



IETM REPORT

www.ietm.org

FAIR PRACTICE LABEL

in the Arts

Report from the IETM Amsterdam Plenary Meeting, 14 – 17 April 2016

by Vassilka Shishkova





IETM is supported by:



Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



Fair Practice Label in the Arts

The moderator of the session, [prof. Marijke Hoogenboom](#) from [Performing Arts in Transition research group](#), started the working group with a brief presentation of its objectives and background context.

The Dutch Theatre Festival in 2015 hosted a session about fair practices in the arts called [United We Stand](#). It aimed to bring together people from different initiatives ([De Agenda](#) in the Netherlands, [State of the Arts](#) in Belgium and [Koalition der Freien Szene](#) in Germany) to share their concerns on the working conditions in the sector in times of economic crisis and funding cuts. The IETM Amsterdam session is by design focused on the practices in the performing arts; hence, it will attempt to define what the fair practices should be. It will aim to collect insights whether and how a fair practice label could be defined in terms of the art sector and how to exert influence on a European level.

United We Stand Initiative

The panellists in the *Fair Practice Label in the Arts* session were: Christophe Knoch ([MICA MOCA Project E.V.](#) // [Koalition Der Freien Szene](#)); Rune Peitersen (artist, [PLATFORM BK](#)); Robrecht Vanderbeeken ([State Of The Arts](#)); Anne Breure (Veem House For Performance and Performing Arts in Transition research group); Tobias Kokkelmans ([Performing Arts in Transition research group](#)). All of them are active supporters of the idea of establishing fair practices label in the arts. The session proceeded with the panellists presenting their thoughts and small group discussions with a joint summary.

[Tobias Kokkelmans](#), dramaturg and journalist based in the Netherlands, reminded the audience the anecdote about the boiling

frog which is often used to illustrate issues like the global warming, the decline of privacy or the economic crisis. Although proven to be [biologically invalid](#), the anecdote seems appropriate to describe the unbridgeable gap between knowing and taking action, between discourse and practice in the human condition. Thus the good metaphor ruined, it actually gives hope to humans too: maybe there is an inner frog in all of us that would know when we have to jump out before the water gets too hot. "But when does 'pleasantly warm' change to 'unpleasantly hot'? Where exactly do we jump of and, more importantly, where to?" rhetorically asked Tobias Kokkelmans, obviously alluding to the situation in the arts sector.

[Lara Staal](#), programmer at [Frascati Theater](#), elaborated on the current situation in the Netherlands (not much different in the rest of the EU or overseas). The state is functioning more like an enterprise. The public sector has become increasingly intertwined with the market, labour is shifting to a non-stop entrepreneurship. Artists and art institutions are faced with higher requirements. More and more we measure quality in numbers. Public funds are being cut and the demands are getting higher. A recent report has shown that the economic crisis and the budget cuts have hit seriously the arts sector in the Netherlands. As a result, an increasing number of professionals are dropped out of permanent contracts to temporary contracts and freelance jobs. These new independent contractors have become so many that their income and room for negotiation has dropped down considerably. The questions are: how do we know it has become too hot, how many burnouts do we have to witness before we strike the emergency break, how much free labour artists and art workers are we going to accept? How long will it take for all of us to see this is not sustainable?

It might be that our biggest problem is not only the neoliberal policy of our governments but the fact that we have accepted and internalised this model of thinking. So is the art world ready to stand for its values and to do it collectively?

[Anne Breure](#) from [Veem House](#) summarized the efforts in this direction so far. As mentioned by Marijke Hoogenboom, [United We Stand](#) was an important meeting that took place in September 2015 during The Dutch Theatre Festival. It brought together several initiatives¹ concerning self-organisation. Members of these initiatives are taking part in the current IETM meeting too. There are several crucial traits that characterise these organisations regardless of their local context. They are initiated by artists and cultural professionals that have been expressing a growing need to organise themselves. They seek for structural engagements. They respond critically to the dominant cultural agenda and seek to offer an alternative sustainable solution. The United We Stand meeting was considered fruitful and now at the IETM meeting it is brought to a bigger scale.

State of the Arts Initiative

[Robrecht Vanderbeeken](#) presented the [State of the Arts initiative](#). It started in 2014 in Belgium from the idea to form some kind of union to fight against cases of unfairness at events and festivals or generally speaking, in temporary and flexible situations. It was obvious that such unfair practices take place in institutions as well so the scope was broadened to the arts sector as a whole.

