieba (University of Limerick/Ireland); Laur Kaunissare (Tallin); Gianna Lia Cogliandro (Brussels); Ellen Loots (Erasmus University Rotterdam).

**2** [https://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de/de/projekte/buehne\\_und\\_bewegung/detail/doppelpass\\_fonds\\_fuer\\_kooperationen\\_im\\_theater.html](https://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de/de/projekte/buehne_und_bewegung/detail/doppelpass_fonds_fuer_kooperationen_im_theater.html), accessed janary 14, 2025.

**3** Examples are: ATT Festival of Young Drama at the Deutsches Theater Berlin; Weimar Art Festival at the National Theater Weimar; Fast Forward European Theater Festival at the Theater Dresden; Our Stage Theater Festival Dresden; International Schiller Festival at the Theater Mannheim; Theater Festival Mühlheim; Shakespeare Festival Neuss; *Theaterformen* at the Theaters Hannover and Braunschweig; Biennale Wiesbaden at the Wiesbaden State Theater.

**4** New are the models of Double or Triple leadership in the German speaking theater world, for example: at the State Theater Wiesbaden; the Theater Marburg; the Dramatic Theater in Essen, the Art Festival at the National Theater in Weimar; the Theater Biennale at the State Theater Wiesbaden; the Dramatic Theater Zurich (2020-2024), Theater Gessnerallee Zurich, Theater Neumarkt Zurich. I strongly proposed these models in my articles and books, especially in *Theater, Krise und Reform* (2016), *Macht und Struktur im Theater* (2019), *Die Regeln des Spiels* (2019), *Ethisches Theater* (2024).

**5** Thomas Schmidt. *Ethisches Theater: Grundlagen des Ethischen Managements und der strukturellen Transformation* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2024).

**6** ITI, the International Theater Institute, is a global international theatre network, which, since 1948, has served the mutual exchange of theatre artists and the better understanding of cultures under the umbrella of and as an official partner organization of UNESCO. Founded in 1981, IETM is the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts, one of largest international cultural networks.

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### Thoughts on Communication in Collaborative Curatorial Studies

By the participants of the university course *Curating in the Performing Arts* (2024/25).

Put into words by Wiebke Jahns, Jeannette Petrik and Jan Struckmeier.

Within our course, we encourage a culture of dialogue based on respect, openness and a balance of voices. We work towards creating a brave and safe(r) framework for an open exchange, and understand that communication is as complex as the different perspectives, experiences and attitudes it encompasses. It becomes clear that within the heterogeneous group constellations which we find ourselves in, a successful communication is by no means self-evident.

This text is a reflection on the beginning of our internal process of developing a more conscious culture of dialogue as a group. It is an outline that will be continuously developed—not only by us, but also as an offer to the faculty, to future cohorts of the programme, and to all those involved in curatorial constellations and collaborations. We want to provide ideas as impulses that can always be added to and rethought.

We are convinced that we mustn't stop learning (from each other) and that the identification of common attitudes is the basis for our communication and joint curatorial work. We therefore understand the following examples as foundational attitudes that we adopt together in order to pursue joint reflection and work processes with respect and space, even in situations of disagreement.

### Framing Conversation

For specific formats of work or discussion, we set parameters together, such as duration, group size and discussion format, as well as content-related objectives that we keep in sight. A lecture works differently from an introductory round or a panel discussion. We want to avoid the development of one-sided discussion dynamics and ambiguities, so that we can better focus on our common goals.

*How can we break down learned communication mechanisms and make decisions together?*

### Speaking

Everyone involved in the conversation should have the opportunity to fully express their thoughts and opinions without being interrupted. We make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to speak and keep track of your own speaking time.

*How can we as a group encourage each other to share ideas, questions and uncertainties?*

### Listening

We listen to each other to understand, not just to react. We adopt a sensitive and active listening attitude that reduces a threshold of anxiety and encourages everyone to express their thoughts.

*What role do our body language, posture and facial expressions play in attentive listening?*

### **Language and Power**

We are aware of the power of language and how it is constituted by social structures inscribed in us. We therefore strive to use and promote habits of thought and language that reduce hierarchies and increase freedom of choice.

We recognize that each of us carries their own experiences and backgrounds which shape their own views and articulation. Regardless of differences of opinion, we take the experiences and attitudes of others seriously.

*How can we consciously discuss and use language that is, for example, sensitive to discrimination?*

### **Embracing Error**

We are in the process of developing a culture of constructive dialogue. Mistakes are part of this. We want to learn from errors and discuss different approaches. We formulate needs as concretely and respectfully as possible and consider criticism as productive and helpful. We encourage an open and curious attitude within the group.

*How can we create an environment that allows room for mistakes?*

### **And:**

*How can we draw each other's attention to perceived dynamics and remind ourselves of our common goals of a successful—attentive, listening, learning—communication?*

*Wiebke Jahns is a live program curator and cultural manager. In her transdisciplinary, often collaborative practice, she explores the intersection of arts, technology and social transformation processes.*

*Jeannette Petrik is a feminist writer, curator and transdisciplinary artist who is part of Dutch and German D.I.Y. and squatting scenes. They focus on collectivity, language, experimental electronics and noise.*

*Jan Struckmeier is an artist and curator of performing arts based in Munich. His focuses are on contemporary arts in Kyiv, on diversity and inclusion as well as on radical interdisciplinary spaces.*

# What Remains

## The Anarchive as a Curating Score for Collective Becoming

### Angela Conquet

*We become-with each other or not at all.*  
—Donna Haraway

#### Preamble

It is August 2024, and I am sitting in the quiet of an old Magdalen Convent laundry repurposed into an art space. I share the space with three art installations. An imposing pile of organic mulch and soil fills the space with heavy earthy scents. Craning my neck, I can see here and there, photographs of dancing bodies; they have been there for some time, and now, their paper slowly disintegrating, becoming compost. Next to the mulch is a screen on which plays a short video artwork. I see bodies dancing, reframed into vignettes, themselves cropped and melted into other frames that become lines that dissolve outside the borders of the screen. Pieces of elegant paper covered with beautiful handwriting are displayed on a few tables in the quietest corner of the space, one reading: *I wanted to experience more.* #034; and written in chalk next to it on a wall:

*There is a Beauty in not everyone  
getting what's happening—  
a Privacy. Scribe KCA #2*

These installations are all part of a program called *What Remains*, an event celebrating a decade of the *Keir Choreographic Award*, an Australian choreographic prize and festival I co-founded, curated and produced, and which now has come to an end<sup>1</sup>. The installations accompany the launch of a book I was invited to imagine—an attempt to preserve but also to reflect critically on the contributions this initiative has made to the broader local dance ecology<sup>2</sup>. Uncoincidentally, the three in-situ installations are by artists who have also been documenting this event, for some, over its entire existence.

None of these are my works and yet, I am looking at a decade of my own work. While these installations revisit, together with the book, the many dances that have been part of this initiative, they are not archives *per se*. Nor can they be said to exclusively belong to these artists as the material constituting them belongs to other artists and, for the scribed testimonials, to audiences. And although the invitation to respond to the Award legacy has been extended by me, I can hardly argue that I “curated” this program; I merely “orchestrated,” by offering the “documenters” the provocation of *What Remains* as a sort of a score to respond to the various archives of the Award. All this could be considered a somewhat luxurious public program to be accompanying the launch of a book. I can see with clarity now how much more it is.

As people start arriving, I become more aware of the dizzying perfume of the mulch, and as I watch how the guests discover and respond to the artworks - perhaps some even recognize their own scribed memories—I know that I am witnessing a form of collective remembering collectively curated, or perhaps even a form of collective com-

posting, like Haraway's "making oddkin"<sup>3</sup>. It is in this moment, of coming together again for the re-becoming of these works, that I can see a decade of my work *at work*, not as an archive but as an anarchive and I know that this is how I want my work to be remembered—as a score for collective becoming.

\* \* \*

Philosophers Brian Massumi and Erin Manning have developed the concept of the *anarchive* to reckon with forms of remembering that are not recognized by the logic of archiving.<sup>4</sup> While the anarchive can be considered, similarly to an archive, as a "repertory of traces"<sup>5</sup>, it is the approach to these traces, or rather their "pull" as Manning explains, that is always activating and orienting<sup>6</sup>. For here, traces are not considered inert but rather "carriers of potential"<sup>7</sup> to be activated and re-created as part of other events, and it is this generative creative process, from the past but for future iteration, that gives it its impulse. Thus, the anarchive is not documentation of a past activity. Rather, it is a **feed-forward mechanism** for lines of creative process, under continuing variation<sup>8</sup> and it is this pull *toward* and movement *with* these traces, that makes the flow of the anarchive radically different.

The *What Remains* installations are all examples of what escapes the logic of the archive and they all emphatically activate the principles of the anarchive responding to Manning's interrogation:

"How else, beyond the archive, might we activate current traces toward future eventing? If an event is emphatically that which cannot be archived in advance of its eventing (because its eventing is precisely what makes it an event, and a pre-archiving of it would make the archive the event), what might be distilled from it, that which bypassed the archive and yet did the work of carrying the eventing forward?"<sup>9</sup>

By inviting the *What Remains* artists to engage with the archives creatively rather than retrospectively, I was asking them to move through the experience of the *Keir Choreographic Award* by **making**; and in imagining this public program to support a book launch, I had unwittingly activated a "seeding forward"<sup>10</sup>—an archival score to capture the imperceptible and the intangible that archives cannot hold but all that might remain of a dance and indirectly, of my work. Here, I will consider the potentialities offered by the anarchive used as a score to probe how *What Remains* as event and its artworks might be one potential method of documentation, as well as a way to consider the legacy of a dance presenter's work while testing its capacities to generate a form of a collective curatorship.

Retrospectives in dance, of bodies of work overtime, are rare in this art form. Documenting dance still comes with the usual challenges due to its ontologically ephemeral condition shared with most live art forms. Choreographers and dancers, with a few exceptions, rarely get retrospectives of their work<sup>11</sup>, in stark contrast with other fields of art. Revisitations of past dance events such as *What Remains* are even scarcer as documenting the work/ings of dance projects or institutions is not a (money and time) luxury many can afford. Of course, books are sometimes published, celebrating this or that performing arts organization or festival, but these are too often institutional self-congratulatory exercises, full of lush photos and official niceties, far from the compellingly discursive catalogues of the visual arts. Invariably, if there are events organized to revisit and remember, appeal to the event's original archives to inevitably produce other archives (such as books, films, podcasts) and in doing so, they fix what has value to be remembered. The voices, perspectives or even personal archives of those

who commission, curate, or produce dance events are rarely consulted or included, and the mechanisms or practices to document their work are close to non-existent.

