



IETM REPORT

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RELOCALISING ARTISTIC PRACTICES

Report from the IETM Brussels Plenary Meeting, 23 – 26 November 2017

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Relocalising Artistic Practices

Through the professional experiences of five different arts and cultural agents, from different continents, states, fields and practices, the session tried to seek new opportunities to rethink the local outside the populist nationalistic paradigm and to reinvent the international without the unification of the globalised culture.

Fabienne Aucant and Olivier Grasser, Charleroi Danse, Brussels, Belgium, introduced the rationale of the session and the key concepts that could structure the discussion.

It might seem strange that IETM members, working on the EU level, supporting and fighting for international exchange and cooperation, artists, cultural workers and travellers, have to discuss the phenomenon of relocalising artistic practices. Why? Why does this topic emerge right now, what does it say about our times? Is it an economic matter? Is it a symptom of populist discourses or a pressure from cultural policies? Or on the contrary, is it a sincere and noble attempt to save and nourish cultural life? The issue reminds us to keep connected to our audiences and to our local reality. Maybe we have lost this contact lately... In the arts, disconnected internationalism is increasingly replaced by relocalisation policies. Is it enough to counter populist identity claims? Can it fill the gap between international artists and producers and those without an international background who feel excluded from the field of arts and culture which seems more internationalised than ever?

Internationalism promotes visions and collective actions beyond nationalism. It strengthens activism, ideas, social interest and values as well as the possibility to share them in an unexpected way. From one side, we can consider nationalism as a way to preserve cultural diversity, keeping in mind that it is possible to find a common ground amidst all the cultural differences. In that sense internationalism can be distinguished from cultural globalisation



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Moderators:

Fabienne Aucant, Production, Charleroi Danse, Brussels, Belgium,
Olivier Grasser, Secrétaire Général, Charleroi Danse, Brussels, Belgium

Speakers:

Steve Mayhew, Co-Director, Performance & Art Development Agency, Adelaide, Australia
Jozef Wouters, Decoratelier, Brussels, Belgium
Anne Watthee, Head of Audience Development, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Brussels, Belgium
Ramesh Meyyappan, Theatre Maker, Ramesh Meyyappan Productions, UK
Mi You, a Beijing-born curator, researcher, and academic staff at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne

Sign language interpreters: Sophie Jallen and Jo Ross

which is more related to the global market and cultural industries. We can also see internationalism as a sign of elitism, a privilege of the selected few and a new kind of consensus on their hegemony.

Relocalisation is a term that comes from economic and industrial field. The process of relocalisation occurs when enterprises find more benefits in relocating their activity to their own country. This strategy is chosen for rational reasons (such as profitability), rather than for idealistic or patriotic ones, because relocalising activities may increase quality and reactivity, and diminish transport and production costs.

What does relocalisation mean when culture and art are concerned? Is it related to a focus on and care for local territories and inhabitants, the local art scene, and audiences, a new policy to include and represent the people?

Based on the provided definitions, the speakers presented their practices as revolving around the concepts of local and international.

The local, the international and how to navigate the two environments

Steve Mayhew, a director, writer, designer, composer, dramaturge and creative producer based in Australia, shared how his "fascination with a global and local sensibility" began with his family travelling Europe and then relocating from Adelaide to a small town nearby and continued with his moving back to the big city in his late teen years.

Steve believed that his story could demonstrate what relocating means from an Australian perspective. Currently he has been living in Adelaide, which is located on the land of Karuma, First Nations people of Australia, existing there for about 60000 years. After 200 years of colonisation, now they are going through a process of reclaiming their language and culture. For Steve Mayhew, relocalisation of arts and culture in the Australian context is closely connected with the lengthy decolonisation process. As for his own artistic practice, local and international have always been interrelated.

1) Working locally with an international agenda.

In 2016 Steve and Country Arts SA completed a multi-art form project called This is a Border (Town) in Bordertown, a small town near the South Australian / Victorian state border which provided the perfect setting in name, size (approx. 3000 people) and location. They invited three artists to work in residence with three groups of people in the area; new Afghani arrivals (the just arrived), older retired men (the been around) and young people (the possibly leaving). Together, they explored the physical and psychological borders we as humans have to manage. A poster campaign was organised as a side public art project. The posters questioned who might be labelled as an Aussie. These posters were ripped off soon after their instalment around the town, also from the place in front of the library where most of the Afghani immigrants congregated to get free wifi to connect with their home.

2) How do we bring local topics to an international context?

In 2015 Steve led an Australian consortium of five organisations into partnership with 11 European countries and regional centres in preparation of a Creative Europe application. This experience outlined the challenges in setting up a common methodology of evaluating audience development and engagement, and triggered some questions around whether international cultural strategies and international cooperation among physically and culturally distant countries can be identified and promoted more broadly.