¹ De Agenda in the Netherlands, State of the Arts in Belgium and Koalition der Freien Szene in Germany

Gradually, various artists and organisations have been involved in this conversation. It became apparent that the discussion itself, raising awareness with these issues is equally important as realising the goals. The current Fair Practice Label in the Arts session is therefore a part of an ongoing process.

Concerning the current situation on a broader European level, the end of the welfare state is entering into the neoliberal state where the emancipatory policies in the cultural sector make place for the Anglo-Saxon model that is profit driven, market oriented and envisages adopting entrepreneurship and verticalisation in the sector. Another typical issue on EU level is that the politicians don't pay any attention to what the cultural sector is pledging for. "It seems the best we could achieve is some damage control, Robrecht Vanderbeeken remarked. Unless the message is backed by many voices from the cultural sector, the governments seem to be deaf for our concerns."

So the problem itself suggested a way for finding the solution. The sector has to build its own common discourse and practices, to collectively organise itself. Then it should megaphone a united message to challenge the current policies both on national and international level.

We need a strategy. We need to bring people together to discuss policies, we need to open up a space for people to imagine alternative ways of doing things; fair practice label being one of the possible solutions. Thus a debate will open that would question the current situation and would raise the awareness of the serious issues. It would eventually open up different sources of information for collection of testimonials and data is necessary to support the message to the policy makers. The wall of shame and silence has to be disrupted for 'being poor' doesn't mean that one is a bad artist. There is also a need to break up with the public image of the artists as being either whining junks on welfare or extremely rich high class individuals.

Besides imagining the fair practice alternative it is important to mobilise the cultural sector workers to join together and to adopt the fair practice label as something that comes out of their own field instead of being imposed from the outside.

The label itself is not a solution. It is more like an instrument to make the issues within the sector visible and to bring them up to the agenda. State of the Arts suggests a label of fair practices which covers four main domains:

- solidarity: issues concerning equal payment, redistribution, minimum wage, fair contracts, etc.;
- sustainability: issues concerning long term development, collaboration and ecology as well;
- diversity: of people but also of all sorts of art forms like experimental, trans disciplinary, artistic research, social-artistic practices, etc.;
- transparency: including artists in the decision making process, being open about collaborations, discussing the ethics of the sponsorship.

There are other initiatives aiming to introduce fair practice standards, like [the wage certificate](#), so the question still open is whether to support it or to develop a parallel label, or even do both.

Other topics are how to design the label in order to achieve its legitimacy and how to sustain it through certain control procedures. Furthermore stands the question how to get the organisations certificate themselves under this label like for example [the fair trade label](#) in food industries is applied. One strategy is blacklisting but may be more sustainable would be to apply some kind of positive reinforcement for arts organisations that decide to certificate under the fair practice label.

In conclusion, Robrecht Vanderbeeken underlined that if we want things to change we have to do it ourselves because nobody would do it for us.



© Vincent Chartier

Group Discussions and Conclusions

Three group discussions with approximately 10-12 participants each that lasted for 45 minutes were held during the second part of the session. They were moderated by Christophe Knoch/Marijke Hoogenboom, Rune Peitersen/Anne Breure and Lara Staal/Tobias Kokkermans and were aimed at gathering the participants' knowledge and experiences in their sector and their state in terms of current practices, standards, measures towards securing fair practices in the arts, possible shortcomings etc. On the whole, the discussions were quite active and informative.

For instance, one of the groups discussed at length the [Living Wage Employer certificate](#) that was recently introduced in the UK. The employers have to provide for the minimum wage and then they receive beneficiary funding in order to pay the workers the living wage which is a bit higher than the minimum one. The scheme is voluntary and is targeted more at large corporations than at arts organisations.

Similar practice in Portugal proved to be even backfiring. Employers kept hiring people under the scheme's conditions and once the nine month beneficiary period was over for them they simply fired those workers and hired new ones.

In terms of the art sector, it was pointed out that employing interns under a government funded scheme that does not lead to sustainable results. Arts organisations get subsidies for temporary three month intern positions but once the term is over they cannot afford to hire the person and they move to the next intern. This practice might be somewhat favourable to young people entering their careers but it is definitely not working in the long run for building and sustaining a career or for securing the so desired by funders 'organisational stability' of arts organisations. The same situation was identified for Austria where a lot of schemes are aimed to support young people on the entrance level in culture, research or the arts field but when one reaches their mid-career the payment is still the same. So mid-career professionals have to struggle



© Vincent Chartier

to stay professional and on the other hand, to deal with the changed circumstances in their personal lives as they reach their 30s or 40s. Therefore, since 2009 the [Austrian Association of Independent Theatre](#) disseminates a reference book with the advisable wages and carries on several advocating initiatives aimed at local and national authorities.