This may be due to the fact that the relatively nascent field of dance curation still grapples with basic yet fundamental questions, such as whether “this curator-producer-dramaturge-whatever figure”<sup>12</sup> may be a curator or a presenter and whether curating dance can be a form of expanded choreography (Gareis, 2023) or vice versa (Dupuis, 2020). Or it may be because these professionals themselves are not preoccupied with their own legacy. The testimonials of the many colleagues interviewed for my doctoral research, all dance-specialized presenters leading some of the most prestigious dance festivals and organizations globally, attest to this. Judging by the long silences when asked what remained of their work, it was obvious many had not even had time to think about it, endlessly busy with managing their venues and “getting things done”. Some had their own ad-hoc systems of keeping track of their work: editorials written to introduce a season, program notes and brochures of shows curated, and other such ephemera. Most of them considered that it was not for the presenter to be remembered, but for the artists and dances they presented. After all, we are the ‘shadow people’ as curator Andrew Horwitz says so beautifully.<sup>13</sup>

And yet, documenting the work of dance presenters, as invisible as dance is ephemeral, is important because it is through such exposure of the field that scrutiny and critique—and therefore positive change—becomes possible. Furthermore, the exercise of looking at what endures of a dance presenter’s work is less about its legacy and more about a responsibility towards the durability of what it gives visibility to. For if a dance presenter’s job is to make dance visible to an audience, what does this *presence-ing* really mean? Does this work start and end with choosing a dance work, the finished “product”, marketed and performed on stage; or is it the actual dancing of that “product”, the event in its embodied liveness? Or is it the audience experience of it? Defining the actual object of a presenter’s work can indeed have multiple articulations that can steer curatorial intentionality, its ethics and ethos and equally, clarify what may need to remain of this work.

I argue that, from a presenter’s/curator’s perspective, what remains of a dance work is what is remembered by the audience, however incomplete or partial, and therefore the “becoming visible” of a dance is intrinsically intertwined with the “becoming visible” of a presenter’s work. The question becomes then, what tools are there to capture the many curatorial inner laborings and layerings made up of so many conversations, encounters, gatherings, rehearsals that presenters experience, witness, enable, as they journey with an artist or a project? What could render visible such a granular member-ing back of a work carried out in the shadows indeed, often unknown to or unheeded by the public? Traditional archiving methods could rise up to the challenge of capturing such new terrains, but would the result do justice to the live presence-ing nature of such a work? What else could there be that can hold and record without fixing?

It is in the process of co-editing the book on the Award that I realized that the book itself—in most circumstances such a formidable tool for archiving—was far from being an archive as it does not set out to retrace the history of the Award, rather it uses it as the springboard to commission writings about things that this initiative also was about: judgement, criticality, internationalism, community. While the book contributors were invited to seed new writings in resonance with these ideas, the *What Remains* installations for its launch were something else—not an archive and more of a score for remembering, unfolding similarly to a choreographic one. In dance, scores



give direction *of* and *for* movement, but they are not needed for dance to happen, they merely give the syntax and the impulse, the rest is food for imagination and improvisation. It is not the body of the archive that was central in these installations, but multiple bodies of memories preserved by active archivists who have journeyed with the event as it manifested. These authors are “archivers” of a different sort, just as *What Remains* was not a retrospective. This is an “assemblage” of witnesses, who have transformed traces of the past into new modes of presence. While all the original dance works still belong to their authors, their photographic, video, scribed documentation became the petri dish of other works, each a different way of remembering, embracing the many and at times messy, random and ungraspable ways in which memory works.

It is precisely this “seeding forward” mechanism of the anarchive that I consider key to how we might document a presenter’s work.<sup>14</sup> The anarchive asks the presenter to consider that their work does not end when a show meets its audience, rather that this is where it might begin: with how it might endure in their memories. If dance audiences remember, durably, a dance, isn’t it then what it might truly mean to make it present, in the now-ness of its live eventing, and in its persistence in the future? This would imply that a presenter’s work should embed and cultivate practices of remembering that preserve the dance in articulations and activations with a view for a “future eventing” rather than calcify in the past. Hence the importance of understanding what other layers the event itself generates that can contribute to a taking into a future. Consequentially, the anarchive automatically orients the temporality and rationale of the presenters’ work toward the future while it plans its own future becomings.

The anarchive does not cancel the archive in the process of remembrance, but it does not need it so much because it is a different kind of remembering that it seeks to activate: the “muscle memory”. Dance studies have long developed fascinating concepts such as metakinesis<sup>15</sup>, kinaesthetic empathy<sup>16</sup> and somatic attention<sup>17</sup> that together with recent studies in neuroscience and neuro-aesthetics confirm that watching dance is a kinetically embodied act. We experience dance with the muscles, and we make sense of it with our senses. This means that a dance presenter’s work is also located here, in how it attends to activating affective responses. While these cannot be dictated, nor even anticipated by the archive, they can certainly be stimulated and nurtured.

This cannot be more palpable than with SCRIBE, multidisciplinary artists Leisa Shelton’s scribed testimonials, which has kept trace, over time, of the audience’s “fresh” sensations captured immediately as they stepped outside the theatre. For each edition of the Award, artist-as-scribes were waiting in dimly lit quiet, intimate nooks of the venue for audiences to volunteer feelings and opinions, and if they were yet unsettled or unsettling, they would gently prod the feeling to form the thought. Scribing with majestic handwritten elegance, they are at once witnesses and chroniclers of both the audience’s labour and of the artists’ intentions, archivists of sensed (a)liveness, and now these beautiful libraries of affect are yet another layer that will make up what will be remembered of those dances. Their function is double-folded: each time they are displayed, they constitute a collective archive of individual affect with potential to re-activate their authors’ memories, but significantly, they act as re-sensing seeding devices enabling resonances with our own memories of the same dances or simply, to sense again and together what others have sensed before. It is a different kind of redistribution of the sensible<sup>18</sup>, an interactivity that relays affect from body to body while blurring the lines between subjects and objects. SCRIBE is thus the ideal archival score capturing both the experience and the affect in the making, while it also “catches us in our own becoming.”<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, it does not take much for the anarchive to be activated and its agential potential to engage sensorially, rather than *precisely* with a past event, opening a vast creative terrain for presenters in anticipating practices to “carry forward” the viewers’ future memories while appealing to their “muscle memory” as a tool not for remembering but of member-ing forward, assembling the affect of the corporeal differently. This is possible because the anarchive allows for pursuing “a different kind of potential for feeling, not immediately structured, but in passage, in a swerve, veering away from the given, even as it takes the given up and attunes it to the new.”<sup>20</sup> The pursuit of these other affects activated by imprecise tools for remembering opens up the possibility for presenters to escape the rigid temporality of the archive and its hierarchies of value, facilitating a different timing and hierarchy of how things need to be remembered.

Etymologically, as Derrida reminds us, *arkhe*—archive, “names at once the commencement and the commandment.”<sup>21</sup> The anarchival score offers presenters a curatorial intentionality that democratizes the framing and the contexts of its framings and consequently, of what matters. It opens the possibility of valuing not only what has been “properly” archived but also the potentiality for anarchival projects that may witness and remember a dance with absences or imperfections or consider the interstices of its folds. Such examples are both the video and photo installations of *What Remains*. Photographer Gregory Lorenzutti’s installation takes the photographic fragmentation of dance captured on paper and returns it to nature, paying tribute to the disappearing nature of live performance, but also exposing them to a slow de-composition, from composition to compost, seeding new soil off past dances. Cobie Orger’s dance film uses the video footage of forty works to activate her memories filtered by a viewfinder. Referencing this partial view divorced from the spaciousness of a theater, her reframing, made of collage, cropping, skimming, and overlays, reveals a striking misremembering through re-member-ing of so many bodies and their movements.

Both these works use a process of transduction, and in their shifting from the archive to the anarchive, they not only disrupt the time of the archive but mobilize multi-modal incarnations and embodiments that exceed both the original event and its archives. Neither of them could exist without the support of traditional archiving (photo or video documentation) but they all use them as “waystations” avoiding a linear mapping of the past, or a re-staging of what has been, and offering renewed embodiments. Importantly, the anarchival score liberates the curator/presenter’s body of work from the body of the institution and its institutional memory and all the data that need to be “officially” remembered: reports, brochures, publications, posters and other ephemera. It acknowledges that for a presenter, documenting all that dance does in the moment of its doings is either impossible or, institutionally and ideologically (mis) guided, and in both cases limited by the short term. And even more importantly, if the presenter’s work is often prescribed and enabled by the institution, how it is remembered cannot be contained by it, because the presenter’s anarchival work escapes the archive, the institution and as in this case, even the presenter.

But there is something else that the anarchive does well in its agential offerings, enabled by its transduction mechanisms. It can incorporate and embody at the same time, as it is *composed of* and *composes with* simultaneously, to create potential new bodies of works, events, affects—multimodal in their renderings, belonging as much to the initial authors as they belong to other artists, to curators or to audiences. This “becoming visible” recognizes that there is no one single custodian of what needs to be remembered; and importantly, that this “seeding forward”, while it can be unwittingly or creatively planned by curators—yet offering incredible potentials for curators to anticipate and

creatively curate the anarchive of their own work—is an organically collective endeavour, a form of collective remembering collectively curated. Manning, paraphrasing the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, reminds us that “there is no general togetherness, only a togetherness in the event.”<sup>22</sup> If what remains of a dance presenter’s/curator’s work are these renewed moments of togetherness seeded from original works into new works into new affects collectively curated *for, with* and *by* active witnesses, then indeed there can be no better way of making a dance present.

## Notes

- 1** The *Keir Choreographic Award* was an Australian biennial dance award launched in 2014 and presented by the Keir Foundation, Dancehouse, Carriageworks and Creative Australia; it offered the winner a prize of \$50,000AUD. Held over five editions, the award commissioned and showcased forty short works and presented each time a festival of public programs. Last accessed on December 10, 2024, [www.keirchoreographicaward.com](http://www.keirchoreographicaward.com).
- 2** Conquet, Angela, and Rothfield, Philipa eds. *Competing Choreographies*. (The Keir Foundation, 2024).
- 3** Donna J. Haraway. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 4.
- 4** Andrew Murphie, ed. *The Go-To How To Book of Anarchiving* (The Senselab, 2016), 6.
- 5** Ibid.
- 6** Erin Manning. “What Things Do When They Shape Each Other,” in *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 84.
- 7** Brian Massumi. *The Go-To How To Book of Anarchiving*, ed. Andrew Murphie (The Senselab, 2016), 7.
- 8** Andrew Murphie, ed. *The Go-To How To Book of Anarchiving* (The Senselab, 2016), 7.
- 9** Erin Manning. “What Things Do When They Shape Each Other,” in *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 75.
- 10** Ibid., 76.
- 11** With a few exceptions, such as Merce Cunningham, Alvin Ailey, Deborah Hay, La Ribot.
- 12** Hanne Hurtzig, Gabriele Brandsetter, and Vesa Sutinen. “This Curator-Producer-Dramaturge-Whatever Figure,” in *Frakcija asopis za Izvedbene Umjetnosti / Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 55, ed. Felix Malzacher (2011), 22.
- 13** Andrew Horwitz. “LECTURES,” *Andrew Horwitz*, March 3, 2018, <https://www.andyhorwitz.com/wp/lectures/>.
- 14** Erin Manning. “What Things Do When They Shape Each Other,” in *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 76.
- 15** See: John Martin. *Introduction to the Dance* (Dance Horizons Republication, 1939).
- 16** See: Susan Leigh Foster. *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (2011th ed.; New York: Routledge, 2011).
- 17** See: Thomas J. Csordas. “Somatic Modes of Attention,” in *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (1993): 135–156.
- 18** See: Jacques Rancière. *Le partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* (Fabrique: Diffusion Les Belles Lettres, 2000).
- 19** Erin Manning. “What Things Do When They Shape Each Other,” in *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 84.
- 20** Andrew Murphie, ed. *The Go-To How To Book of Anarchiving* (The Senselab, 2016), 47.
- 21** Jacques Derrida. “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” in *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9–63, 9.
- 22** Erin Manning. “What Things Do When They Shape Each Other,” in *For a Pragmatics of the Useless* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 77.

