REWIRING THE NETWORK (FOR THE TWENTIES)

SUMMARY - Resetting the agenda for IETM

Photo: Markus Spiske

The performing arts have been going through some rough weather in recent years. Through Rewiring the Network, the members of IETM went on a journey to collectively engage in envisioning a transition into a more sustainable future for the performing arts. The purpose: strengthening our practice through knowledge exchange. But, as society is changing, the network can only achieve this purpose if it stays fresh and relevant. Facilitated by IDEA Consult, IETM members took the whole year 2020 to find it out. Throughout the Rewiring trajectory, we have been sharing learnings and insights in several ways, via a series of blog posts, an intermediary publication, a series of working papers and a final report which synthesises the main outcomes of the trajectory. The text you are reading now, is a brief recap of the main insights and learnings from the trajectory. Why did we start networking internationally in the first place? What are the current pressures on our work? What could a more sustainable future practice look like? And what role can IETM play in advancing this transition?
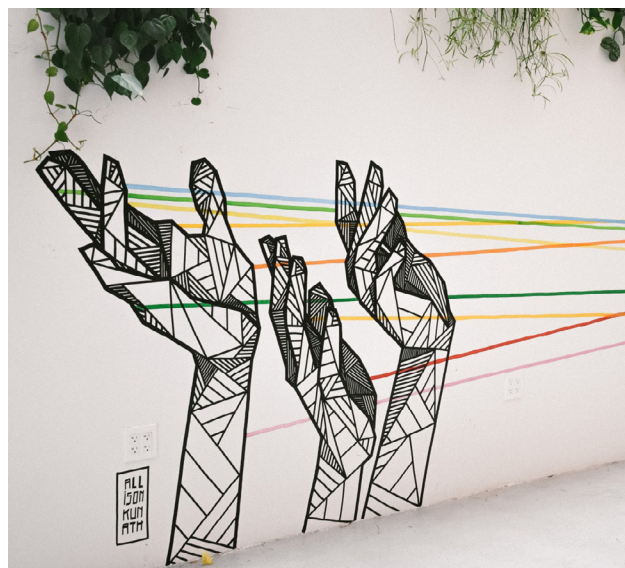

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WHY DID WE START NETWORKING INTERNATIONALLY?

Today, IETM is a "membership organisation which exists to stimulate the quality, development and the context of contemporary performing arts." Currently, the network has approximately 500 members in more than 50 countries. They come from all sub-disciplines within the performing arts and take up all functions in the ecosystem. This is quite different from the origins. Initially, IETM was short for "Informal European Theatre Meeting". The idea of creating an 'informal European theatre meeting' was born in the summer of 1981, in Polverigi, a small village in Central Italy. On a summer night in 1981, some of the directors of festivals, alternative spaces and supporting organisations conceived the idea of organising regular meetings to talk about the development of their different projects. They did so in a context where 'official' international collaboration was very much driven by governmental bodies for cultural diplomacy, where the international performing arts landscape at that moment was dominated by large festivals. Also, there was a tangible division between Western and Eastern parts of Europe, which mounted after the Second World War. In predigital times, the pioneers of international networking organised networking meetings not only to strengthen alternative venues and festivals in their countries. Looking back on the early days of international cultural networking, one might identify the following five promises of international networking for the performing arts:

- Stimulating international mobility throughout the whole of Europe, beyond the borders of East and West.

- Creating opportunities for artists, not only touring of productions but also longer-term relationships between artists and venues.

- Developing production capacity, by not only exchanging knowledge but also by pooling co-production resources.

- Developing public support and policies for contemporary performing arts.

- Democratisation of contemporary performing arts, by creating the right context for presentation.

Forty years later, it is safe to say that the networking led to major achievements. For instance, all this international networking did have a decisive and prolific impact on the development of innovative performing arts initiatives across Europe. The network grew. Emerging European cultural networks also cooperated for advocacy initiatives. In the slipstream of the fall of the Berlin Wall, they put this promise of international mobility and cultural exchange between the East and the West into practice. International networking was beneficial for connecting artists and venues on either side of the former Iron Curtain.

