



IETM REPORT

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ART AND CIVIC MOVEMENTS

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

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Art and Civic Movements

Each panelist had an experience in engaging with civic movements: some from recent years, others – for decades, some on a local level, others on an international one; some as outsiders, some – as insiders. Leen Laconte, the moderator, represents a ‘syndicalist’ professional arts organisation. Jean-Marc Adolphe shared his activist experience as a cultural practitioner but also, as a citizen. Thomas Eder spoke about the work of a Berlin-based collective of artists-activists. Hulya Ertas introduced the figure of the artist as expert/facilitator of civic initiatives. Kelly Diapouli claimed that being a cultural manager in Greece is already a kind of activism. Nick Millett from Elapse claimed that asking questions, which is the essence of art, already initiates political effects in the society.

Leen Laconte, is the director of [Overleg Kunstenorganisaties \(oKo\)](#). oKo is a network of over 200 members, professional arts organisations in Flanders and Brussels involved in the creation, production, distribution, participation and/or the support of arts. The main objectives of the network are advocating for the arts sector and influencing art policies mostly on the national level. Decision making at the oKo-network follows the “one member – one vote” principle and together, the members work to strengthen the independent position of the art sector and to secure “decent working and employment conditions, good art policy and a favourable social climate”.

Jean-Marc Adolphe has been in art and activism “for decades”. A journalist, essayist and director of artistic and cultural projects, he is also the founder (and the former editor in-chief) of the interdisciplinary cultural magazine [Movement](#). For many years he has been writing about politics, civic movements, the commons, public spaces, urbanism, as well as about arts, dance and theatre; all that along with his active participation in civic movements as a ‘regular citizen’.



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Moderator:

Leen Laconte, Director, Overleg Kunstenorganisaties (oKo), Belgium

Speakers:

Thomas Eder, LAFT Berlin - Landesverband Freie Darstellende Künste Berlin, International Cooperations - Berlin Performing Arts Festival, Germany

Nick Millett, Artistic Director – Elapse, France

Kelly Diapouli, Co-ordinator – Busart, Greece

Jean-Marc Adolphe, Director and chief editor – Mouvement, France

Hulya Ertas – Civicwise international network

Thomas Eder, in parallel to his engagement with [LAFT Berlin](#), [Berlin Performing Arts Festival](#), and the volunteer group around [Berlin Diagonale](#), takes part in „die Vielen“ (“the many”), an association of artists engaged with political activism. They serve as a platform for anyone in the art sector - artists, directors, dramaturgs, producers, to take a position and stand for it. “Our group is a place for expression where everyone can become a political human being”, Thomas Eder explained.

Hulya Ertas is an architect, journalist and researcher in the field of urbanism and how architecture influences the daily life, role of the architect, and social design. She is part of [Civicwise](#), a global network of 40 full

active members and more than 400 people networked in dozens of cities all around the world: architects, designers, urban planners, economists, graphic designers. It promotes “citizen engagement, developing concrete actions and projects based on collective intelligence, civic innovation and open design” by organising ‘glocal camps’ in various cities to share expertise and to support local civic/public space initiatives. Civicwise’s nodes are Barcelona, Valencia, the Canary islands, Paris, London, Mexico City. Hulya is a member of Barcelona Civicwise network.

Kelly Diapouli is the founder and director of [Busart](#), an independent organisation connecting Greek artists with the

international art scene. Arts and cultural professionals often do not get paid for their work, they do not receive social security benefits, so “being an artist in Greece is already a civic action”, Kelly pledged. Even some established project, for instance like the European Capital of Culture, can convey the potential of a civic movement. In that relation Kelly Diapouli cited her experience in winning the ECOC’s title for Elefsina. Elefsina is an industrial city, a working class area with not much in common with the stereotypical touristic image of Greece. Many of the projects envisaged by Elefsina 2021 are based on citizen participation.

Nick Millett is the artistic director of ELAPSE, an arts organisation engaged with new technologies, performance art, physical theatre, playwriting, street arts. Nick assumed his work can cause political effects, even when he does not make it so on purpose. “Basically, my job is to question; and I ask questions as an outsider (to the field)”, Nick summarised. Often his works question the concept of identity; the identity politics as well. One of his current engagements is an interdisciplinary cooperative project within the Creative Europe programme. The project is aimed to explore and examine how technology intervenes in the today’s process of determining the truth. It is designed as a participatory experience in which the spectator becomes a researcher. This project poses further questions on what is participation, what political effects art can have, how the identity of art is being changed and what the arts identity could actually be.

The changing role of the artist

The session’s announcement in the IETM Brussels programme (see the text on the right) served as a departure point to investigate if and how today’s artists relate to the world.

