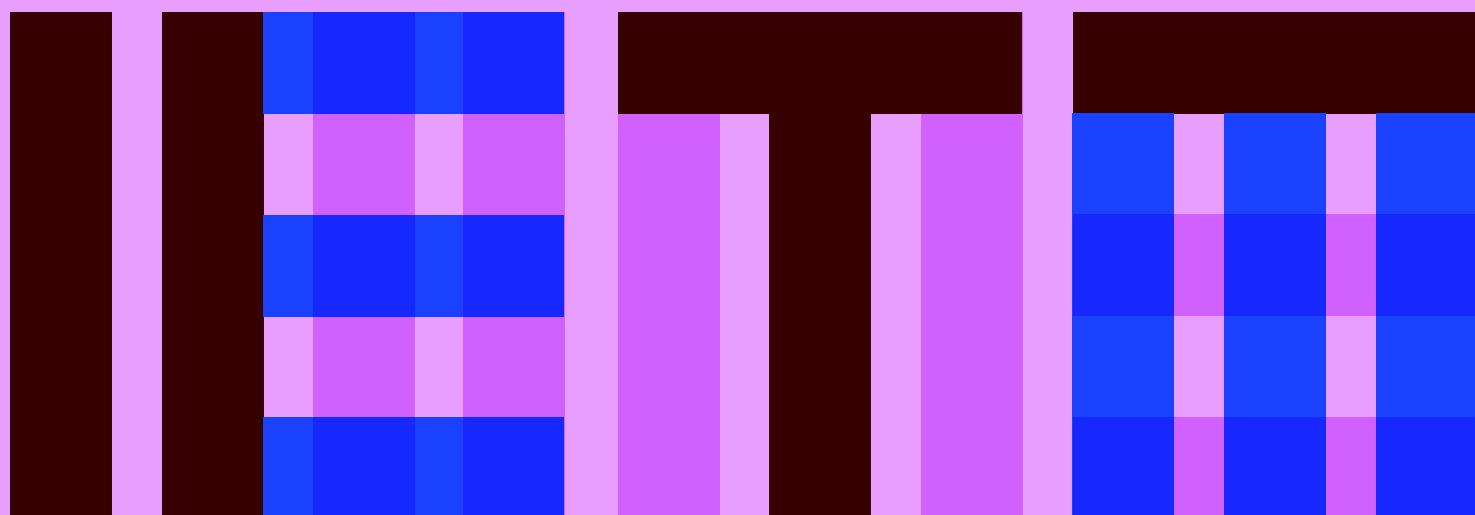


# Work & (in)stability

By Susanne Danig



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Work & (in)stability  
by Susanne Danig****Report from the IETM Belgrade  
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## Summary of the report

This session gave a sense of perspective about the dominant feeling of instability in the cultural sector, through stories and data analyses coming from different regions of the world. It examined the consequences of the “project-based” cultural economy as well as the pressures and transformations that the latter has brought to the field of artistic production.

The session also put forward a number of meaningful coping mechanisms for creating better working conditions, including keeping conversation open with policy makers and governments as well as artists' movement and collective action.

# Work & (in)stability

30.09.2022

BY SUSANNE DANIG

## Moderator:

Marijana Cvetković

STANICA (STATION) Centre For Contemporary Dance, Serbia

## Speakers:

Jaka Primorac

IRMO- Institute For Development and International Relations, Croatia

Danae Theodoridou

Performance Maker and Researcher, Belgium &amp; Greece

Sepehr Sharifzadeh

NH Theater Agency, Iran

Rodrigo Arenas

Artist and researcher - IETM Global Connector 2021-22, Guatemala (on video)

## Opening notes

*There can be no peace or stability for the arts and for cultural workers if we support a capitalist system that does not take care of the lives of its workers. The capitalist state cannot produce the working conditions - or cultural policies - that could improve the social and economical conditions of artists and cultural workers or that could bring them stability.*

*Working conditions are a global concern, and there are no decent working conditions for artists and cultural workers, neither in the Global South nor in the North.*

*As well as this, artists cannot ignore the conditions of workers in other fields.*

Indeed, what is left of the idea of cultural policies within the capitalist state? Does it even make sense anymore? Doesn't it only bring more harm by keeping the status quo?