WHAT ARE THE CURRENT PRESSURES ON OUR WORK?

International performing arts networking was quite successful, but at a certain moment major shifts happened. 2010 might be a pivotal point. After the near collapse of the global financial system after 2008, most European countries cut their budgets for contemporary performing arts. This put severe pressure on the collaborative practices in our transnational production and presentation systems. Other major societal shifts marked the last decade. The impact of human behaviour on the environment and our increasing awareness of the climate emergency. Also, there have been worrying (geo-)political developments in Europe and beyond. For a long time, the idea of European integration was our major narrative, and the performing arts have also played an essential role in this story. But as the Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev argued in his essay *After Europe* [1], since a couple of years, the idea and possibility of European disintegration have been gaining ground, with Brexit coming into place, the rise of Eurosceptic parties everywhere and the democratic election of illiberal parties.

The co-creative Rewiring exercise shed light on a number of issues, which ultimately 'devalue' the manifold values of the performing arts. Of course, we're not only talking about the economic value of the performing arts, but first and foremost its intrinsic artistic value, next to the social, human and ecological ones. These five forms of value are the same spots where interesting experiments can be situated. Precisely because the pressures are mounting, artists and arts organisations are developing alternative practices in order to create the right conditions to enhance the artistic, social, economic, ecological and human value of the performing arts.

[1] Krastev, I. (2020). *After Europe* (Updated Edition). University of Pennsylvania Press.

Photo: Ahmad Odeh

- **Artistic value**. A lot of people raised the issue that the conditions in which they create and produce have a negative effect on the artistic value of the work, for instance, the sharp competition in the sector, leading to a blame game between the different parties involved in the creation, production and presentation.

- **Human value**. Bad working conditions and unequal access to training and education are major issues. Strikingly, we received not that many examples of alternative models strengthening wellbeing and the human fundament within the arts.

- Concerning the **social value** of the performing arts, the main issue seems to be a lack of inclusiveness. The working conditions in the sector, as well as certain prejudices in the art communities, conventional governance structures and lack of inclusiveness in programming play a major role in this.

- Concerning the **economic value**, there are a lot of issues with unsustainable funding models, with a.o. a lack of support for the independent scene and small-scale initiatives, lack of support for touring, issues with funding applications and - an overarching issue - a focus on ad hoc projects and a lack of long-term perspectives. There are a lot of concerns about unfair remuneration and the socio-economic position of independent artists and workers.

- Last there is a lot of worry and concern about **ecologically** unsustainable practices in the arts, which have a negative impact on our natural resources: the limited ecological awareness in the sector, concerns about travelling and touring and the use of materials and energy.

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WHAT COULD A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE PRACTICE LOOK LIKE?