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Leisa Shelton/ Fragment 13—SCRIBE

*Commissioned for WHAT REMAINS, by The Keir Foundation and Creative Australia, Abbotsford*

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### Linda Samaraveerová

A collective curation is based on interaction and communication between different bodies and minds. This interaction might have, at times, a positive effect, at other times—a negative impact. I believe that collective curating needs strong clarity in everyone who is part of the collective. It is mainly communication that is challenged in a team situation, but which is urgently needed for successful progress. Words can connect us and help us to create things together. They can make us happy or laugh. But sometimes words can hurt. Yet when we do not express what we think, our communication center might get blocked. When the words have a negative impact, the emotions get disturbed... and blind actions might follow that are under the influence of a negative impact.

Listening and communicating has, in this regard, two directions: we need to be able to listen and communicate with ourselves to know where we stand, what we need and what we want. And we need to be able to listen to our environment and our colleagues in the team. There are many methods to reach a harmonious, respectful communication by setting rules, thinking and analyzing the language—these are all attributes of doing. This yogic method has a radically different approach: it suggests letting go of doing for a while and to enter a deep state of awareness that allows clarity in listening to one's own body and mind. The aim is to reach—through a regularly repeated practice—a deep harmonious state, which will naturally bring a positive and constructive way of listening, talking and working with others.

The practice aims to recognize one's own inner state on a deeper, subconscious level and focuses on balancing our communication center. It is suggested that one practice every day, though it can also vary depending on one's own time possibilities and needs. I believe that a harmonious body and mind supports a more objective understanding of what is happening around us and produces a positive interaction with the external world: be it creating together or solving problems or conflicts in a constructive way.

### Introduction—some philosophical background

From the perspective of Yoga, we exist in three worlds: the external world, the inner world and the transcendental world. The body is understood as a structure that is in constant change and transformation. In this context we speak about a physical body, breathing body, emotional body, intellectual body and the blissful body. All these five bodies can—to a certain extent—be observed, experienced and modified by us. These five existential sheets are in constant-interaction with the three worlds: the external world, the inner world and the transcendental world. In this practice we will try to recognize and observe these five dynamic bodies (in Sanskrit: pancha-koshas), to understand if they are in a harmonious or in a disturbed state. We will then focus on the breathing body with the aim to positively influence the other four.

### Practice

The whole practice takes fifteen minutes. If you have less time, choose any of the three parts and do it for five minutes. Please find an environment where you can be undisturbed. You can sit on a chair, or on the floor in a crossed legs position, or you can lay down.

#### 1. Mind travel—physical body

Put your alarm clock on for five minutes.

Now take a decision to disconnect from the outer world by closing the eyes and by bringing your awareness inside. Please keep your eyes closed during the practice.



Allow the body and mind to relax. Keep your mind directed towards your physical body. Don't try to do anything, just exist inside of your body in a simple, effortless, and aware state. Allow your mind to travel through the body from legs till head and experience each part of the body for a while. Stay in that practice for the entire five minutes with closed eyes.

Did you experience tension or pain somewhere? Did you experience any physical disturbance? In which part(s) of the body did you experience disturbances? Please make a mental note or write it down.

## **2. Hands On—Breathing body, emotional body, intellectual body**

Put your alarm clock on for five minutes, sit or lay down and close your eyes again.

Bring your hands on your belly. Feel how the hands are resting on the belly and allow the breath to be spontaneous. Feel with your hands how the belly is naturally expanding and contracting as a manifestation of the breathing process. Keep the hands on the belly for a while and then move the hands to the chest. Don't manipulate the breathing movements in your belly and chest, just allow them to happen by itself. It means that you will experience yourself in a spontaneous state. Stay in that observation for the entire five minutes.

Did you experience these breathing movements—the expansion and retraction in the belly and in the chest—as free movements, or did they feel blocked? Did they change during the observation?

Did any memories or thoughts appear during this time? Were these memories and thoughts positive, negative or neutral? Could you observe them, or did you identify with them? Please, make a mental note or write your experience down.

## **3. Central pathway—Breathing body, communication**

Put your alarm clock on for five minutes.

Please now keep a sitting position and then close your eyes again. Keep your back freely uplifted.

Open the mouth and stretch your tongue out. Observe the breath entering the mouth and recognize the pathway of the breath. Get aware where the pathway ends. How long is the pathway? Does anything happen between the inhalation and exhalation? Stay in the role of an observer, without manipulating the breath. The breath is spontaneous. Keep your mouth open with the tongue stretched out for the entire five minutes. After five min, close the mouth again, get aware of your inner state now and then repeat OM twenty-one times.

You were now observing the central pathway that connects the emotions, the organs and the limbic brain. We use this pathway also for communication with the external world to express our thoughts and feelings through voice and language. Were there any tensions or disturbances on this pathway? Did thoughts and emotions appear while observing this pathway? Were they positive, negative or neutral? What is your inner state now? Do you feel calm or disturbed?

These practices aim towards self-realization. Sometimes we experience ourselves in a blissful state, sometimes in a disturbed. If a blissful state is recognized, we can stay in that state sitting calmly and experiencing it for an extended time. If a disturbed state is recognized, we will need some further methods to achieve the state of harmony called Samadhi in Yoga.

Samadhi is a situation in which we can dive into the wisdom, intuition and creativity deep within us and around us. A collective is a collection of individuals. And yet as a consciousness we are all one united. So, whatever we do as individuals will affect the collective consciousness. And how will all this practice affect the collective curating? Practice, observe and see what comes. And practice again. Observe the transformation on the individual level and on the level of the collective. I wish you all a lot of success and joy!

By Linda Samaraweerová

<http://www.eindorf.at/hausartists/linda-samaraweerova/>



KYOTO EXPERIMENT

# Warm-Up Exercises for Trans-individual and Collective Curating

## Nicole Haitzinger, Hanna Hedman, and Valerie Oberleithner

As co-authors of this article, we have worked in different constellations over several months and in a joint research lab in 2024, on the question of the relationship between collective curating and dance-related practices. Although our professional activities can be placed in the larger context of the performative arts, our short CVs already illustrate different positionalities. Hanna, trained in dance at the Royal Swedish Ballet School, holds a diploma in somatic movement education from the Body-Mind Centering School and works as a choreographer and contemporary dancer in France. Valerie, trained in contemporary dance, works as a choreographer and performance artist, initiates community projects for underprivileged people with mental and physical disabilities and addictions in the Parisian banlieues, and works as a coach for performative presence in French film. Nicole studied theater and is a professor of dance studies; she also teaches curating in the performative arts and works as a dramaturg. Different family backgrounds and socializations (mainly Sweden, Ethiopia, Austria, France) and body techniques (ballet, modern dance, body-mind centering, contemporary dance techniques) have each contributed to a particular “formatting of the body”. (Hanna Hedman)

Fascinatingly, when we first met and despite all our differences, we could immediately recall a beloved common practice, namely the collective warming up of bodies in dance education and rehearsal processes. The memories of this recall initiated the gentle arrival of a group into a shared space, often beginning with lying on the floor and accompanied by a spatial mindfulness. Here, in the warming up of bodies recognized as vulnerable, a collective bonding takes place that forms the basis for any further action, but whose potentiality has hardly been reflected due to its supposed self-evidence. Despite the beautifully discursive and theoretically conclusively argued relationality in the curatorial context, in our opinion there is still a gap between the proclamation of the ideal curatorial condition for all participants and the curatorial processes in practice.<sup>1</sup> The guiding question of our research for this issue of OnCurating.org was therefore how curatorial collectives can be “warmed up” in relation to the body and “tuned in” to each other through dance. This question, which at first glance seems to reduce complexity, is based on two fundamental and independent experiences in the curatorial field, be it on one ‘front’ as an artist or on the other ‘front’ as a curator or as an intermediary between the two.

As a first experience, the three of us are all too familiar with the standardized and conventionalized protocol of a curatorial conversation, which usually takes place face-to-face in the offices of institutions, cafés, or currently (according to neoliberal production logics and work mechanisms) often on Zoom. In this asymmetrical constellation, sitting face to face or communicating in a virtual world, it is often decided which artistic forms of articulation are worth showing and promoting and which, for various reasons, cannot be ‘programmed’.

The second, more beloved and less discursive experience described in the introduction is quite different, namely the warm-up in dance or rehearsal processes or the ritual gestures before performances, in which our bodies meet and are tuned in with collective gestures, guided in different ways, carefully and without judgment. While the curatorial “table situation,” to put it formulaically, is usually accompanied by a cool distance and the vertical alignment of bodies in space, the horizontal ‘warm-up situation’ potentially creates a (touching) closeness between bodies that are respected as vulnerable. One situation is subject to the prism of choreography as a prescribed law,<sup>2</sup> but in the literally shared warm-up, bodies temporarily become a performative collective. Admittedly, these are two exaggeratedly formulated pars pro toto situations against a horizon of experience based on our positionalities. Nevertheless, we would like to argue that these are two common experiences in the field of curating performative arts.