**Marijana Cvetković, Manager of STANICA** opened the session by framing the discussion around the fundamentally problematic ruling of the neoliberal capitalist system over the arts sector and its relationship with the experienced instability of arts workers around the globe.

The aim of this session was to give a sense of perspective about the dominant feeling of instability in the cultural sector, through a diverse array of stories and data analyses, coming from different regions of the world. The reflection about the relationship between cultural work and the sense of stability of the sector (or lack thereof) was also explored through the consideration of fundamental political issues and their embodiment by the hazards encountered by cultural workers in their attempts of making critical art, while also trying to make a living in today's socio-economic reality.

With its interactive format, the session examined the consequences of the "project-based" cultural economy as well as the pressures and transformations that the latter has brought to the field of artistic production. It also articulated the struggles and roots of instability at a macro and micro-level, its effects on the discourse about arts workers and on how far the sector itself thinks outside of its own reality, whether in the dialogue with broader workers issues or with other expressions of precariousness, seen in different places around the world.



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## Evidence-based research shows a chronic state of emergency

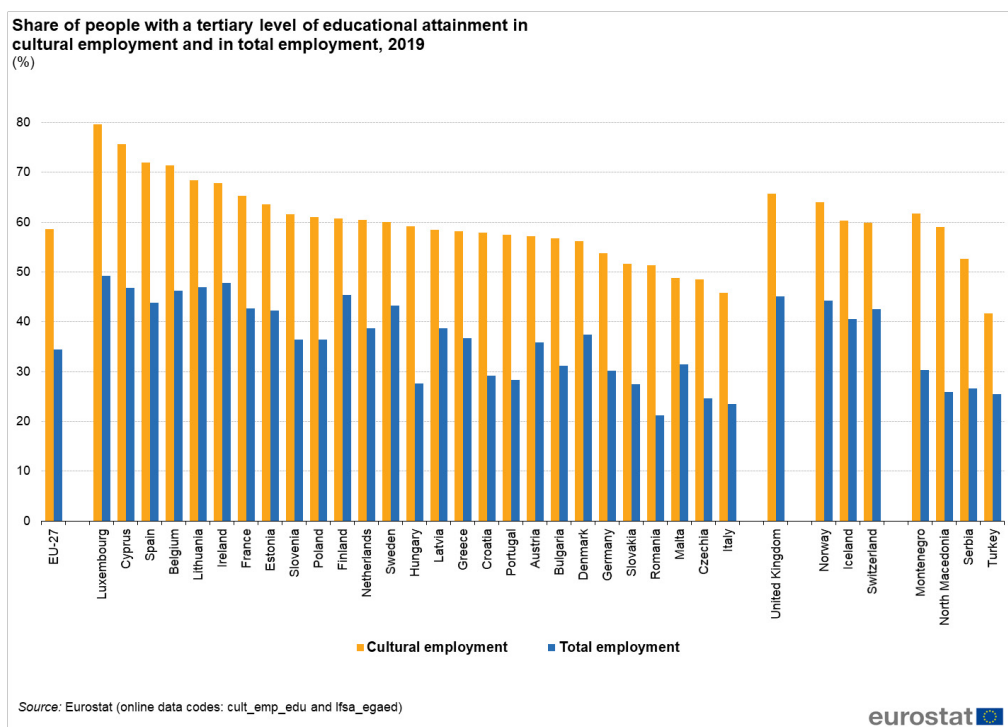
Moving away from the welfare state and socialists' states since the late 80s has affected the notion of cultural and artistic work, by imposing concepts such as cultural industries and projects onto the work of artists. As a result, this has led to the transformation of the organisation of arts and culture production, thus displacing artistic experimentation and research to the margins of independent scenes and to other hidden spaces.

In such an industrialisation process, the work of artists has had to specialise and to be reorganised in a more tradable format, obliging artists to adapt their work to the art market regime. This is how the explosion of arts residencies, educational programmes, seminars and conferences that we know nowadays has come to be.