Another issue identified through the discussion group was the cost of the administration in the arts and cultural sector. A lot of money actually is spent not for art or for artists or art workers but for the administrative and management apparatus. The following observation was suggested in regards with the professionalisation of performing arts organisations: "In the 70s it was all about education so we got educators on board; in the 80s it was marketing and everybody got the marketing people in their teams; in the 90s it was about development and everybody got fundraisers; in the 00s the focus went to producing so we got producers. Now we need all these roles, and more, in order to make work and this adds up to the bureaucratisation of culture."

Meeting with peers, holding discussions on all these topics, being united and being quite vocal about one's needs, principles and limits was outlined as a way to breaking the dependency of the artist from the institutions. It is a lot easier to just say "No, I will not go for this" when you feel backed up by so many people. Securing that there will not

be someone undermining the arts sector position was viewed as one of the applications of a standard or a label of fair practices in the arts. Many examples of unfair practices in the arts² were brought to prove the growing need of implementing such a label. Good examples were praised as well.

The big questions that remained open were: when is a practice considered fair? How to keep the fair practice label sustainable? How do we guarantee fairness?

Short conclusions

Group One:

We should acknowledge the possibility of lowering the standards or the volumes of production. This should be regarded as direct consequence of certain decisions made by policy makers.

The profit of the art is being made by the distributors not by the actual creators of the artistic content.

All of us, individuals, organisations, and larger structures, both independent and governmental, should assert influence to change the current situation.

² Like taking a fee from artists and art organisations to participate in a profiting or subsidised festival or event; not paying them for participating; requiring voluntary work and many more.

“Practice what you preach” should be adopted as a principle in regards of fair practices in the arts sector. As for the label, we have to be careful it does not become a policing tool.

Solidarity was outlined as the right attitude towards addressing all the issues regarding working conditions in the sector.

Keeping transparency on how you are being paid, whom you are being paid by, how much you are being paid was considered quite important too. It was noted that transparency has to be a double sided process.

Group Two:

Two general approaches were outlined when reviewing the situation in different countries. One is very protective towards arts and culture, the other is quite liberal. Both carry their advantages and disadvantages.

Solidarity and transparency on different levels were pointed out as really important in achieving impartial conditions in the sector. An illustrative example for openness in the sector is the UK initiative [I'll Show You Mine](#) where arts professionals disclose their salaries and wages. This practice is forbidden in some countries though. In general, practices vary considerably in different states. Another example that was mentioned was the Canadian government funding the development of a national system in paying artists and for arts production.

One can think of solutions on a local or on a national level but it gets really difficult to come up with a solution on a European level because of the huge diversity in realities and practices.

An interesting opinion was that solidarity is almost a kind of provocation at these times when systems break down and people struggle to maintain the possibility to work and to build things up.

Concerns were expressed that a label, something being imposed on the institutions, might push people out of the sector. Margins of instigation and suggesting a certain change are to be handled with due care.

Group Three:

The sector has to be regarded as an ecosystem that we are all in together. We need to make conversations between artists and organisations: not only one against another but together in search for common solutions.

Creating general awareness about the problems in the sector is important. Transparency about resources, wages, funding is considered a precondition of building trust in the conversation.

It is important to just say ‘no’ and do that together.

The system is undermining this kind of collective approach. The whole idea of the pay-to-play model drives mostly to individualisation rather than bringing arts people together.

Transparency emerged as a stake for achieving fair practices in the arts: transparency of means, of sponsorship but also carbon transparency.

During the last decades, organisations have become established and powerful while it should be the other way around: artists should be more powerful and in control.

It is a double way process in which the artists have their share of responsibility: “I am part of the problem – I have accepted too little and accepted to pay too little to others too.”

So, if the problem is common, solutions should be sought in common too.

Further information and contact:

If you are willing to share your story or participate in the ongoing conversations on fair practice label in the arts you can write to the initiators of this session:

Het Transitiebureau,

transitiebureau@gmail.com