In the following, we would like to explore the potential of warm-up exercises for trans-individual and collective curating. According to our thesis, warm-up exercises can be used to “unlearn” fixed social patterns and a “habitus” in the relationship between “curator/artist,” as well as a rigid attitude towards canon and aesthetics. They also support an implicit kind of learning that is closer to the etymology of Old High German learning in the sense of feeling and sniffing. Remarkably, learning in the proper sense of the word refers to the near senses (touch and smell) rather than the far senses (sight and hearing). The connection between curating in the performing arts and embodied practices is a major blind spot in our mainly ocular-centric theory: with a few exceptions, there is hardly any research literature (and case studies) on the subject. Presumably, the seated position defines the curatorial profession and curatorial action in the ‘Western’ context. The paradigm shifts in the curatorial field (decolonization, critique of power, care practices) calls for a reflection on the relevance and implementation of other practices in the curatorial field: “Somatics encourage embodied thinking and help to tune and train attention, bringing mind and body together.”<sup>3</sup>

However, the term **somatic practices**, a collective term that we also used many times at the beginning of our research, is considered problematic and controversial in current discourse. Etymologically, “soma” is borrowed from the Greek *sômatikos*, the adjective *to soma*, literally translatable as body.<sup>4</sup> As Isabell Ginot convincingly argues in *From Shusterman's Somaesthetics to Radical Epistemology of Somatics*, the history of European or “Western” dance from the early modern period to modernity is characterized by dance-related practices that can be situated on the periphery of dance as an art form.<sup>5</sup> These are, for example, physical exercises in medicine or gymnastics, which, we would like to add here, can be identified as resonances of an ancient discourse on the body. First, in the artistic colonies of Central European modernism, such as Monte Verità, founded by pioneers of so-called “free” dance or expressionist dance such as Rudolf von Laban or Mary Wigman, harmony-creating exercises became fundamental to utopian designs for a new community. And secondly, the medical discourse protects gymnastic exercises as a daily routine for modeling bodies ready for war according to heteronormative parameters—whether of male bodies going to the battlefield or of women whose bodies would literally and metaphorically produce a new athletic generation.<sup>6</sup>

During and after the Second World War, with its countless dead and wounded bodies, this discourse lost its potency in its interweaving of body and community. In the first two decades of the second half of the twentieth century, they were mainly used to prevent injuries or to rehabilitate the body in dance training, until Thomas Hanna finally introduced the term somatic practices as a collective term into the discourse in the



1970s. At that time, it was implicitly profiled as a counter-model to traditional dance techniques oriented towards virtuosity.<sup>7</sup> As Isabell Ginot convincingly demonstrates, a specific genealogy of somatic practices—especially those of the pioneers Moshe Feldenkrais (Feldenkrais Technique), Frederick Matthias Alexander (Alexander Technique) or Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen (Body-Mind Centering), who are considered to be the founding generation—goes hand in hand with a kind of pseudoscientific approach in which questionable medical evidence is presented and charged with subjectivist narratives of belief and experience regarding their efficacy.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Isabell Ginot criticizes the establishment of somatics and somaesthetics as an autonomous and theory-based academic discipline, launched by Richard Shusterman and others in the 2000s, which are currently and widely accepted as particular body knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Two questionable aspects can be uncovered here: firstly, somatic practices are ascribed an “efficiency” that tends to be based on dichotomies such as right/wrong or good/bad for individuated bodies. And secondly, in the current discourse, somatic practices become one of specific techniques for the fabrication of an idealized body model whose inclusions and exclusions based on norms and ideologies are little reflected upon:

“The methods Shusterman’s book favors—supported not only by reference to Alexander and Feldenkrais but also through Yoga, tau-chi-chuan, or zazen—have these elements in common: they favor slowness, a feeble articulatory amplitude, a minimum of muscular effort, and, above all, an attention directed toward the self. They are all solitary techniques [...] My [Isabel Ginot’s] hypothesis is the following: behind the insistence on the singularity of each corporeality, most somatic methods have as a backdrop a homogenous, universal, ahistorical, and occidental body.”<sup>10</sup>

Despite its numerous global circulations of bodily techniques (adapted to this scheme), the ‘western’ 20th century has largely remained stuck in the anthropocentric self-reference of a mode of being in the world.<sup>11</sup> This dominant and autoreferential “corpo-reality” hinders collective thought and action, as is elaborated in the current performance discourse with reference to the *concept of transindividuality* elaborated by the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon<sup>12</sup> back in the 1990s: “The concern with the self is cloaked on a singular level in an etho-poetics of existence which obfuscates the political and social reasons to think and act collectively.”<sup>13</sup> In the context of neoliberal shaping and socialization, the reference to the “pre-individual” and “trans-individual” common—key terms in Simondon’s concept—, according to the guiding thesis of this discursive current, is supposed to unleash ethical, emancipatory and political potential.

The concept of trans-individual community is based on a sharp distinction from identitarian, nationalist or fascist models. The new paradigm here is the creation of a processual community that is constantly exposed to collective processes of individuation, in which the individual, the collective, and the milieu are interdependent and ultimately conceivable only as a relation. Although Ana Vujanović and Bojana Cvejić continue to formulate a legitimate critique of somatic techniques and bodywork focused solely on the optimized individual in commercialized mainstream culture, the body-related and dance-related potential for trans-individual processes of community building remains hidden. Furthermore, and this is a second point of criticism, the key question “How much potential do we have to go beyond our individual selves?” is based on an implicitly “Western” socialized us.<sup>14</sup>



Although a discourse, historically founded and critical perspectives on somatic practices as an increasingly solitary technique are urgently required, we believe that over-criticism runs the risk of misjudging the potentialities of dance-related practices in the context of collective curating. We would therefore like to make a distinction between somatic and dance-related practices. While somatic practices have literally taken on a life of their own as a label since the 2000s and are increasingly circulating outside of an artistic context, we start from the following parameters—based on our *shared situatedness*, despite our differences in terms of cultural origin or profession, and in a contemporary dance context. Firstly, we think that form and depth do not form a duality, but that the exploration of the depth of structured movements can produce an explosion of energies, vibrations and sensations. Secondly, the relational relationship between aesthetics and ethics in the sense of *bodies taking care* is of specific relevance in a dance-related context; thirdly, we assume a shared existence in the world in which we are constantly moving in relation to others and that the way these movements move towards and away from each other, with more or less touch, with more or less speed, can be adapted contextually with sensitivity and co-responsibility.

Thinking along an imaginary warm-up training for curatorial collectives, we would like to conclude by presenting two prototypical exercises that, on the one hand, go far beyond the solitary and self-referential paradigm of somatic practices and, on the other hand, consider the complexity and diversity of a temporary community. Two trans-individual and two collectively oriented exercises are proposed, conceived by Valerie and Hanna based on three criteria and contextually adapted specifically for collective curating: (one) non-judgmental, (two) between labeled and unlabeled, and (three) horizontal. Each of these exercises is to be understood as an accumulation of a dance practice by Hanna or Valerie, which is here for the first time passed on to curating collectives in a kind of provisional score.

## I Warm-Up for Transindividual Curating

### Exercise 1:

#### Hanna Hedman: Three Fluids

This exercise is based on the somatic practice of Body-Mind Centering<sup>15</sup> and was developed by Hanna Hedman especially for a group tuning-in. Each person in the room—guided by Hanna/a facilitator—explores three different qualities of movement connected to bodily fluids in their own body: cerebrospinal fluid (light, gentle), synovial fluid in joints (fast, flowing in different directions) and blood fluid heart/artery (rhythmic, directional).<sup>16</sup> People move in each mode for several minutes. Each person then chooses a movement quality according to their state of mind and embodies this state with a more than human conception of the world and movement: for example, coral (cerebral), octopus (jointless), or elephant (heart-rhythmic). The result is a non-judgmental and open resonance space, an ecologically conscious environment between all bodies or entities in the room.

### Exercise 2:

#### Valerie Oberleithner: Authentic Movement (a version)

Authentic Movement is an established somatic practice that can be practiced in pairs or groups.<sup>17</sup> In the context of our research, it has been specified by Valerie Oberleithner for the tuning-in of groups and here in particular of collectives in the context of curating, firstly to generate empathy and secondly to create a non-judgmental working atmosphere. Tuning in has the potential to dissolve existing hierarchies or conflicts

between participants, and to motivate the assumption of responsibility and care within the group. The instructions Valerie wrote as a warm-up exercise for transindividual curating are as follows:

Come together in pairs. Partner one moves with closed eyes for seven minutes. The person moves from within. The person tries not to force the movement, but to listen to what comes... Partner two watches Partner one move. Partner two sits at a good distance from Partner one so that the person can observe the movements well. While observing, Partner two puts his or her body in a comfortable and alert position. If Partner one is in danger (for example, falling or bumping into an object), Partner two approaches Partner one quickly and carefully. Partner two places his body between the object and the body of Partner one. This is how Partner two protects Partner one. When the alarm bell rings (after seven minutes), the couple comes together. Partner two begins by describing the sensation. Try to stay descriptive. Avoid interpretation. Then partner one tells what was experienced during the movement. You can describe feelings, sensations, images, imaginations. While one partner speaks, the other simply listens. Change roles.

## Warm-up for Collective Curating

### Exercise 1:

#### Valerie Oberleithner: The Mirror

This exercise, in which a curating collective is physiologically tuned in through the activation of mirror neurons in singular bodies, evokes empathy, mutual listening, a non-judgmental encounter beyond hierarchical structures.<sup>18</sup> It is inspired by Keith Hennessy's inclusive community projects, in which a connection between people is motivated without verbal battles.<sup>19</sup> The exercise begins with the following introduction: "When one person performs a movement and an opposite person/multiple people perform the same movement in mirror image, mirror neurons become active in the performer's cerebral system, activating empathy. (With this exercise we can potentially create a non-judgmental atmosphere in the collective. Each person is free to participate actively or to observe the situation".

After this introduction, one participant stands visibly opposite the group and demonstrates movements to the rhythm of freely chosen music, preferably danceable songs from club culture. The group mirrors this person's movements. Then another person steps out of the group and the first person becomes part of the mirroring collective. Each person should be given the opportunity to share their movement phrase with the group. The movements should be slow and as simple as possible in the beginning. Once the collective is in tune, more complicated phrases can be tried in a playful way.

### Exercise 2

#### Hanna Hedman: The String Contact

The String Contact begins with the group dividing into pairs.<sup>20</sup> Two people take a string of wool (about 1.5 meters long) in one hand and move around the room together. After a few minutes, the task is to keep the string taut between the two people and to feel who gives impulses and in what way (active/passive, tempo, modulation of energy). Finally, a third person (and two string) is added to each pair. The person in the middle now feels impulses from two directions and begins to balance them. The collective of three moves around the room together with several other collectives of three. After a few minutes, another person moves to the middle position. "Observe how you react" (Hanna Hedman): The singular person experiences how they act physically and in

movement in group constellations and which social patterns can be experienced here: more impulse-giving or absorbing, too responsible or letting others do it? Depending on the decision and the needs of the group, the levels can remain the same or be gently raised, for example through the task of forming different patterns (choreographic prism) or using different movement techniques.

“You are connected” (Hanna Hedman): This exercise is primarily used to connect and deepen kinesthetic empathy between groups of two or three, with special attention to the larger group in the room. It explores a shared experience and expands awareness of small and large events. This physical experience can be used as a soft skill in the act of curating. Through the gentle guidance of a facilitator and/or group reflection after the practice, co-responsibility and socially driven imagination are released as potential in collective curating.

These four warm-up exercises, developed for trans-individual and collective curating, motivate states such as grounding, empathy, bonding, and resonance to varying degrees. In this sense, they are to be understood as soft skills and potential tools. By practicing Three Liquids, Authentic Movement, String Contact and Mirror Exercise, (our) bodies in their singular vulnerability become responsible bodies, bodies that test care and concern as a shared experience in a safe space before or during exposure to increasingly precarious and harsh realities.