Today’s art is ‘polyidentical’. This openness to multiple identities could keep it from degrading to being instrumental, especially for political purposes, and surely opens up new artistic fields, but it puts some strain upon artists. “How many artists

feel the urge to get a PhD degree today? This professionalisation, academisation, corporatisation processes can both erode art’s identity and reinforce it. Also, there is the issue of branding: are we branding ourselves, have we become corporate? Which is the community, the ‘club’ that we as artists would be happy to belong to? Aren’t we striving to belong to a club that has no members in it?” – these Nick Millet posed these and other questions, taking provocation from the statement that “today’s artists have lost the will to question the world as outsiders” and claiming that his artistic practice is all about asking questions as an outsider.

On the contrary, Hulya Ertas suggested that feeling / acting as an outsider to the world borders with a personality disorder and could hardly be a sustainable practice. Someone else added that artists bear a responsibility for the changes their art might cause. There was also a suggestion that may be artists should involve in the situation before a conflict / trauma is taking place, while for now, the typical case is that artists reflect on the events after they have happened.

A participant reminded that art, the way it is created and perceived, is a matter of education, and education instils the existing culture. So what is important is how art functions in a non-systemic way in an existing system.

Art and civic movements

Today’s artists have lost the will to question the world as outsiders. Instead, they have a deeper desire to become components of civic movements, reconnect with the population and contribute to changing societies. On the flip side, an increasing number of activist movements promote and relay their causes by working with artists. Do the arts have a new mission? In this session, we will explore the tensions between the artist as both a romantic outsider and an activist insider.

The act of questioning itself was also brought into question in the course of the discussion. “What is the difference between art as fundamental research and investigative journalism?” Leen Laconte provoked the participants. For Thomas Edder, art is there to question routines. If the audience gets engaged and re-thinks these routines, a place for change opens up.

For Nick Millet, art reinvents reality and it can be a place to experience the future. Someone else added that questioning things can be done in a positive way by inviting people to dream about what kind of life we want. Art lets us create and try out realities. “We need to build and be a part of the new building.”

Art and activism between the left and the right populisms

We should start with the stipulation that civic movements can easily get political even without being primary intended so. Presumably, the same applies to art as a form of questioning the world. When this constant questioning resonates with the audiences, it can foster a will for change – thus causing political effects regardless of the primary intentions of the creators. We should also take into account that the link between that questioning and a political statement is not necessarily direct. There is a whole spectrum of intentions and expressions between making clear political statements with one’s art and making art ‘for art’s sake’.

Many civic movements start with a genuine feeling of anger and the will to protest and to stand against a certain threat. What happens when the danger disappears, how to make sure people with different political views stay together? It is a process no one can predict. While the situation develops, people project their political views on the statements they make, and inevitably one or another political stance gets prevalence in the movement¹. This might estrange those who have different views. Art and artists’ involvement in civic movements

¹ It was noted that usually, civic movements are considered as initiatives of the left political spectrum.

trigger the process of becoming political, i.e. becoming involved in social, economic, ecological, political problems, but should not have the aim to maintain or guide the process of politisation. Of course, there are attempts both from the political left and right to make art instrumental to their purposes. The participants were explicit that this should be resisted. "Let the artist invent their form of involvement", Nick Millet pleaded.

The urge to guard art's independency and the will to critically question the world against turning art into propaganda opened up the question whether art can fight populism. "No, not at all" was the sad conclusion in a world where the presumably privileged majorities claim they feel oppressed, as if they are foreigners in their own countries². What art can do instead is to fuel some energy into the public space as grounds for critical debate and to foster wider participation in it. As Hulya Ertas remarked, cities are obliged to offer opportunities for civic participation in decision making but most often it is a "false participation" which is not inclusive to all sorts of citizens. Another suggestion for a way of art's engagement into civic movements without getting tangled into left or right populism was to look for rational people with constructive ideas, not for causes to oppose against. "We are supposed to be the clever crowd, aren't we?" – these words illustrate the dubiety of the proposition.

Art activism and funding

There are so many places in the world where engaging with activism poses serious threats to artist's career, freedom or even life. Yet, democracy also has its mechanisms to exercise pressure over those artists who take part in civic movements. For Jean-Marc Adolphe, the whole concept of Creative Europe imposes the neo-liberal paradigm forcing artists to compete in creativity as if creativity could be measured. The constant tension between institutions and artists escalates in situations of art activism. "Things are happening in the streets and institutions don't like streets, simple as that", Nick Millet

concluded. All this might result in reduced funding or any additional impediments for the artists. Kelly Diapouli added that the threat of financial censorship is even greater with private funding bodies where the principal decides what to fund and when to cease the funding. This can lead to the gravest danger for an artist – to comply with self-censorship.