3) How to navigate the two environments?

The latest edition of the Australian Theatre Forum, a major gathering of theatre practitioners from all over the country, which Steve co-curated with first nations woman Alexis West, was focused on diversity. Since artists can be considered 'informal ambassadors' or 'cultural diplomats' as they tour, collaborate and exchange across borders and cultures, what values do they portray overseas? How do they foster shared cultural understandings when touring or undertaking diverse collaborations?

Those in attendance at the forum suggested implementing a cultural risk assessment of every project that could open space for questioning our values and finding our common grounds.

The ongoing process of decolonisation is important for contemporary Australia. It can aid everyone in understanding the codes of the Aboriginal cultures but also help them to rewrite entrenched and colonised ways of thinking and operating for the future.

How to relocalise your art practice when your work is inherently site specific

Jozef Wouters is a Belgian independent artist and scenographer who runs a place called Decoratelier in Molenbeek (Brussels) as a base for artistic projects. For Jozef, being local is the departure of his work.

Jozef aims to keep Decoratelier an open space; he tries to work with everybody: artists, students, local communities. "Decoratelier is a space that accommodates the various forms of collaboration and labour that is inherent in my work. ... It is a permanent place within the constructional quest for constantly changing spaces in which art, thought and artisans meet", he claims.

In terms of relocalising art practices, Jozef identifies Decoratelier as a way of transferring the international to a local level. The idea about this project came when Jozef was working with one of the big theatre institutions in Brussels, the internationally recognised KVS (The Brussels City Theatre).



What is a Real Aussie? - a project by the street artist Peter Drew ©Peter Drew

Instead of transforming it into something else, he decided to work with their classical building, its thick walls, high threshold and its 49 electrical flybars that can function individually. He took inspiration from all the craftsmen and theatre workers in the scenery studios and decided to set up an independent temporary association of craftsmen and artists with whom he would work on this project. Jozef divided the overall production budget into fifteen parts and invited fifteen scenographers to come up with their pieces in his working studio in Molenbeek.

That is how Decoratelier was established. The result of this collaboration was a four-hour show in which fifteen different scenographies, fifteen different negotiations, appeared and disappeared one after the other.

The project proved to be meaningful and viable, and since the beginning of 2017, [Decoratelier](#) relocated to its new place in Molenbeek, in an old factory building in the Brussels canal zone where the second biggest used cars market in the world is located. In 2018, Decoratelier will continue making site specific works with local and international artists and makers. For Jozef, it is crucial to make sure that all stakeholders are represented at Decoratelier and that they consider the place as theirs.

How to relocalise your art practice when your work is inherently international

Anne Watte, Head of Audience Development at [Kunstenfestivaldesarts](#) shared her experience in bringing the international on a local level.

Kunstenfestivaldesarts is an international arts festival dedicated to contemporary theatre, dance, performance, film, and visual arts both by Belgian and international artists. Trying to be a cosmopolitan city festival, the team behind it also endeavours to anchor locally by establishing long-term bonds with diverse groups of people within the city and involve them in the

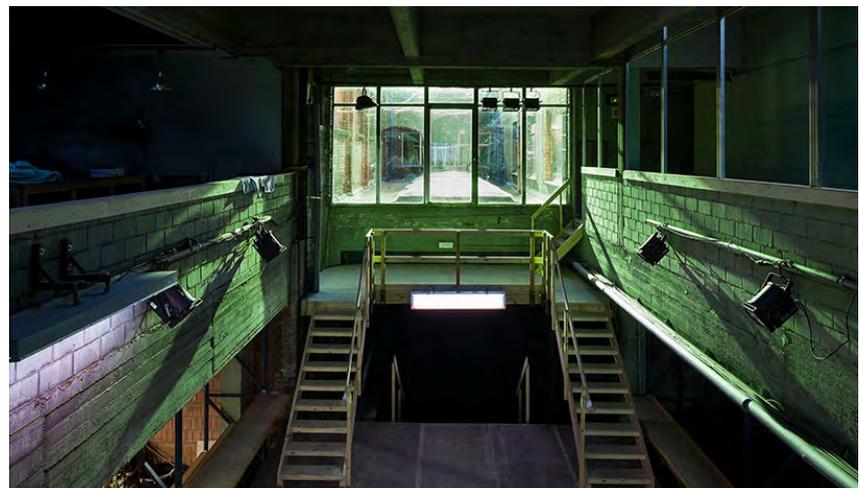
festival. They work towards achieving its (cultural) accessibility - for Dutch- and French-speaking communities, locals and immigrants. This ensures the economic viability of the festival, but it is not only about selling out tickets. More importantly, the international festival has to be made meaningful to the local audiences and to make them feel invited and represented.