## Notes

- 1 See: Beatrice von Bismarck, *The Curatorial Condition* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2022).
- 2 Gerald Siegmund. “Choreography and Law. On the Necessity of Resistance,” in *Denkfiguren. Performatives between Moving, Writing and Inventing*, eds. Nicole Haitzinger and Karin Fenböck (Munich: epodium Verlag 2010).
- 3 Sarah Whatley. “Somatic Practices: How Motion Analysis and Mind Images Work Hand in Hand in Dance,” in *Handbook of Human Motion*, eds. Bertram Müller and Sebastian I. Wolf (Heidelberg: Springer 2018), 1911–1925.
- 4 Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales, «Etymologie. Somatique», accessed January 14, 2025, <https://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/somatique>.
- 5 Allegra Barlow, Isabelle Ginot and Mark Franko. “From Shusterman’s Somaesthetics to a Radical Epistemology of Somatics,” in *Dance Research Journal* 42, no.1 (Summer 2010), 12–29.
- 6 cf. Nicole Haitzinger. “Das Phantasma des “deutschen Modernen Tanzes,” in *Tanz&Archiv. Research Journeys. Kaleidoscopes of Dance*, Issue 7, eds. Irene Brandenburg, Nicole Haitzinger and Claudia Jeschke (Munich: epodium Verlag 2017), 76–91.
- 7 Thomas Hanna. “What is Somatics,” in *Bone, Breath and Gesture*, eds. Don H. Johnson (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books), 339–352.
- 8 Barlow, Ginot and Franko. “From Shusterman’s Somaesthetics to a Radical Epistemology of Somatics”, 18.
- 9 Helen Thomas and Stacey Prickett (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Dance Studies. Part II Dance and Somatics*, (New York: Routledge 2020), 69–138.
- 10 Barlow, Ginot and Franko. “From Shusterman’s Somaesthetics to a Radical Epistemology of Somatics”, 21–23.
- 11 Martha Eddy. “Somatic Practices and Dance: Global Influences,” in *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 2 (Winter, 2002), 46–62.
- 12 Gilbert Simondon. *L’individu et sa genèse physico-biologique*, (Grenoble: J. Millon 1995).
- 13 Ana Vujanović and Bojana Cvejić. *Toward a Transindividual Self*, (Oslo: Oslo National Academy of the Arts 2022), 14.

**14** Ana Vujanović and Bojana Cvejić. *Toward a Transindividual Self*, (Oslo: Oslo National Academy of the Arts 2022), 19.

**15** Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. “Body Mind Centering,” accessed January 14, 2025, <https://www.bodymindcentering.com>.

**16** Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. “Body Mind Centering. Fluid System Course,” accessed January 14, 2025, <https://www.bodymindcentering.com/course/fluid-system/>.

**17** Tina Stromsted. “Authentic Movement Institute,” accessed January 14, 2025, <https://www.authenticmovementinstitute.com>.

**18** Anton Benz. “Mythos Spiegelneurone,” in *Spektrum.de* (March 4, 2022), accessed January 14, 2025, <https://www.spektrum.de/news/was-steckt-wirklich-hinter-den-spiegelneuronen/1991029>.

**19** Rhizomatic Arts. “Circo Zero Performance. Keith Hennesy in Collaboration,” accessed January 14, 2025, <http://circozero.org/current>.

**20** This exercise was first tested by Hanna Hedman in the context of the European research project “Empowering Dance—The Soft Skills Teaching and Learning Approach” (2020-2023), accessed January 14, 2025, <http://www.empowering.communicatingdance.eu/> at the invitation of Monica Gilette, Sarah Huston and Marcela Santander Corvalán) and specified in our research for collective curating.

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**Valerie Oberleithner**, an Austrian choreographer and performer in Paris, explores dance and choreography to promote empowerment and a reflection on body politics. She teaches across Europe and works in French cinema as a coach for performative presence.

## iSaAc Espinoza Hidrobo

## 💖 Viral queer love—reclaiming public spaces by iSaAc Espinoza Hidrobo

This page is an offering attempting to materialize some of the impulses and practices used with and by the *maiskind* community on public spaces in Cologne, it is an invitation to welcome You to imagine how parts of a *maiskind Dance Gathering* might look like 🍌; transgressing the streets reclaiming the queer body communities of the past by empowering the energies of the present 🍌, hosting the powers of transition as we move from one part of the city to a nearest other, sweating, shaking, and healing from within, exploding through the pores of our bodies into the public space, shooting viral queer love 💖 to pedestrians, to the landscapes, and up to the cosmos.

We welcome You to visualize the start of a *Dance Gathering*; a bunch of queers, unicorns 🦄, migrants, witchy loving monsters 🧛, movement enthusiasts and fantastic friends, some are wearing 🍌 high heels 🍌 others 🍌 sneakers 🍌 make up 🍌 whatever feels great 🍌; They are from all ages gathering on a Town Square in the city. Traditionally, when we gather, we love to welcome people by sharing a piece of chocolate 🍌 while introducing ourselves, raising questions of consent as we might dance very close with one and other 🍌; as well as crystalizing that dance can be a bunch of diverse situations, expressions which we are excited to host and give tools to develop collectively 🍌. Once this initiation ritual is established a *maiskind* (member) 🍌 makes a call, inviting participants to embark on a journey of transformative sparkles by saying: “we are here in Cologne, you all look fabulous today 🍌, now we invite you to imagine we go to our favorite club, from this moment, the streets we will go are the paths inside this club, they are just in a different dancing phase, we welcome you to interact with people; respect the distance. Share love! 💖💙 and remember!!! You have a partner and soooo many other partners along the way in this party... 🍌🍌. as: **It is not about you; it is about all of us.**” 💖💙🍌

During the score, the maiskinder are encouraged to spark words of memory, guiding throughout the streets, like a playful task, remembering the fabulousness of our existences 🍌, of our ancestries 🍌 encouraging participants to dare to shake the butt 🍌 while squeezing through pavements, after screaming words like Popo!! or chocolate 🍌!! for participants to freeze and sense the group heartbeat as the street movement like a film continues, or 🍌 Sexy!! To fiercely cross traffic lights suggesting their sexiest walk or pose, the way you would perform on your way to a bar in a club.

After sweating, flirting 🍌, shaking your ass 🍌, holes 🍌, organs 🍌, your thoughts 🍌, your weirdness 🍌, your fabulousness 🍌, squeezing through to the end between peoples, challenging gazes 🍌, their asses 🍌, decolonizing all our and their bodies....? 🍌 ??? one of these partners, another maiskind (member) gathers everyone on the way, inviting rituals of breathing, breathing through our communities in and out,



thanking ourselves, thanking our ancestors, the landscapes 🌊, the trees 🌳 and pedestrians for joining us, trusting us, for witnessing, for ❤️ and for and for ❤️ .... before moving to the next score.

Since 2020 iSaAc Espinoza Hidrobo directs *maiskind*, an enchanting transdisciplinary community **where diversity flourishes, queerness empowers, and ancestral inspired rituals come alive**. We are culture, otherness, we are. architects reconstructing narratives, reclaiming spaces... Both physical and imaginary across temporalities, geographies, and dimensions. In this transformative journey, we transition, translate, and transport ideas verbalizing truths. We must constantly remember everyone everywhere: that we are multiplicities, that we are not alone, that we Must love one another, embracing our differences, diverse forms of communication, identities, beliefs, and interests. We must be inclusive, giving voice and prominence to those who have been rendered invisible. We invite you to join us, shake our bodies, our butts, be queer, unicorns celebrating love and infecting your surroundings with it. **Come to us in Cologne anytime! Or follow us or contact us on Instagram/email @maiskind\_official / [www.maiskind.com](http://www.maiskind.com)** 🐦 **It is a welcome space for everybody**. We hug You, with love maiskind 💕.

By Isaac Andrés Espinoza Hidrobo

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iSaAc - iSaBeL is an Ecuadorian choreographer, trans artist-activist & violinist based in Europe. Their Works engage with trans-feminist anti-colonialism and ritualism, exploring transdisciplinary constellations of participatory composition

# "This is like a miracle. How did we get here?": An Interview with Florian Malzacher and Milo Rau on Collective Curating

## Nicole Haitzinger, Gwendolin Lehnerer, and River Lin

Together with Florian Malzacher (FM) and Milo Rau (MR), we—Nicole Haitzinger (NH), Gwendolin Lehnerer (GL) and River Lin (RL)—delve into the multifaceted topic of collective work in artistic and curatorial practices. In our conversation, we explore the trajectory of collectives in the art world and examine questions of hierarchy, responsibility, and aesthetic perspectives. We not only consider the historical emergence of such structures but also the practical challenges associated with them—both in theater and in curatorial practice. Against this background, we ask Florian Malzacher and Milo Rau: What does collective curating mean for you and your work, and to what extent can it break hierarchies or create new forms of empowerment and responsibility?

**FM:** When I studied in Gießen in the 1990s, collectives were the order of the day. Solo directing was done by those we already considered hopelessly lost. It was the time of She She Pop, Showcase Beat Le Mot, Rimini Protokoll and many other artist collectives. In theory everybody was on stage – even the ones that run the lights. And that anyway everybody did everything without division of roles, from controlling the music to accounting. Of course, soon pragmatics kicked in, but the concept of collectivity was taken seriously. And yet, at least in my memory, we never really talked much about what this meant as a concept. It simply was practiced as a counter-model to the real (and sometimes) imagined hierarchies of the municipal theater and its ingenious, typically male, directors.

It came from the same impulse that we approached the idea of curating collectively. First with the student-run Diskurs-Festival in Gießen and later with the curator's collective Unfriendly Takeover which I founded together with some friends in Frankfurt. Thinking back, I am actually surprised that we already called ourselves curators. Back then in 2000, it was completely unusual to use this term in the context of theatre. Again we just did so without much theoretical consideration, even though we would refer to Hans Ulrich Obrist sometimes. But generally it came just as naturally as we called ourselves a collective.

So I come from a practice where these ideas were already embedded. Later, in more professional contexts, such as steirischer herbst or the Impulse Festival, these collective approaches were replaced by models that had official hierarchies but still were very collaborative both within the institutional structures but also in the cooperation with artist. In projects where several different artists are involved the curator's role is of course not only a serving one but involves a lot of moderation. I understand it rather as a distribution of different roles and tasks than as a matter of hierarchies. During this time there was also a strong discourse within net activism preferring the concept of

collaboration (which does not need personal sympathy or even the same goals to work together) to collectivity.

Maybe coming from theatre ideas of collaboration and collectivity are anyway more obvious than in other art forms: Theater is always a collaborative or collective effort. The key question is maybe not only whether hierarchies exist, but how they function: What working methods prevail? What are the different roles and how do they complement one another?

**MR:** Your account of the emergence of the term "curator" also reminds me of the time when there were suddenly no more "program directors" or "dramaturges," but only "curators". In essence, this meant a kind of disempowerment of the "brilliant artistic mind" and a structural shift toward programming. I never consciously pursued or reflected on this, because my approach has always been project-based. When I think about my first curatorial situation, it was more about thinking about other people's work: How do things fit together? What follows which piece? What is being produced where? Because our projects were spread out over the year, I never really thought of it as work. For us, it often worked like this: The curators would suggest something, and we would say: "Yeah, great, let's do it." There was no strict programmatic approach—just a diffuse need to, for example, "bring small productions to big stages" or "move away from municipal theater practices.