The main problem identified was that there have been major economic and political changes without any adjustments made to the basic needs of the cultural sector. The arts have instead been submitted to strong market oriented instruments. In addition, the issue of class division is almost completely ignored by cultural policies. Divisions and conflictual relations between the public and civil sectors are significant in many places. Dense struggles, cynicism and a lack of solidarity are more and more present, also among art workers who many times feel isolated, having to compete for opportunities and for public funding.

Cultural policies in most countries still ignore the questions of artists' working conditions. There are very few policies that tackle these questions and propose solutions. Official bodies refuse responsibility, ruled by economic measures and pressures. National cultural policies more often promote nationalism and conventional concepts of culture, focusing on classic and traditional arts practices and systematically subordinating art to public education and research, instead of working towards protecting contemporary culture production as a public good.

Although it is not new information, it is important to shed light on the fact that there is a sense of instability and scarcity also when it comes to the full-time attention that art workers can allocate to the arts. This is especially true for artists who have to rely on other sources of income to survive.



As demonstrated by Artist and Researcher Rodrigo Arenas in his analysis of the Latin American context, only 30% of the income in the arts comes directly from artistic production<sup>1</sup>. With an average monthly income of 500 US\$, only 10% of artists in Latin America are able to live exclusively from their art<sup>2</sup>, making it almost impossible to build a stable, long term and sustainable career in the arts. These numbers reveal that practitioners in the field are not able to dedicate full time to their artistic career, often having to secure secondary governmental jobs, or in areas such as research and education or management. This induces a lack of competitiveness (≠lack of competition) of these artists in the global market who are therefore at a disadvantage in seeing their career developing to its full potential. Other than the already mentioned class divide, this also creates a global divide, by increasing the competitiveness of certain cultural hubs and forcing artists in Latin America to migrate, usually not in the best of conditions.

The economic management of culture and the arts, the instability derived by the high level of competition that results from it and a high number of freelancers and micro-enterprises induce a visible inflation of projects and the well known phenomenon of “festivalisation” of the sector, fostering fatigue and self-exploitation of cultural workers and artists. The visible overproduction of arts programmes would suggest a thriving sector but, when examined up close, it is rather a symptom of the worsening of the conditions, wages, social roles, security and stability in the sector.

The importance of evidence-based research in making these systematic issues visible to policy makers was stressed by Jaka Primorac, in reference to her recent research on the Croatian cultural sector<sup>3</sup>. According to her, it is also the most effective way on which to build recommendations for the making of new cultural and social policies and to reclaim artistic and cultural work as labour. Numbers can also help to reveal the social embeddedness of artistic work, which is always forgotten in the discourse surrounding the ‘artistic genius’ who works out of love and thus gladly gives unpaid labour to the community, in a way that makes the whole of the work of artists and cultural workers invisible and unpaid<sup>4</sup>.

At least in Europe, the cultural sector differs from other sectors in the sense that it has a majority of input of people with a tertiary level of educational attainment<sup>5</sup> in relation to the total employment rate, both at the local level and at the European level. (see figure above)

The data would also help to further explain the causes behind the lack of solidarity and the cynicism of workers in the cultural sector. The sector also sees a domination of micro-enterprises (up to 7 people employed) in the cultural sector, in comparison to the rest of civil society. The fragility of these cultural organisations contributes to the overall precariousness of the sector, because of their small size and capacity and because of their potential flexibility, which is often overused. Moreover, the continuous history of precarity of the sector has also exacerbated the fragility and instability of artistic labour, up to this day. Interviews with cultural workers in South Eastern Europe during the Covid-19 pandemic have shown that this period is considered as ‘just another of many crises’, which would support this idea of a normalisation of a crisis state in the cultural sector, proven by the statement below, given by a Croatian cultural worker in the frame of Jaka Primorac’s research.

*We are always on the edge of survival, always oriented towards self-organisation, to getting by in impossible conditions...getting by in impossible conditions is for us a kind of natural state...*

When talking about the precariousness of the cultural sector, there is also a need to differentiate several levels of income stability. A first distinction should be made between paid and unpaid labour. Within paid labour, there also needs to be a distinction between artists and cultural workers who have a more stable employment and those that have an atypical employment — which is in fact the most characteristic type of income for artistic labour as is demonstrated by the high level of the self-employment seen in the cultural sector when compared to other fields (see figure below).