To establish these long-term bonds with various communities is the core work of Anne as the responsible for audience development. To know them better, she goes to those groups, and being an outsider there, she always relies on a local key figure who could introduce her to the community and help her to understand and address the specific audience group.

A successful example of such cooperation is the [Chicago-Kunstenfestivaldesarts Project](#), 6 years of collaboration between the festival and a local Youth House in the city of Brussels. The young people from Chicago choose seven performances of the festival, meet the artists and make videos about their experiences. The project was initiated by a dramaturg of the festival who also volunteered at the Youth House, i.e. an 'insider', someone the youngsters know and trust. Anne presented a short film about Chicago-Kunstenfestivaldesarts Project. It featured Mustafa, an insider at the Youth House who had participated in the first editions and now is helping with the organisation of the project activities.

For Anne Watte, the most important lesson from these endeavours to establish long-term bonds with various communities is that if you want to work with them, you have to let them influence your work. "If you invite the youngsters from Chicago Youth House to a performance you have to accept that they would be noisy and they would probably bring popcorn along." Be sensitive to their way of communication and their culture. For example, now [Kunstenfestivaldesarts](#) takes in account Ramadan when programming the festival. It takes time and commitment to establish a bond of trust and confidence. It is not an easy task to build audiences on a local level and in specific communities, Anne admitted. It is far less supported by the cultural funds than bringing international artists or going out to international audiences. But it is definitely worth it. Now, the youngsters from Chicago Youth House have started organising their own festival.

Participatory projects, involving (non-professional) locals, are another form of collaborating with local communities. Anne gave several examples from her practice at the [Kunstenfestivaldesarts](#): Within by Tarek Atoui (2017), Composite by Tetsuya Umeda (2017), Le Moindre Geste by Selma & Sofiane Ouissi (2017), Guerrilla by El Conde de Torreñel (2016), Les marches de la Bourse by Anna Rispoli (2015), Gala by Jérôme Bel (2015), etc.



Inside the new venue of Decoratelier © Jozef Wouters

“I can only encourage the fact that more and more artists are interested in locally anchoring their practices and work,” she said, “as long as their goal is a real encounter/exchange.” She shared the conviction that it is necessary to confront local audiences with international work; and vice versa. “But in order for this to work, this should be a two-way street, to the extent possible.”

The changing perceptions of the local and international

Ramesh Meyyappan, independent theatre maker, considers himself as a kind of internationalist and jokes that wherever he lays his hat is what he calls ‘home’. That would be a shared situation for many independent artists whose work is touring internationally most of the time and who identify themselves as global nomads. However, Ramesh insists on having a strong cultural identity: “I identify myself as deaf but I’m an Indian Singaporean, whose family are fairly traditionally Indian in their outlook. Yet, I have for the past 10 years found myself ‘settled’ in Glasgow. And so the question about what is local and what is global resonates with me often.”

Being a deaf performer confronted Ramesh with the necessity to create work for himself, work based on his own rules, because he would hardly fit in most of the concepts available. He developed a [visual theatre vocabulary](#), a mix of visual and physical theatre styles which came out as universally understandable. Evading verbal language as the medium of sense and developing language that could be accessible to all surely eased showing his work on the international scene.

Ramesh discovered that the themes on which he works had to resonate with the local audiences. He began to understand that local issues could be quite equally global and that stories about families, grief, loss, love, universal human emotions can be related to by folk from many walks of life, backgrounds and cultures – because we could relate to being human. He had noticed that local stories have the potential for a global appeal. Nonetheless, there



Ramesh Meyyappan in *Off Kilter*, 2017

is a limit, and a story that is too local and specific can be less interesting for ‘outsider’ audiences. Therefore, Ramesh does not stage work on the topic of deafness. First, he believes it is not of interest to theatre audiences and secondly, he is aware that such type of performances could provoke patronising reactions.

Recently Ramesh got involved in a project with a local group of Singaporeans, the [Singapore D Monologues](#), an international collaboration between UK-based and Singaporean artists. The process involved listening to a specific group of Singaporeans who see themselves as being marginalised due to a disability. Their stories formed the basis of a script written by a UK resident. The script is then to be used to develop a piece of theatre. Albeit pleasing and intriguing, the project raised some questions for Ramesh. Why are UK artists needed to support this or why the Singapore stories can’t be told by the Singaporeans themselves? Who is benefitting from this? “I don’t know what the Singaporeans, whose voices we are supposed to represent, have gotten from the process – ‘international collaboration’ looks good on paper but I do think there needs to be closer scrutiny at funding applications to examine what key stakeholders gain from the process,” stated Ramesh.