I think we have a similar way of thinking, but for me the liberation of the artistic was not primarily about breaking away from the "dictatorship of the director"—I think that is a very German debate. Rather, it was to break with the idea that a text had to be the basis of a play. When I left Germany, this concept disappeared for me, and it was a total liberation. Instead, the text became a means of documenting the rehearsal process—something that was collected, shortened and adapted every night. Now, with the Wiener Festwochen and the "Free Republic of Vienna," I am thinking for the first time about how an entire festival program can be aligned with collective needs; needs that arise from the city, the participating artists, and the curatorial team itself. For me, it is not important whether there are five or ten curators. What matters is the expertise: Everyone brings something different to the table. In our team there are people with specific knowledge of musical dramaturgy, outreach work, or specific cultural contexts. I, on the other hand, follow other developments and can contribute different perspectives. A key question for me is: How do we ensure that our program works both within the city and internationally? For example, we adopted the "Vienna Declaration" and formed working groups to clarify when the artistic advisory board comes into play, how much of the program is co-designed by the city, and which blind spots we need to address: Is the independent scene missing? The Arab world? Southeast Asia?

This confrontation with our own limitations is essential. Sociologically speaking, the "Gießen collectives" are a probable collective—with a limited scope. But when I talk to a curator from Ankara or the sister of Thomas Sankara about a play about revolution, I encounter a completely different curatorial aesthetic. Such encounters force you to question your own perspective: Am I ready to engage with a radically different taste? These are the exciting questions for me as a curator and artist. One has to create situations in which one is forced to step out of one's comfort zone—not out of stubbornness, but because one's upbringing and aesthetic conditioning suggest a certain perspective.

**FM:** I find that the question of criteria is very interesting. Such improbable collectives, as you call them, challenge one's own standards. They bring new perspectives into play that may become more important than the question of whether something is a "good" work or not.

For me "Truth is concrete", a 7day non-stop marathon-camp in 2012 on artistic strategies in art and activism was the project where I really learned a lot about the productive (and at times exhausting) friction between curatorial ideas and a collective driven development. We invited more than 200 artists, activists and theorists from all over the world – and it was clear that this would create a field of agonistic tension. Spanning such a vast group of people and geography it was clear that the curatorial process had to be based on input from many other people. Certain regions or topics or practices or struggles were not known to us, we had to rely on others. Also there was not a single view on things, there had to be space for opposing positions. The curator Antonia Majaca once said, "curating does not mean endorsing." I have always found that a very helpful idea: not having to identify with every position that is presented. Of course, this raises a lot of questions. But if one understands it—as Chantal Mouffe suggests—as an agonistic field, then this plurality and tension naturally becomes part of the process. However, it comes down to two things: On the one hand, the loss of control—allowing things to happen that you cannot fully determine—and on the other hand, maintaining control, whether out of responsibility or to prevent everything from falling apart. This friction between letting go and intervening was essential to "Truth is Concrete" and part of the concept.

**NH/GL/RL:** At this point, we would like to follow up with a question for both of you: Florian, you spoke about the concept of collective curating, the associated loss of control, and the tension between allowing and intervening. To us, this sounds a lot like a *theater of assembly*, where different perspectives and positions are brought together. But we wonder: A *theater of assembly* does not necessarily require collective curating. And conversely, collective curating does not automatically mean that a true assembly forms. Would you agree with that?

**FM:** One could see collective curating itself as a form of assembly. The question is whether this assembly leads to further assemblies. Not every assembly is necessarily productive or leads to the desired results. An example that comes to mind is one of the most ambitious assembly projects that was also collectively curated but maybe had to fail: the Assembly of Assemblies which was initiated by Sibylle Peters and others about ten years ago. The idea was to bring together activist groups from all over the world and curate a collective assembly that took place in the theater space at Kampnagel. Of course, group processes are no guarantee of success. But the question that arises here is what collective assembling and curating means. Because if we look closely: there are not only very few curators collectives – like WHW from Croatia that will curate the next Skulptur Projekte in Münster – there are also very few real performance collectives.

When it comes to assemblies, I agree that the ideal is to introduce positions that are unfamiliar, complementary, and perhaps surprising. And such a curatorial assembly would need to be designed in a way that allows these different perspectives to emerge and be negotiated.

**MR:** Regarding these assemblies, I have always had the impression that, according to Chantal Mouffe, such a process is more like a field experiment—open and organized, whether thematically or through the confrontation of extreme positions. In these fields of tension that often arise in these trials or tribunals, the goal is to bring together completely different opinions and create a format that establishes certain rules and a structure. Such a format can be very effective, whether it's a tribunal, an interrogation, or a series of pleadings divided into minutes. Often the presence of judges and the need to tell the truth are part of these models. Over time, one develops a sense of what

works for all participants and what is perceived as hubris or overreach by the organizers—what doesn't work. It is often difficult to determine how much antagonism a format can withstand.

One example was the General Assembly in Berlin, which included a representative of Erdogan's party and a Kurdish activist. The topic was the Armenian genocide, and the jury demanded its recognition. Of course, the AKP representative could not give this recognition, which led to a temporary halt of the project because it became impossible for both persons to remain in the same room.

Ironically, the President of the General Assembly, who came from a Herero community, then said that he would also leave if the AKP representative left—because Turkey was the only state that had recognized the German genocide against the Herero.

At that moment it became clear how difficult it is to negotiate such politics of memory in a European context—how they overlap and can completely change the dynamics of a format. Interestingly, I have often noticed that likely collectives—those with similar goals and backgrounds—tend to be more conflictual. The conflicts often arise in areas that seem small at first, such as debates over identity politics. These conflicts are emotionally and morally charged, but not necessarily destructive in the traditional sense. Such conflicts often occur within probable collectives that share similar intentions. In improbable collectives, where extremely conflicting goals converge, it sometimes seems easier to reconcile these differences. One example is the Landless Movement, which consists of queer activists, farmers, and indigenous activists—a group with completely different positions but united by a common adversary.

I think the era of minimalists—collectives with clear, simplified structures—is coming to an end. Political realities are shifting, as seen in the election results, where suddenly it's just the AfD against everyone else. This shift means that collectives today tend to have a more defensive role, they need to come together to defend themselves against external threats. This became particularly clear to me when I recently watched the Elephant Roundtable after the German election. It was a strange experience to watch this political transformation.

Today, it feels as if the collectives increasingly must take on a defensive function—which changes the meaning and the dynamics of such gatherings.

**NH/GL/RL:** We would like to address another important dimension—the question of responsibility within collectives. Collectives always work in two directions: on the one hand, they offer protection and complicity, which can create a certain opacity. On the other hand, they involve coming together for a common goal or vision. Especially when it comes to collective decision-making, the question arises: who takes responsibility—both within the collective and externally? How have you experienced this question in your projects? And how do you manage this responsibility, especially in collaborative work processes? Are there clear structures or is responsibility often distributed in an unclear way?

**FM:** I would say that in most cases there is accountability, it might from the outside not easily recognizable, especially since it is differently organized in different groups. With five or six people, responsibility can usually be shared quite well. Within bigger collectives other structures have to be found and organized. In Western contexts, we traditionally think of responsibility as something that is assigned to a single person who makes the final decision or takes full responsibility. But that doesn't have to be the case. Responsibility can be distributed in a way that works for the collective. Especially



in activist groups or collectively organized projects, it is crucial to act quickly when a decision needs to be made—a clear structure of responsibility becomes essential. The challenge often lies in the fact that collectives sometimes lack the experience to distribute responsibility efficiently, both internally and externally. In collective curatorial work in theater or other creative fields, there have been repeated attempts in the past to entrust collectives with specific tasks—sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Often the failure occurs because the collective lacks the necessary experience or has not yet sufficiently established its internal structures.

**MR:** Two thoughts on this: First, I think that moving from a lack of responsibility to a discussion about taking responsibility is like a muscle that can be trained—just like a movement. Going back to the landless movement, I was always impressed by how long discussions would go on. Then, at some point, the process would shift, and things would just get done—the decision that was collectively seen as the best would be implemented, even by those who had been outvoted. It's almost like a small democracy, except there's no opposition to constantly remind everyone that things went wrong. I think responsibility works like a muscle that you train, and as Florian mentioned, in theater you train it collectively through the work itself. It's about moving from openness to closure and back to openness. And that is something that can be accelerated and even harnessed, because in that openness there is an increased intelligence and an increased power.

Another observation I've made is that collectives don't operate in isolation; they usually operate within institutions. And often, within the overall structure of an institution, a collective is weaker than a single individual in a leadership position. Interestingly, collectives within larger institutions tend to be more hierarchical than a solo curator, precisely because they are weaker as a group. There are situations where three people agree with each other, and this can be used strategically to push through decisions. At the Wiener Festwochen, for example, I coordinate with my artistic team, and when we present our position to the broader assembly, there is little room for negotiation; it's essentially settled. I say this quite openly because this is how things can go in the worst case.

I think that's sometimes a reason why collectives exist—because individuals don't always feel strong enough to bear the stress and responsibility alone. It also has to do with personal disposition. If you're an intellectual, and not just an Elon Musk-type, but someone who needs discussion and dialog to figure things out in a small circle, then working collectively makes sense. But on the other hand, it can also reinforce the "armor" of a collective in leadership positions.

I mention this as a critical perspective because we have become accustomed to thinking of collective leadership as inherently better for institutions. And in many cases, this is certainly true, as it helps to dissolve traditional divisions of power.

I thought this is very relevant to collective processes, but you also often end up in places where no one intended to go—but somehow you end up there anyway. I've experienced that a lot in theater: moments where I think, "This is like a miracle. How did we get here?" Nobody planned for us to arrive at this solution in the morning, but by the evening it's the conclusion we've reached. That's the beauty of collectivization: the depersonalization and liberation of the individual will. This is the positive side of collectivity.

**FM:** Milo, in your work, you repeatedly bring together impressive collectives, while at the same time being perceived as an individual—a central figure, even the “genius artist”. Your name is often synonymous with a network of collaborative processes. How do you navigate this dynamic and this contradiction?

**MR:** I would say that my way of working is very text-based. My projects always start with texts that I either write or choose. Then we work on them together, and in the end, I put it all together. That is, in a way, my signature. That is part of my approach: I take the final responsibility, even though many processes happen collectively. Collectivity means that everyone contributes something and takes something away. It is always about negotiation—about the exchange of values and recognition.

There are two sides to my work: on the one hand, a core team that I have worked with for years – dramaturges, set designers, cinematographers—because we need precise technical collaboration. On the other hand, there is a more flexible, dynamic side, like the way René Pollesch has worked, where different energies are quickly brought together. I don't always know exactly how that works, but it's a mix of ideology and pragmatic work that I still need to think about. But I have no ideological problem with it—it is more about my inner attitude. As a curator, I am constantly torn between different roles.

**FM:** It's interesting that this conversation came up because I was supposed to write a text about collective curating. But every time I tried to put it into words, the text felt unsatisfying. I keep asking myself: What does it really mean to curate collectively or to make art collectively? Is that really the case, or is something else at play? I think the way curating and making art has changed, especially in terms of networks and collaboration. But is “collective” really the best word for it?