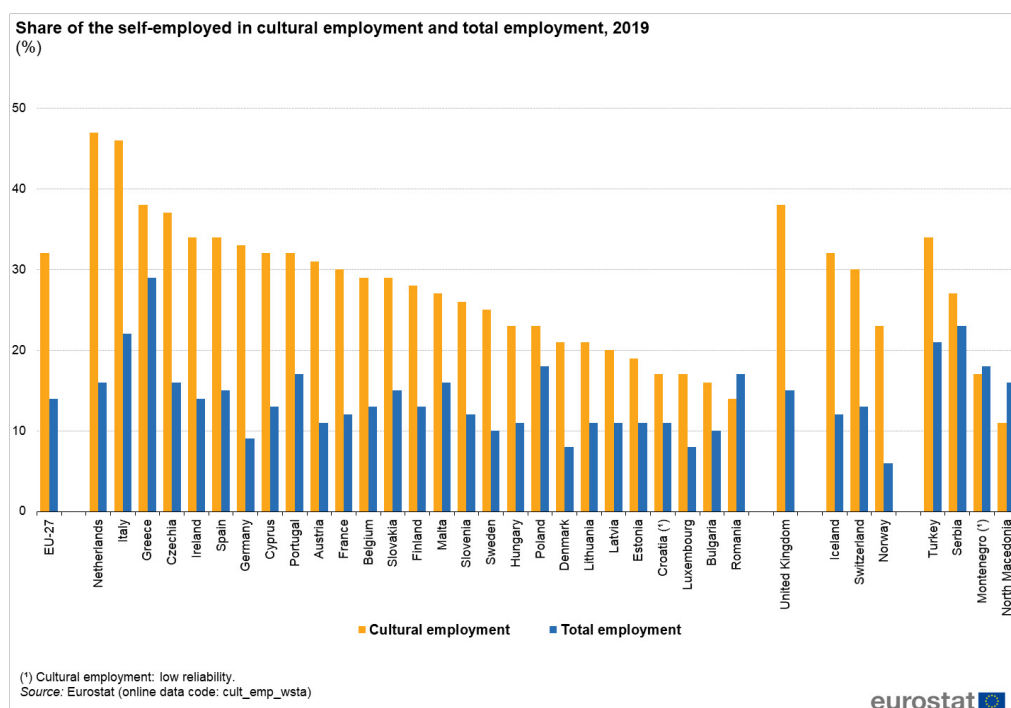
<sup>1</sup> <http://www.trabajadoresdearte.org/sitio/resultados-2do-censo-latinoamericano-de-arte-contemporaneo/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Od Projekta do projekta, Rad i zaposlenost u kulturnom sektoru, (From Project to Project, work and employment in the cultural sector), Blok

<sup>4</sup> Katja Praznik, Art Work: Invisible Labour and the Legacy of Yugoslav Socialism (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021)

<sup>5</sup> According to the OECD definition, the population with tertiary education is defined as those having completed the highest level of education, by age group. This includes both theoretical programmes leading to advanced research or high skill professions such as medicine and more vocational programmes leading to the labour market.



Regarding the **high input of unpaid labour**, the data supports that there are examples of various forms of unpaid labour, such as voluntary work and overtime work. Therefore highlighting that, even by capitalist standards, culture is not priced higher than its input value, if one were to count the labour that is not getting paid for but is still being provided. Voluntary labour is particularly seen as essential in order to enter a professional career in the cultural sector and it manifests in the form of unpaid internships, which only contributes to extending the class, gender, ethnical inequalities that are already prominently visible in the cultural labour market.

It is especially important to point out **the traps of the project-to-project** type of labour. As the cultural career path is considered as a personal calling, private and work time are enveloped in one long stretch of time, which causes the exhaustion and burn out of artists and cultural workers who have a high personal involvement in the subject and the process of what is produced. This obviously results in recorded unpaid and self-exploitative practices and opens the question of who, in fact, can afford to work precariously. This vicious project-to-project timeline was also raised by Danae Theodoridou, who not only mentioned the pressures for innovation — often confused with artistic authenticity<sup>6</sup> — which exacerbates the feeling of precarity of artists, who feel like they have to come up with a new project in order to apply for grants.