'Rewiring' does not stop by mapping major pressures and signals of hope. Essentially, it is about designing a shared vision of a preferred future and brainstorming about how to get there. We completed the X-curve image – designing the transition for the performing arts during a massive online brainstorm in May 2020. There we imagined a better future. The focus lied on envisaging more sustainable practices in the performing arts in 2040. What will we do, how will we work together? What will be the underlying values, guiding our work? In a nutshell, we need a transition for the performing arts on five levels: towards more sustainable practices which create the right conditions that foster the intrinsic artistic value of the work; which create the right conditions for artistic practices to also have a positive and demonstrable social impact; which respect the human values of all those participating in the ecosystem; which respect the broader ecologies the performing arts is part of; and which are based on economic practices which are sustainable over a longer period. To make this transition concrete, we broke it down in 20 building blocks – four for each of the five forms of value.
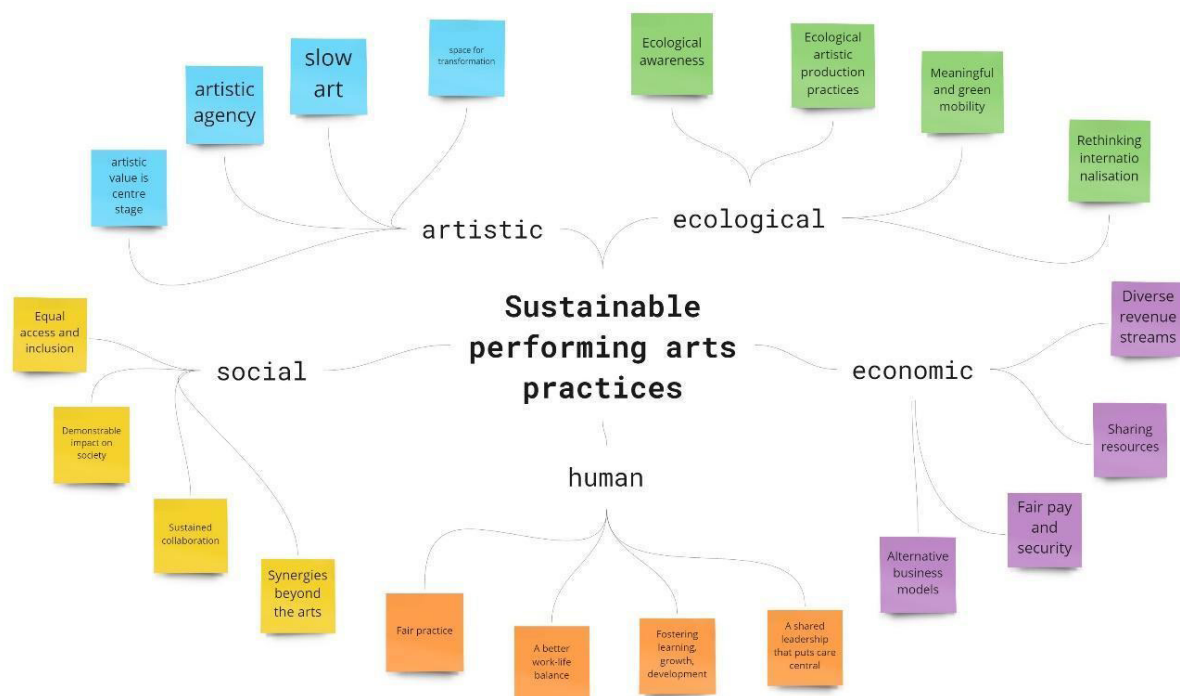
The human value

How to create a future where the human fundament of our sector is enhanced, in the face of the multiple pressures being put on individual artists and art workers?

- **Fair practice.** In a sustainable future for the performing arts, work relations are organised in a fair way. In the first place, this means that work in the arts - self-evidently including artistic work - is valued as labour, hence needs to be remunerated and to happen in a healthy work environment.

- **A shared leadership that puts care central.** A leader is someone who guards the common purpose and who allows all team members to thrive. They also create the conditions to allow this to happen. Leadership can be shared to empower team members, to unleash everyone's strengths and to include more diverse perspectives into the decision-making processes. Shared leadership will be a leitmotif in our future performing arts sector.

- **A better work-life balance.** In a sustainable future, human beings are not involuntarily pressured anymore into working processes that do not allow them to take up their roles as parents, as partners or as friends outside of the arts. This means that we recognise our partners-in-art as full human beings and create family-friendly conditions.

- **Fostering learning, growth and development for each**. Systems for the sharing of skills and know-how and of mentorship are set up. This not only responds to the basic human need of self-development, but also allows for more job mobility within the arts, but also towards different horizons. This way, the stories which are told on stage and by whom they are told, will resonate much better with the society at large.

Photo: Kyle Head

The social value

How to break out of our social bubbles and develop sustainable and long-term connections with people outside of our current networks?

- **Equal access and inclusion for diverse audiences.** In the future, one's social, economic or ethnic background, gender, skin colour or physical ability does not determine whether one can have access to the performing arts ecosystem or not. By fostering more diversity among artists and art workers, the stories which are told on stage will resonate much better with the society at large.

- **Demonstrable impact on society.** In 2040, we will have developed compelling discourses about this value and systems of knowledge development, data collection and social impact measurement, functioning in line with our core values. Therefore, the impact of our work will be more tangible and visible.