On the other side, no less important is the question whose money we take to make art. How do we deal with today's US politics and Trump, with Brexit or with the rise to power of far right parties across Europe³? We cannot claim to be innocent and naïve about where our funding comes from, especially if the political stance of the source is in contradiction with our art activism. Indeed, we, today's people, handle multiple identities but maybe we should assume we are citizens first and then, artists, doctors, architects and so on, someone insisted.

Inevitably, when you apply for funding or when you take part in a civic movement, you are asked to respond to certain agendas. Artists are responsible for maintaining the independence of their art. Democracy is not lost. Art is not lost. There are constant negotiations, and the status quo is constantly being questioned. As a last point in the heated discussion, someone asked: "Where would be the place to be idealistic if not in the arts?"

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An actual example of art activism call for action was the appeal of Kelly Diapouli to respond to the fact that five UK cities were excluded from the European Capital of Culture network due to Brexit. "It is a decision that attacks primary the cultural professionals, not the UK government. Why don't we do something? We used to be more active before," Kelly appealed to the IETM community to take the chance of being in Brussels and march in support of UK cultural professionals. On the whole, the participants seemed hesitant to respond to the appeal. Some voiced the opinion that everyone loses from Brexit and there is no ground to support cultural workers but not agricultural ones, for instance. Other participants reminded that Brexit is a result of a democratic vote and everything that happens now is a consequence of what the majority decided. To that, someone responded there are precedents of repeating a referendum in case it becomes clear the majority was not aware with the consequences of their vote.

² Someone mentioned a US survey which revealed that the majority of pro-Trump voters are white, men, undereducated, unemployed, stating they feel being oppressed.

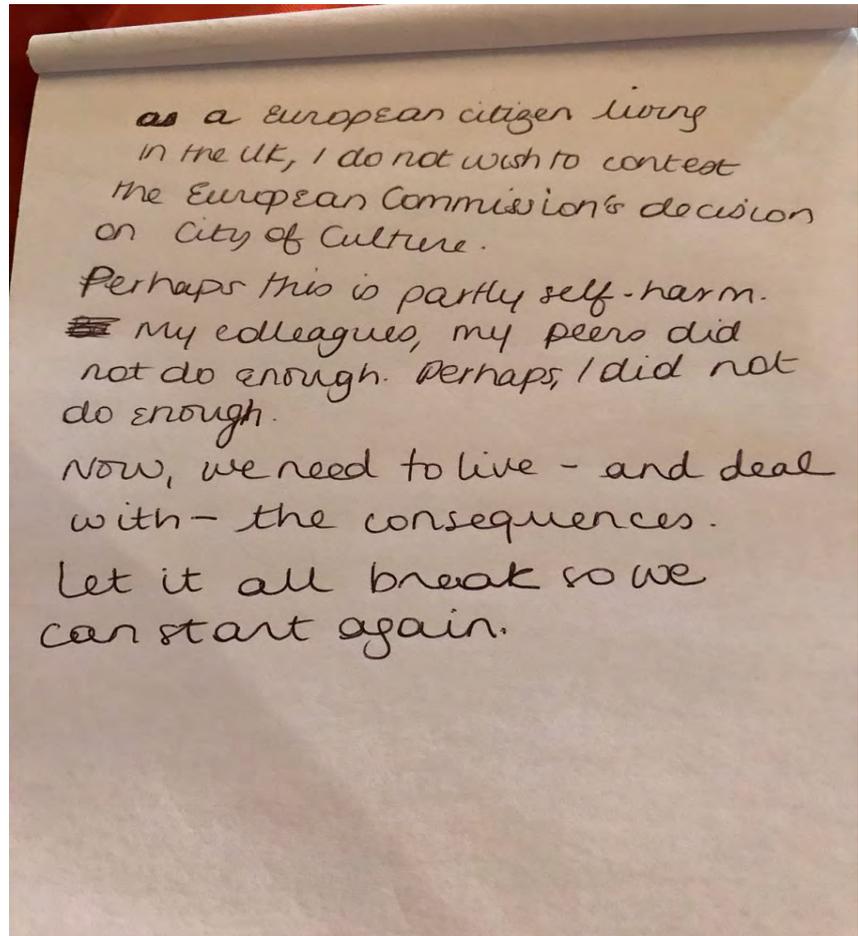
³ Although it seemed their representatives lacked in the discussion, it was made clear that right-wing artists and right-wing audiences have their place in the art activism spectrum.



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The pragmatic voices of the UK representatives asking for patience since the final outcome was not clear yet, with the bidding cities not having issued their official response and some official letters still under preparation, seemed to sooth the matter for that moment⁴.

Looking into the Twitter streaming from the session one can see that when it comes to art and activism, and critical questioning, the outsider vs. insider distinction is hardly applicable...



[Leo Burtin on Twitter](#)