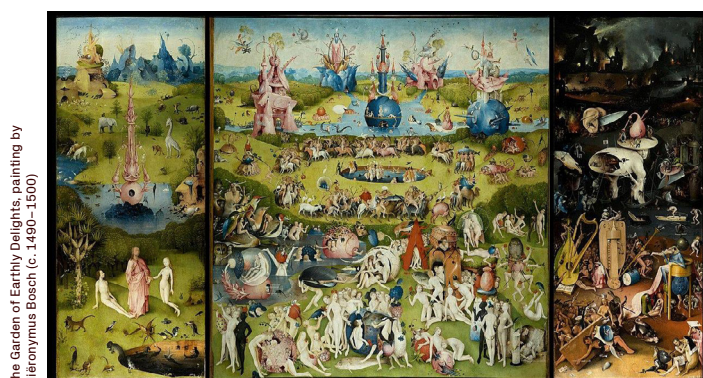
In relation to the structural problem of funding, if we wanted to find a more stable way of working, we would have to create ways of funding the creation process. Up to now, funding is linked to the final output (or product), but not based on its extensive creation process and the time and energy put in. More importantly, as raised by Danae, shouldn't we impose other criteria to art creations, other than those imposed by the neoliberal focusing mainly on the accumulation of financial, symbolic and cultural capital? What would an artistic production of degrowth look like? What would such a production mean for the care and attention put into the work and the communities involved with it?

## Stories and narratives matter

Although data and a reading at a broader scale is undoubtedly an effective way of pushing forward the sector's agenda when approaching policy makers, there seems to also be a need of putting a story to these critical analysis, especially in the face of the increasing dominance of far-right and neoliberal narratives and politics in a globalised context. This strategy seems to be more effective, also helping to avoid a sense of desperation and the above-mentioned cynicism caused by what Danae has named the 'dystopian mess of neoliberalism'.

Enhancing the experiential dimension of this precarious reality was therefore Danae's proposal to the question at stake, which she structured around 4 real life statements which he heard (was told) between 2020 and 2022, in the frame of her work as an artist:

1. *"You are too research oriented - you should focus more on touring and expanding your network."* - by the committee that evaluates applications for the Ministry of Culture in Belgium.
2. *"Your work is not authentic enough, because it is the second part of a research that has already started."* - by the same committee
3. *"It is hard to support artists as they mostly work with black money, and we cannot map the field."* - by the Greek minister of Culture at the start of the pandemic.
4. *"Artists can deceive other people with their performance talents."* again by the Greek minister of Culture at the start of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>



The Garden of Earthly Delights, painting by Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1490–1500)

<sup>6</sup> See statement 2 of Danae's presentation below (p.10)

<sup>7</sup> In connection with teenager rape accusations against the Director of the national theatre, who the minister herself had placed in his position.



These examples put a focus on the issue of discourse and the perception of the nature of the artistic work. A quantity versus quality approach, a transactional relation to the artist and a market relationship to arts productions, where there is an expectation for artists to go from hot topic to hot topic, looking for new and groundbreaking territory and turning everything into an immediately profitable product that nobody has yet heard of. By refusing to follow this market logic of offer and demand, the artist becomes a pseudo-worker who does not want to properly integrate the labour market and always remains in an ambiguous status of amateur. As a consequence, the sector has suffered a severe shrinking of its funding and a colonisation of local culture by private initiatives, through the introduction of these market oriented concepts that impose certain directions on artistic productions, mostly by following the neoliberal capitalist society – fast, productive, socially oriented. Using experiential, real life examples of the systemic instability of arts workers allows us to identify the underlined narratives that need counteraction, and to pinpoint the concrete consequences of the neoliberal management of culture in daily life, as well as their short term and long term effects on arts practices. It also creates a space of dialogue where it is possible to compare realities and share examples of other experiences.

