

Around the world

How do we work internationally while minding just sustainability?

Artist Benjamin Verdonck, LIFT (the London International Festival of Theatre), the Art Happens art agency and Castillo discussed the issue of sustainability: what do they each understand sustainability to be; what forms does it take in the practices of artists or organizations; how is sustainability implemented from diverse points of view, such as gender, class, or where you are in the world, and how do you take your own privileges into account as you rethink these factors? The talks were about how and why artists and organizations take steps to ensure sustainability in their work.

After three exploratory online sessions, Castillo felt he wanted to question sustainability from a queer, anticapitalist, and colonialism-aware political standpoint, and understood that this was not the right forum for him. He did not want to impede the others in working on sustainability from their own perspectives and withdrew from the discussions.

Benjamin Verdonck, Art Happens and LIFT then decided to focus on the concrete steps that they each undertake in their own practices or organizations. They saw this working group as a safe space where they could discuss and learn about these vulnerable processes from their peers, in order to question and change them.

Based on interviews, at the request of the Flanders Arts Institute / Kunstenpunt, Eva Peeters wrote about the steps that Verdonck and LIFT have taken to achieve greater sustainability in their international activities, and the possibilities, questions and obstacles that are involved. The result is an invitation to all to engage in sustainable practices, and to tackle the artistic, social, economic and ecological intersections that entails.

From the report: “[This is a] proposal to take small steps to achieve sustainability in personal and specific contexts and situations, so that everyone contributes through their own actions, making collective progress as a sum of many actions and reflections. It concerns many small things, all within our limits and possibilities, and our being aware of our own limitations in terms of background, privileges and so on.”

In the past 15 years, climate change and sustainability have risen significantly on the agenda of the cultural sector. In 2007 they were still considered to be niche topics, and the few pioneers mainly focused on trying to reduce their carbon footprint by tackling their infrastructure, or e.g. by reducing single-use plastics.

Over the years, climate consciousness has grown substantially and these last years you can see how it even infiltrated artistic programmes. Climate change impact, climate refugees, international mobility and its CO2 emission, raw material depletion, loss of biodiversity, global inequality and exploitation are only a few of the complex challenges that you can see reflected more and more in the cultural output.

Since 2007, the ways of dealing with this multifold crisis we're living in has led to a diversity of experiments in cultural and artistic practices. How do organisations and artists today try to reconcile their artistic mission with the need to contribute to a sustainable and just society? Flanders Arts Institute/ Kunstenpunt talked to two art professionals with different perspectives: artist Benjamin Verdonck and director of LIFT (London International Festival of Theatre) Kris Nelson.

The magic of limitations - Benjamin Verdonck

Our first conversation is with an artist who has a long track record of incorporating sustainability in his practice. Benjamin Verdonck is a multifaceted artist and considers himself both an actor, theatre maker, performer, writer, visual artist, collector as well as a teacher. His work revolves around stepping outside of prevailing, pre-set patterns and structures, and around constantly rethinking how an artist can interact with reality.

Throughout his work, the concept of 'just sustainability' plays an important role. From his much debated manifesto in 2011 – a call to the performing arts to actively collaborate on a transition towards a fair sustainability, to his personal choice for conscious travel, Verdonck can be seen as a pioneer in the Belgian art scene when it comes to sustainable art practices.

'Over the years, I have created dozens of performances, playing more than a thousand times in more than twenty countries. Many of my recent works of the past ten years are 'viewing boxes', miniature theatre shows operated by strings, with lights going on and off and panels opening and closing. I started creating this mobile repertoire in a search for agility and lightness, wishing to be less dependent on the long-term programming of

theatres and festivals. Wanting to move more freely with my work affected the work itself, not only in creating but also in how it is conceived.'

With this repertoire Verdonck prefers to perform outside of institutions, in close interaction with his audience, as he did in his most recent project '[World Tour in Antwerp](#)'. Not shy of radically switching perspectives, he decided to play outdoors for a global audience in his own city instead of travelling the world looking for international audiences. 'I spent a year travelling within my own city, assuming that the different nationalities you encounter and international dimensions you experience when performing abroad can all be found right here, in this city.'

In his artistic career, Verdonck has become increasingly critical about international travel for the sake of it. 'I want to resist the idea that you have to be everywhere, just because you can.' He tends to thoroughly consider the added value of travelling with a performance and when he does, he tries to really engage with a place, and with the people living there.