- **Collaboration is key.** To foster meaningful relations with different kinds of audiences, we will not only be coproducing, but also co-creating, co-programming, co-planning and co-governing and making decisions together. By 2040, we will have invested a lot in the development of inclusive practices and arts education and will have shaken up the basic value chain of production-presentation-participation.

- **Synergies beyond the arts.** The arts are not an island. By 2040 artists and art organisations have built self-evident connections with actors with e.g. primarily educational and social goals. There is more dialogue with external stakeholders like politicians, funders, NGOs, municipalities.

Artistic values

How to create a future in which the intrinsic artistic and cultural values are widely regarded and respected as factors for personal and societal development?

- **Artistic value is centre stage.** In 2040, artworks will not be instrumentalised. Their core contribution to society lies in their artistic value and the impact of art on social life, health, economy, etc., will be considered a consequence or by-product of this core artistic value. To unleash the full potential of the artistic value, the conditions in which an artwork or artistic practice comes about will be organised in line with the needs of that work.

- Keyword in this context is: **artistic agency**. In practice, this means that artists oversee the conditions in which they operate and that those conditions are tailored to the individual project or process. Consequently, artists will have a major role to play in institutional decision-making processes.

- **Slow art.** By 2040, the production machine will slow down and artists will not feel the constant pressure to be visible anymore. Periods of research will also allow for space to reflect and respond to broader cultural and social shifts in society: a core attribute of the arts.

- **Create space for transformation.** In 2040, artistic institutions will find ways to create spaces which are not pre-programmed and of which the-rules-of-the-game are not fully set. There, the cross-fertilisation and 'co-practices' will take shape. This will allow artistic forms to renew themselve. On the edges of the practice, art will continue challenging and reinventing itself.

Between these 20 building blocks there are also many connections and interrelations. This consistency has to do with the fact that they are informed by a set of shared values. Basically, *Rewiring the Network (for the Twenties)* is a story about fairness, solidarity, interconnectedness, diversity, equality and plurality, the fundamental belief in the value of the arts in a democratic society and our desire to make these values really guide our practice.

Photo: Alex Alvarez

The economic value

How to create a future in which the economic resources in our sector are fairly distributed, creating the proper conditions for all these other values to flourish? In 2040, how will we look at the economic value of the arts?

- **Alternative business models.** In 2040, actors within the performing arts will have developed new and more sustainable business models. In these models, cooperation is central, not competition or providing services. These new models function according to principles of slow art and degrowth.

- **Fair pay and security.** Work in the artistic sector is recognised as labour, hence receives a fair remuneration. Also, other economic transactions (fees for presentation, coproduction...) within the field correspond to everybody's contribution and needs. All artists and creative workers professionally active within the performing arts will be ensured a basic level of security.

- **Sharing resources.** In 2040, venues, resources and costs will be shared, in the context of a more sustainable 'economy of sharing'. Not all transactions need to be monetised. Systems for non-monetary exchanges – alternative currencies, common wallets, solidarity systems... - will be widely used and adapted.

- **Diverse revenue streams.** Sustainability is enhanced when one is not dependent on a single source of income. In 2040, synergies between local, regional, and national dimensions ensure broader and more comprehensive funding schemes. This has brought more resources into the arts but is also part of the larger interconnectedness between artistic players and the world in which they are embedded.
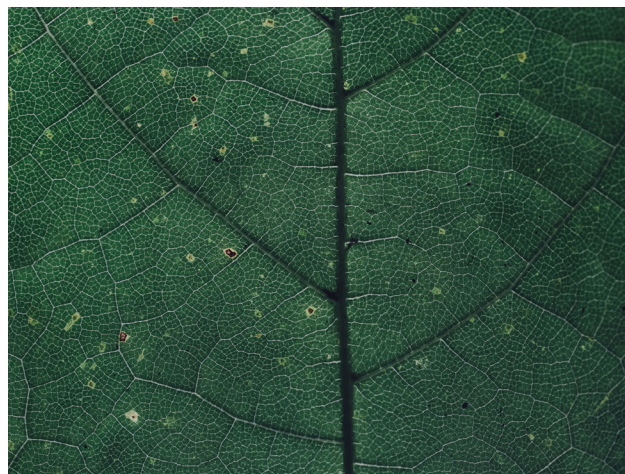

Photo: Markus Spiske

Ecological values

How to create a future in which the ecological impact of our work is respecting the boundaries of our natural ecosystem?