This was also the approach supported by Sepehr Sahrizadeh, who stressed the idea that no discourse or reflection about instability can be complete without remembering the experiences of other realities which might seem distant and perhaps even 'exotic'. Through the well known Hieronymus Bosch triptych painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Sepehr underlined the impact that happens at a micro-level by illustrating of the fact that stories do matter and that the small facts that are happening in every corner of the painting (and of the world) do participate in the shaping of a holistic state of affairs. This being so, the session proceeded to make a case for the need to improve working conditions in the arts by engaging participants in the audience with a series of 5 polls.

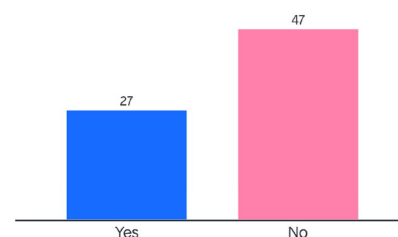
The conclusion of the poll revealed that Sepehr's own answer to the statement '*I can easily purchase an online ticket for a digital performance / streaming*' was the only 'no', versus the overwhelming majority of 74 'yes' answers in the room. This contrast of experiences highlighted the idea that it is crucial to reconnect with the stories behind the numbers, in order to make change and find stability in the unstable world that we live in.

One needs to find ways to avoid benefiting from exotifying the instability of other people by asking them to showcase their precariousness within a more privileged society. Socio-economic experiences, political experiences and physical experiences, such as the one of disabled artists should rather be shared with others via conversations, in order to counter the effects of an alienating globalisation and those of capitalist norms. Each story and each process of curation needs to be considered as a piece of a whole, as a part of a global picture of the state of affairs.

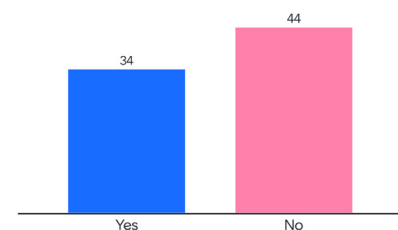
In line with this statement, Rodrigo also pointed out the need for taking the arts outside of their traditional spaces such as museums, galleries, theatres and institutions in order for arts workers to go beyond their own reality and to be able to develop new perspectives and nurture their artistic practice with input from outside the artistic sphere. This process will in turn allow to build a stronger case for arts workers and might allow to deconstruct this never seen before level of cynical rhetorics, through which cultural workers are seen as the exploiters of the taxpayers' money and to 're-establish art as this institution that acts as the political and ethical check of democracy, that citizens can turn to in order to examine the results of their actions and put limits to them'— (Danae Theodoridou). Right now, '*the workers of a whole sector are reduced to lazy people who go around performing different personas to innocent citizens who work hard to fund their artistic practice*'. With these types of narratives, how could the state recognise the particularities of the conditions of art workers and design frames that would correspond to these needs? What kind of cooperation between the artistic field and the state should be established? And what other solutions are out there?

Jelena Vesić also put it in her question to the panellists: art workers are perceived as a privileged layer of society, in relation to the wider 'populist working' layer of society: the 'Artocracy'. The rhetorics are more unbelievable than ever so it can be easy to feel like we are in an incomparable moment in History, where critical art is being suppressed, and where the hostile narratives around cultural labour are at a peak. How can such a level of cynicism and hostility be neutralised? Can we not learn from History in order to try to counter this alienation?

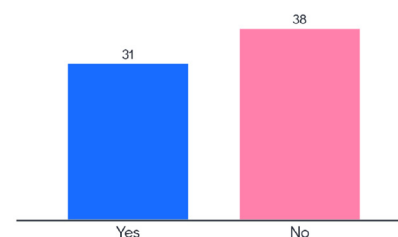
**I can be sure that our theatre company/group members would all be here ( wherever you're based) by next year to make another project together.**



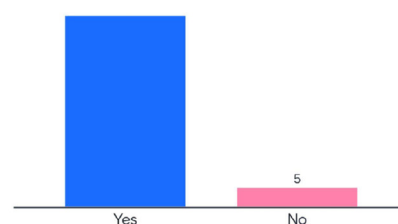
**I can bring any idea on stage without restrictions.**