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**Florian Malzacher** is a curator, writer, dramaturg and visiting professor for dramaturgy and curatorial practice at the University of Design & Arts in Karlsruhe. He is host of the online platform “The Art of Assembly”.

**Milo Rau**, born in 1977 in Bern, is the artistic director of the Wiener Festwochen, known for his works at the intersection of art and activism. He has received numerous international awards.

### **What if you read the article, instead of the headline**

Stefan Kaegi

What if you listened more than you read, all of you together.

If you didn't sit opposite each other, but rather next to each other.

Or if you laid down next to each other looking at clouds passing by.

If you drew when you talked.

What if you encouraged your artist friends to talk to people who were neither artists nor their friends.

If you tried to identify with people you hated.

If you made one of you listen to what those people say on headphones and repeated it out loud word by word.

What if you didn't agree, but also didn't leave things undone.

What if you didn't sit down for meetings. But discussed while walking, while cooking.

What if you stayed alone for a while.

What if together you went to places where people gather. Tried to understand why they gathered.

What if you wrote down what you just said—and read it out loud to each other.

If you sat on chairs with one foot up on the chair, your knee next to your ear.

What if you went under the table and listened to the others studying their feet.

What if you spent time together on the countryside.

Avoided drugs that make you feel self-confident.

Tried drugs that help you lose your ego.

What if you took Europe out of the equation every now and then. But didn't forget to defend democracy.

If you took night-trains.

Avoided abstraction.

Zoomed in and zoomed out.

What if all of you together found a place to look at for a minute in silence and then clap.

What if you considered timing more than the look.

If you wore clothes of each other.

Watched animals.

Ate pure wasabi.

What if you didn't build institutions with walls.

Avoided working with people who have been in the same position for more than ten years.

If you criticized CEOs at least as much as politicians.

And corporations at least as much as nation states.

If you invented your own board game to play in your collective.

Watched non-stop rain for a day.

Walked backwards as a group.

Or forward but always moving the left arm forward when the left leg moved forward and the right arm when the right leg stepped forward.

What if you didn't rehearse much, but rather did tryouts.

Simulated and pre-enacted in 3D. Then discussed it again.

What if you were consequent but made some good mistakes.

If you talked late at night and tried to remember next morning.

By Stefan Kaegi

<https://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en>

# Post-Editorial Q&A

## Sigrid Gareis, Nicole Haitzinger, Gwendolin Lehnerer, and River Lin

After more than a year of working together on this Issue of *Collective Curating in Performing Arts* at the end of the editorial process, the co-editors made a move to respectively propose post-curatorial questions to one another. Through self-provocation to the collective/ collaborative process, we again reflected on the power structure of curatorship, practices of collectivity, and what urges us to advocate collective/collaborative curating in today's (performing-) arts ecosystem, through this introductory and/or retrospective dialog.

**Gwendolin Lehnerer:** I would like to begin the Q&A session with a quote from Amanda Piña, which I kept reflecting on throughout the process of working on our issue of *Collective Curating*:

As we seek to adapt to a burning planet, we must rethink how we live, perceive, and experience the world. What role do our collective bodies play in this social, political, and spiritual transformation? (Amanda Piña)<sup>1</sup>

In reference to Amanda Piña's quote, where we are asked to consider our relationship to a "burning planet," I wonder how we can and must transform the infrastructures of art and curating so that collective curation becomes a necessity rather than just a challenge. What tools or changes in our practices do we need to advance this transformation and better integrate the collective body as an active part of this change? In other words, how can we foster the collective in these processes?

**Sigrid Gareis:** I personally believe that expectations are set too high when one posits the "healing of the world" as a central task of art. While there is corresponding expertise in art and curation, it has its limits. Nevertheless, considering the "burning planet," we all need to examine our habits, behaviors, and certainties—both personally and institutionally—a necessity that continues to be underestimated despite ongoing crises. With its unique imaginative power, art is particularly capable of developing and testing future forms of life as models—a potential that should be brought more into focus. Since the problems we face are planetary, it is ultimately clear that they can only be addressed through joint (collective or collaborative) efforts. In practice, this urgency necessitates not only a profound and critical rethinking of cultural infrastructure (material, personnel, and institutional) but also to highlight the utopian strength of art and curation.

**River Lin:** From an Indigenous-centric perspective, the notion of a "burning planet" by Amanda Piña sees an ecological urgency to enact radical care collectively. Indigenous Peoples have performed a networked body and internet of things since ancestral times to the present, as they have always lived in community-based structures, both spiritually and socially. This collective caretaking in curatorial practices, for me, means rethinking the collective action of community engagement, whether in institutional or grassroots realms. To perform the collective curation, what is essential is to first shift a



top-to-bottom hierarchy and manner of bureaucracy towards an infrastructurally horizontal body. This kind of work requires much more effort because the notion of progression has long trained and inhabited us. As long as decision-making cannot be deconstructed in a collective setting, we will not be able to approach collective thinking and making of curation.

**Nicole Haitzinger:** “Thus the curatorial question is how to adjust your questions and concerns to the reality, or what are the curatorial strategies that can communicate to the reality, or transform it?”<sup>2</sup>

What other practices (quotidian, political, socio-cultural, e.g.) outside the field of performing arts show similarities to practices of collective curating, and how could these be adapted and integrated into collective curatorial processes?

**River Lin:** During the Lunar New Year in Chinese-speaking communities, family members and their relatives living and working everywhere would get together (again) at home. To prepare for the celebratory feast of New Year’s Eve, everybody would work together despite the fact that they might not be acquainted with each other, or that some of them have had a difficult year. This situation of temporary community shows a gathering-driven collective action for a social ritual from the past and present. This cultural custom often reminds me that, when I create and hold events and spaces for colleagues, artists, and audiences as a curator, in a collective setting I am no longer an individual but a part of a community that I am associated with and responsible for others. Therefore, curation is formed, as curation has always been alongside many others or community members.

**Gwendolin Lehnerer:** In my opinion, we can learn from various sources, such as the women’s rights movement, political organizations, and, in particular, from ecosystems that surround us or of which we are a part. The beehive exemplifies this idea. Recently, I discovered how bees make decisions without a leader. When a new queen is needed, many bees search for locations and return to share their findings. Instead of a single decision-maker, a decentralized voting system occurs bees advocating for a site are circled by others, and the majority determines the hive’s new location through a dance ritual. Bees’ dance rituals show alternative communication, suggesting we can also learn to collaborate. There are many forms left to explore, with the body and arts playing crucial roles.

**Sigrid Gareis:**

I work alone because I don’t believe in consensus. If you have a group, then you have to find a consensus, and I don’t think that in the consensus decision, you find exciting work. Exciting work is in the extremes that you cut out if you have to agree with other people. (Frie Leysen)<sup>3</sup>

The “grande dame” of festival programming, the highly esteemed curator Frie Leysen, who died in 2020, surprises us with this very pointed statement. While working on this publication, I often imagined the rationales that could be used to counter her arguments and convince her of the importance of collective curation.

**Gwendolin Lehnerer:** Frey Leysen argues that seeking consensus can hinder extraordinary work, diluting creativity through compromise. For me, collective curation doesn't require consensus to be compelling. Engaging with diverse perspectives fosters creative processes. Marta Keil notes that collective curation is often misunderstood as conflict-free, yet it involves discomfort and power struggles. Simply including a group doesn't resolve issues; decisions remain exclusive, and conflicts emerge. Thus, collective curation embraces these challenges, leading to creative paths unattainable through solitary efforts. A feminist lens suggests that consensus can be radical, fostering solidarity among divergent voices. Ultimately, compelling work can stem from collaboration, as various perspectives can create unique avenues beyond individual curation.

### Nicole Haitzinger:

Dear Frie Leysen,

We didn't meet in person, yet your reputation remains strong, as shown by Sigrid's question in our editorial collective. Your generous curatorial work in Belgium and globally, along with your commitment to *DeSingel* and *Kunstenfestivaldesarts*, has significantly impacted the cultural memory of curating performative arts. However, your militancy for art—evidenced by the resignation from the *Wiener Festwochen* directorship—led to a certain intransigence, distancing you from others. You stated, "To play a decisive role today and in the future, the festival must rethink its vision and structure,"<sup>4</sup> emphasizing the need to leave established ways of thinking. Your frequent use of exclamation marks and the word "must" in interviews reflects this urgency. Ten years ago, you were right that the *Wiener Festwochen* needed to shift its approach, which it did by appointing Milo Rau as artistic director in 2023. In many ways, you have been ahead of your time while showing resilience regarding two aspects currently affecting our curatorial world amid multiple crises.

You resisted gender issues in this interview: "DM: Are gender politics and sexual discrimination still an issue for women in culture today?" "FL: I don't know. It's relevant if you think so. It never was for me. I never paid attention to it." Your radical rejection of art's social function: "Every artistic project must have a social aspect. I don't agree. An artistic project doesn't need to have a social function or impact. I refuse to defend art with social arguments." (ibid.)

I mention this in more detail because my arguments for collective curating focus on negotiation and recognition of dissent, rather than consensus. Even if you are not convinced by gender sensitivity and social practices in curating, curatorial colleagues could introduce these elements to diversify art institutions and festivals. This would signal the rehearsal of democracy, which is under threat. The interview title *Searching for the New Generation* might not seem like a small utopia. A constellation of collective curating could have allowed your radical curatorial perspective to constructively engage with the next generation's concerns. "C'était une femme extraordinaire, d'une très grande force, qui s'est toujours battue pour la création artistique" (She was an extraordinary woman, of great force, who always fought for artistic creation), said Daniel Blanga-Gubbay, one of your successors at the *Kunstenfestivaldesarts*, who respects your position yet embodies a later curatorial generation's model of co-curation.

**River Lin:** Artist-collectives are increasingly empowered by cultural institutions to challenge or transform existing frameworks in their events through curatorship, as seen with ruangrupa at *documenta fifteen*, Raqs Media Collective at the 2020 *Yokohama Triennale*, and (LA)HORDE at Ballet National de Marseille. Instead of viewing this as a mere alternative model, what does it mean for artists to assume institutional leadership and curatorship in a collective context? What new discourses and shifts does it introduce? How can artist-collective curators create new artist-led productions and influence arts ecosystems?

**Sigrid Gareis:** In the Western hemisphere, artist collectives that engage in curation have primarily emerged in the visual arts, while curatorial roles in theatre are generally a more recent development. Historically, institutionalized theatre has been predominantly led by individual artists in municipal theatres across Europe and, notably, artist-led institutions have been common in South America and Africa.

In Europe, the rise of curatorial roles in the performing arts strongly correlates with the internationalization of the sector in the late 20th century, characterized by a dense festival structure and independent production houses. As a result of this development, expertise has shifted from aesthetic and artistic issues to aspects of international knowledge, networking, and the increasing significance of art mediation and marketing.

Today, both artist-led and curator-led models coexist in European theatre. From my experience with artist-curators at Tanzquartier Wien—whom we systematically invited as a corrective to our curatorial work—I observed strong hospitality, collaborative efforts, greater artistic risk-taking, innovative formats, and the impact of friendship in curation. Each side gained valuable insights from this collaboration.