- **Ecological awareness.** By 2040, all actors within the ecosystem will be fully aware of the fact that all their activities are embedded in broader, planetary ecosystems and have an ecological impact. They will be able to self-assess this impact and reflect it in their behaviour and decisions. Environmentally friendly mobility will be valued more than large-scale and rapid mobility across the world.

- **Ecological artistic production practices.** Slowing down the cycle of creation, production and dissemination of performances will imply that we will produce only when it is urgent and meaningful. We will make every effort possible to use environmentally friendly materials and energy systems and recycle production materials.

- **Meaningful and green mobility.** Artists, programmers and arts workers will prioritise green mobility. Mobility will not be taken for granted. They will travel when it is meaningful. This implies different time frames and paces, allowing for a different connection to local audiences and valuing quality over quantity.

- **Rethinking internationalisation.** By 2040, we will have developed many ways to work within an international context, which will not necessarily require physical presence of the artist elsewhere. Long distance meetings will often be held online. We will value the international dimension of our local contexts and focus on the mobility of ideas, next to the mobility of live art.

WHAT FUTURE ROLE CAN IETM PLAY, IN ORDER TO ADVANCE THIS TRANSITION?

So here we are. We have mapped the current pressures on our work and we have scouted for promising alternative approaches. We have designed a transition for the performing arts on five levels – the artistic, the social, the human, the economic and the ecological – and we have broken this down into 20 more concrete building blocks which might allow us to go to work and start building the transition. But how to do so? Working on system change is always complex and the work of many hands. But what needs to be done, and who will do it? What could be the role of international networks, and IETM in particular? International networks are essentially multipliers. They have the leverage to contribute to our transition mainly through five roles: creating the urgency to change, facilitating the learning of new skills, setting direction, investing in experiments and connecting & collaborating.

Photo: Paul Green

- **Creating the urgency to change.** As a network, IETM is a multiplicator of practices. The way the network decides to develop and implement its actions will have a huge impact on the practice of hundreds of artists and organisations in joining these actions. Therefore, IETM is in an excellent position to create the urgency to change, also by leading by example.

- **The development of new skills and competences.** IETM has been a place for knowledge exchange since its inception. This is still the essence of the network. It should remain a platform that fosters the acquisition of new skills and ways of doing and accelerates skills development among members. The skills or areas of development will be instrumental to the transition we have imagined.

- **Setting the direction.** When a network 'sets the direction', this is not a top-down approach. It can create environments for the co-creation and development of a shared future vision, and goals for the transition. Obviously, this is what we have been doing in the Rewiring trajectory and needs to continue, in order to empower and inspire the members. Within a network, inspiration for change can circulate and gain energy.

- **Investing in experiments.** Transitions need investments in emerging practices. In the future, it can be discussed whether IETM should be one of the players investing in experiments with alternative practices. It can be argued this is not the core business of the network, and other instances – other networks or cross-border projects, artist initiatives,… - are better placed. But the innovations and experiments need to be multiplied and gain critical mass, in order to have an impact. Therefore, the role of IETM in connecting and making them more visible, is really essential and critical in the light of our transition.

- **Connecting and making visible.** Self-evidently, the core role of a network is to connect and collaborate. IETM can use its expertise and facilities to connect and collaborate with a focus on actors working on change, strengthening them, allowing for their exchange and making their learning processes and insights visible. IETM as a network also connects with other networks. With networks of funders, other fields or performing arts networks with different focuses or geographical delineations. IETM, as a network, can invest in creating evidence for the arts. IETM is ideally situated to lobby for, champion or promote values of the arts. It can lobby for new standards of funding, set priorities, engage stakeholders, push actors to think and act from the perspective of the arts.

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