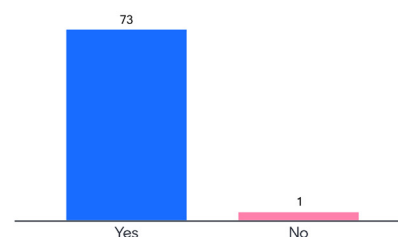
**I am sure that if/when I lose my job, I will have state/non-state support/fund.**



**I have access to health-care with a minimum of / decent expenses.**



**I can easily purchase an online ticket for a digital performance/streaming.**



## Coping strategies: looking out and looking back

Although it is not up to the cultural sector to choose an alternative solution for the capitalist system or for the imposition of a strong market reasoning on the essence of artistic labour, all speakers agreed on the need to go beyond criticism and to put forward a number of meaningful coping mechanisms.

Instead of comparing the current reality to a similar struggle in History, the idea put forward was rather to look back and rediscover many of the meaningful experiments done in the past. Even if the contemporary struggle of the arts could very well be a historical first, good examples from the past should not be forgotten. Jaka Primorac raised cases from the Yugoslavian models for artists welfare in the 1960s and the audience also raised the example of theatre collectives in Holland in the 1980's. Likewise, Jaka Primorac stressed the importance of contemporary initiatives that are experimenting with solutions for improved working conditions of the sector and quoted as example the introduction of a basic income for the Arts, in Ireland or the adoption of the price list created by the Croatian Screenwriters and Playwrights Guild by the Union of cultural workers in Slovenia.

Both Jaka and Danae acknowledged their intention of keeping the conversation open with policy makers and governments and saw artists' movements and collective action as positive reactions to the current pressures. Jaka proposed to join artists' movements in order to increase the visibility of the experience instability of art workers and to keep the solidarity, seen in the high networking practices of the sector. Danae mentioned **that only through collective actions and initiatives<sup>8</sup> can the arts and culture become [again] a strong social component of society**, offering imaginative alternatives and supporting the emergence of a more caring social coexistence. These initiatives are seen as relevant solutions and as a good trend within the chronic lack of stability of the sector but they also prove that resilience of its workers and potential for change of the sector relies on the workers themselves.

The focus was also on a translocal practice for the arts, as joint international actions such as the declaration of artists' rights signed at the UNESCO conference in 1980, in Belgrade, have proven to have no impact so far. Focusing on the small local scenes, finding a solidary base with connected structures to support each other and sharing resources was, according to Marijana, the only way to sustain critical arts: scale down and then connect with similar initiatives.

A relationship to the local context needs to be put at the centre of the arts practice. 'It seems that the future of arts practices in Latin America is [at the level of] the local scene' said Rodrigo Arenas. As mentioned, Initiatives for the **decolonisation of the arts** have worked on taking art productions out of their traditional space (museums, theatre and other institutional spaces) and exposing art makers to life outside of the art bubble in order to develop new perspectives about the arts and to take into account the outside world. The decolonisation of the arts processes and of its discourse, through the connection to the local community and to the outside world, would certainly help to deconstruct the power dynamics imposed by the market and to replace competition with cooperation and transactional relations with solidarity, via locally rooted practices. It is also only by taking into account the local context that real impact on cultural and social policies can be achieved.

**Moreover, there is a shared responsibility of all parties in the sector to change their practices and improve working conditions at an individual level.** For example, Sepehr mentioned that after the IETM Focus Brussels meeting 'Fair Enough?' In April 2022, he did make significant changes to some of his contracts with artists, in order to create a fairer distribution and balance of risk and responsibility and if more people in the sector adopted this practice, it would greatly improve the solidarity and sense of stability of the most vulnerable players.

To cope with the instability of the cultural labour and its market, we must regularly remember not to forget. As Sepehr put it **'Oblivion is the disease of our century.'** Even if we cannot find a structural solution, we must:

- not forget to experiment and make positive changes at our own level;
- not forget the stories we hear or that we choose to curate;
- keep remembering the human and local scale;
- not forget that we are connected to other places in the world;
- not forget our past and remember good cases in history;
- not forget that we are interconnected with other members of society.

In short, we should look back and around for good practices and initiatives that connect art workers to each other and the world.

<sup>8</sup> Such as [State of the arts \(BE\)](#) and [Support Art Workers \(GR\)](#).