Certainly, it is a good idea to have a different voice to tell the story. Also, paying audiences might prefer to see the work of

an internationally renowned artist rather than to pay for ‘amateur art’. Or it might be they want a representative voice to share their stories, perhaps feeling they lack the skill or confidence to do for themselves. In any case, the influence of the storytellers is great, and this process requires respect and responsible attitude. There has got to be empathy, shared understanding, and honesty in what is presented.

So what happens when an artist travels and works in so many different places? Ramesh shared that whenever he felt connected with his various audiences through empathy it gave him the reason to think of himself as an ‘internationalist’. And when at home, in Glasgow, he is influenced by the culture, the people and the place. This inevitably feeds into his work.

Beyond the concepts of local and international

Mi You summarised the topics presented so far as being below (working with local communities) and above (working on international collaborations) the level of the nation. As someone who teaches and does research in the field of politics and history, culture and history, as well as works as a curator and a dramaturg, Mi You assumed she would add to the discussion a slightly different dimension. She made a quick review of the current state of the concepts of local, national and international from the viewpoint of her research field.

She broadened the context of working on the local level by reminding that a lot of work with local communities is going on outside artistic practices too. Also, in terms of politics, many organisations on the EU level work with local municipalities and thus navigate beyond the boundaries of the national states. The nation state is obviously in a situation of crisis, but on the level beyond nations, there have been difficulties too. There is the idea of internationalism as a common struggle, but still, there are questions how we function at a level of international solidarity.

A recuperation of the intellectual left is being noticed, but at the same time, the intellectual left is also experiencing a crisis. For example, many of its techniques as decolonial thinking, postcolonial thinking, constructing new identities, denationalisation are being used and distorted by the far right. Today we can observe groups of right wing white males claiming they have become the oppressed minority, by appropriating the rhetoric of the minority movements.

For Mi You, another problem with the intellectual left postcolonial theory is that there is a tendency of reducing the problems to cultural specifics, the outdated concept of the Enlightened Europe versus the rest of the world, while it is actually about class and the concrete material conditions in which people exist. For instance, Indian workers are presented as devoted god worshipers who live in a different temporality and who therefore do not need the same form of liberation as the workers in the West.

In her research report *The Nomad, Space and Network of the Silk Roads* and the parallel curatorial series of performative programmes, *Transgression and Syncretism*, at the Asian Culture Center Theater in Gwangju, South Korea, and at the inaugural Ulaanbaatar International Media Art Festival, Mongolia (2016), Mi You suggested an alternative paradigm that explored decentralised network and nomadic thinking as a methodology. Taking the trade routes known as the 'Silk Road' as a figuration of thinking, the research project rethinks the concept of space not

just as a "three-dimensional container of activities" and the concept of time as being something else apart from a "dimension added to space". Silk Road as a series of historical trade routes connecting East Asia and Europe through Greater Central Asia is perceived as a contemporary political-economical metaphor for the huge transnational infrastructural projects of today. The Silk Road functioned as a decentralised network connecting nodal towns, yet the flow of ideas and artistic forms resulted in "the most syncretic visual, cultural, linguistic and religious practices and is still to be seen to date". Thus the concept of the decentralised network undermines the relatively new (dating from the 19 century) notion of the nation as unity of territory, language, ethnic identity and common history.

The figure of the nomad, as a figuration of rethinking identity and updating the question of diaspora, can help to rethink identity as a situational and non-essential category, Mi You asserted. That could be more viable in today's contemporary society, where we still live in nation states while they have been multiethnic and multilingual for quite some time.

Discussion

The discussion raised several topical questions. A concern for *fetishisation* of the local has been raised. Indeed, there is a tendency of the local going hype on a superficial level. As Jozef Wouters noted, he is invited to

talks more often than the interested people actually come to Decoratelier.

A question about the memory of the places has been raised. The changing demography of the neighbourhoods means discontinuation of memory. Is bringing the history of the area, of the people who lived there useful? – Mi You emphasised that it is a question of how far we should go back in history and on what level: because 200 years ago none of the current nations existed. Steve Mayhew recalled his experience watching "Art + Soul" TV art history series of First Nations people in Australia: "It is like travelling in time, time that is not linear, however, but circular."

Another shared concern was that 'local' art does not seem as attractive for funders as 'international'. There is still a divide in cultural creation and consumption. Still, various groups of people are excluded with no access to funding or no opportunities to attend arts and culture. In addition, 'international' is elitist and further groups are being excluded. To counteract this negative trait, Anne Watthee insisted that long-term bonds with local audiences and empowerment for those communities should be supported by the arts and culture agents.



The ingenuity of underground waterway and irrigation system in dry lands spread all over Central Asia. © Mi You