I appreciate the growing emphasis on collective leadership discussions in theatre a lot. My experiences have shown that blending curators and artists at the leadership level is an ideal approach for the future. This could effectively balance the risks associated with collectivity and responsibility while better addressing the challenges of our time.

**Nicole Haitzinger & River Lin:** Artistic collectives sharing curatorial roles in institutions and festivals represent a recent phenomenon in a globalized world, rooted in various historical precedents like modern European art academies and the 1930s Archives Internationales de la Danse, as well as the independent scene from the late 20th century. Unlike these past alliances, today's performative arts are envisioning new structures alongside queering practices. This includes exposing power dynamics, initiating institutional critiques, exploring entangled histories, demanding pluralization of the arts, and practicing hierarchical decentring. Our thesis here is that collectives composed primarily of artistic positionalities work on collective worldmaking. This means that a possible (art) world is imagined together and in unison, producing an identifiable artistic (and perhaps also aesthetic) signature. In contrast, transdisciplinary curatorial collectives, which are composed of people from professions close to the arts and, above all, from professions distant from the arts and labeled as such (from civil society, from political activism, from the health and welfare sector, from politics, from the climate protection and sustainability movement, from technology, from cosmic mediators such as “shamans”), are marked by the social and ethical relevance of a way of being together and of coordinated action in a world that is splitting apart. The two types of curatorial collectives cannot be clearly distinguished; the transitions are usually fluid: together they form a relational ecosystem that potentially makes not only the arts, but also our world(s) more livable

## Closing Remarks and Outlook on Behalf of the Editors

The exploration of collective curating has powerfully shown us, in its depth and complexity, how crucial it is to question and reshape the established power structures within the art world. In the contributions from our authors and co-editors, it becomes clear that collective processes are much more than creative collaborations—they are a powerful tool that interrelates ethical, political, and ecological dimensions, while also establishing “curating in ecosystems” as a sustainable approach.

The discussions in this issue highlight that collective curating is not merely a form of cooperation, but rather a way to address the most pressing issues of our time. It provides a means to bring social justice, ecological responsibility, and political engagement to the forefront, sparking meaningful change.

As editors, we are deeply convinced that collective curating will play a central role in the future of the art world. It offers the opportunity to create a more inclusive and just art landscape—one that faces the complex challenges of our present with courage and responsibility.

On behalf of the editors,

Sigrid Gareis, Nicole Haitzinger, Gwendolin Lehnerer, and River Lin

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## Notes

**1** M HKA LAAT, “Front Row with Amanda Piña. Artist Talk,” M HKA LAAT, November 28, 2024, 19:00–20:30, <https://www.muhka.be/en/activities/front-row-with-amanda-pina/>, accessed January 10, 2025.

**2** Biljana Tanurovska-Kjulavkovski. “In betwixt and between. The reality and the imagined” in *Always Contextualize. An Exercise in Curating Performing Arts*, ed. Ana Vujanović (Belgrade/Skopje: 2022), 37–56.

**3** Frie Leysen, “Searching for the Next Generation: Frie Leysen & the KunstenFESTIVAL,” interview by Daniel Mufson (2002), published at his blog, <https://danielmufson.com/interviews/searching-for-the-next-generation-frie-leysen-the-kunstenfestival/>, accessed December 8, 2024.

**4** See: “Frie Leysen,” *Profil*, July 7, 2014, <https://www.profil.at/gesellschaft/wiener-festwochen-frie-leysen-kritik-376577>.

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**Nicole Haitzinger** is a dance and theater scholar, professor at Paris-Lodron University Salzburg, and co-leader of the university course Curating in the Performing Arts. She curates and dramaturgs international projects.

**Gwendolin Lehnerer**, cultural and theatre scholar, is a research associate at the documenta Institute in Kassel and co-leader of the University Course *Curating in the Performing Arts*. She also works as a freelance dramaturg and curator in Vienna, Munich, and Berlin.

**River Lin** is a Paris-based Taiwanese artist working with live art, dance, and queer culture. He is Curator of the Taipei Arts Festival, Co-Curator of Indonesian Dance Festival, Guest-Curator of 2025 Lyon Dance Biennale and Co-Artistic Director of Something Great, Berlin.



# Songs for Curating

## Tracklist to support collective curatorial practice

Collective curating processes can be challenging - reflecting on communication, adjusting our language, finding our roles, embracing disagreement and practicing softness.

This poppy and Spotify-able collection reflects the various phases of collective curatorial practice, navigating hard cuts, ups, and downs. While the playlist is designed to support curators of performing arts who are working collectively, it may also resonate with others :)

The journey transitions from light, playful and dreamy tunes to driving and powerful pieces, ultimately landing on themes of hope, empowerment and vision. Some tracks carry a specific vibe, others deliver a message, a few can be enjoyed with a wink. And yes, there's a touch of kitsch here and there - enjoy!

Marie Heleen Samrotzki (she/her) is a Cologne-based artist, cultural producer, DJ, and selector, working between performance, sound, text, and criticism. With a background in the Freetekno and DIY scene, Marie thrives on musical exchange, embracing the belief that the only true system is a soundsystem. #samrotzkimarieheleen // <https://mariesamrotzki.net/>

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|--|--|
| 1. <i>Dream</i><br>"Snake Oil" - Glass Beams                             | 8. <i>Work</i><br>"Break of Dawn" - K-65                                       |
| 2. <i>Play</i><br>"El Chepe" - Vulfpeck                                  | 9. <i>Empowerment</i><br>"Fuck What They Want, We Are What They Need" - Gnucci |
| 3. <i>Embrace Excitement</i><br>"Embrace Euphoria" - Black Mountain      | 10. <i>Stay Positive</i><br>"Positive Energy Forever" - Mall Grab              |
| 4. <i>Create</i><br>"Creator" - Santigold, Freq Nasty, Switch            | 11. <i>Keep it Easy</i><br>"Until we meet again" - Hermanos Gutiérrez          |
| 5. <i>Breathe</i><br>"Breathe" - The Prodigy                             | 12. <i>Recollect</i><br>"Fragments of Time" - Daft Punk feat. Todd Edwards     |
| 6. <i>View</i><br>"Un camino mu largo" - BNS Posse                       | 13. <i>Grow</i><br>"Swinging Spathiphyllums" - Mort Garson                     |
| 7. <i>Question and Motivation</i><br>"Am I going Up?" - All Them Witches |  |

**Link to the playlist:**

[https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3hj2EFZ3H6n5gMkWXedLNI?si=Hk2fFIETTeKb\\_PwOEnCnpg](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3hj2EFZ3H6n5gMkWXedLNI?si=Hk2fFIETTeKb_PwOEnCnpg)



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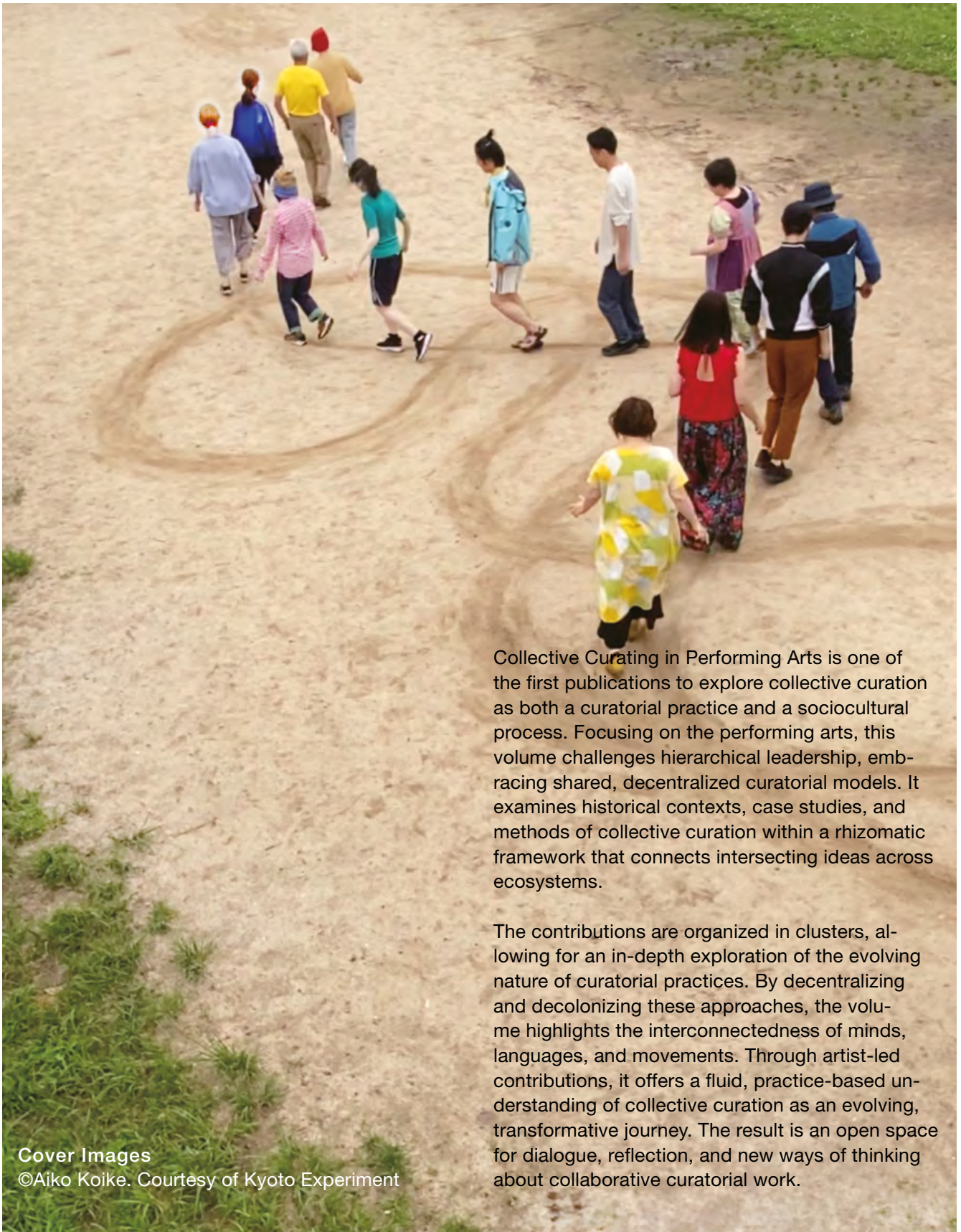
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Collective Curating in Performing Arts is one of the first publications to explore collective curation as both a curatorial practice and a sociocultural process. Focusing on the performing arts, this volume challenges hierarchical leadership, embracing shared, decentralized curatorial models. It examines historical contexts, case studies, and methods of collective curation within a rhizomatic framework that connects intersecting ideas across ecosystems.

The contributions are organized in clusters, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the evolving nature of curatorial practices. By decentralizing and decolonizing these approaches, the volume highlights the interconnectedness of minds, languages, and movements. Through artist-led contributions, it offers a fluid, practice-based understanding of collective curation as an evolving, transformative journey. The result is an open space for dialogue, reflection, and new ways of thinking about collaborative curatorial work.

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