'The plan for "World Tour in Antwerp" was ready before Covid-19 hit us. I had been looking for alternatives to the sector's standard but environmentally damaging ways of international touring, which is often financially driven (e.g. flying back and forth for just one show because of the revenue) and/or because international fame is rewarded by funding bodies. Then the pandemic happened and forced us to keep within our city boundaries and stay outside of buildings, let alone cultural venues. What was originally intended as a "world tour" from art venue to art venue in Antwerp became a tour outside of institutionalised spaces. I went from street to street, past squares, doors and windows - a movement driven by the question: where are the people who have little access to culture? It felt like a journey, meeting and interacting with people who then send you on to another spot that you didn't know beforehand you would end up in.'

Understandably, you would expect restrictions, such as the Covid-19 measures, to affect the quality of a performance, but Verdonck experienced an unexpected richness in surrendering to any given situation. 'The magic of limitations is that a seemingly endless range of possibilities starts to open up.'

Chances are that Verdonck's practice will become even more radical when it comes to creating new work, as his practice is no longer supported by an art institution. For many years, Benjamin Verdonck was one of five artist residents in Anwerp's city theatre Toneelhuis, but recently this collaboration ended in favour of new, young artists. This new reality will put the question of producing and distributing new work in a different light.

Even more than before, Verdonck will focus on local awareness and working with what is already there: objects and people. 'Collecting objects in public space is a daily part of my artistic practice, so I will be using my own archive of collected objects. Roundels, gloves and mittens, broken footballs, birthday presents, sticks, ends of string, magazines, unused consumption receipts, ... I tend to pick something up because it speaks to me. There's no premeditation. Only secondarily, when objects have gathered on the windowsill or on the corner of a table, do I interact with them. And there is no artistic finality to it. Collecting to me is an intimate way of looking at things, of caring for them. In the work that I envision for myself in the near future I want to abandon the finality of a production, and I am curious to see what this lightness and freedom I long for means concretely in my artistic work. I will start from my archive of found objects and practise what it means not to create anything new anymore, as an exercise in agility.'

Verdonck hopes this investigation will lead to developing new performative strategies for opening up his archive to a public that has little or no prior knowledge of his artistic trajectory, people who experience reality differently from what is considered to be the norm. One of the ways he will do that is by working closely together with an asylum centre and a centre for intensive psychotherapy in his neighbourhood, engaging with them for a longer period.

From working his way around the concept of international mobility to reconsidering our relationship to objects and the constant drive of producing new ones, you can clearly see a thread of consciously balancing questions and concerns around sustainability in its broadest sense.

Braiding sustainability throughout your organisation - LIFT

Moving on from an individual art practice, we wanted to get some insight into how a larger arts organisation such as a festival deals with sustainability. When you take a look at the climate and social impact of a festival the peak impact will most likely happen during that week or two when the festival takes place - in terms of energy use, food impact, artist and audience transport, waste - and partly during the preceding period of programming, e.g. by travelling around for prospection. LIFT has been trying to reduce their ecological footprint by working on the above mentioned impacts for decades. These goals came into new focus during and out of the pandemic in recent years.

'We were part of a project led by the Danish Arts Foundation and the British Council in collaboration with Julie's Bicycle', the head of LIFT Kris Nelson explains. It was called 'International Touring & Environmental Responsibility' and within that project we

partnered up with the Danish CPH Stage Festival to share models for environmentally responsible touring and collaboration. Part of the project was a crash course on climate change and sustainability for our entire LIFT team. That course was a great refresh, and led to immediate action: we applied all that we'd learned in all our activities in this year's festival. We followed Julie's Bicycle green rider, we had two outdoor works and several off-site works, and simple decisions went a long way. For instance, we didn't use any diesel-powered generators, nor paper tickets, and we put climate-themed work as the headliner of the festival.'

Before the pandemic, LIFT was involved in the European cooperation project Act Art Climate Transition, led by Kaaithheater and focusing on ecology, climate change, social transition and looking for hope in an era of climate breakdown, mass extinction and growing inequalities. 'After our participation in this project ended, we still wanted to look for new ways of working on sustainability', Nelson says. 'When Covid-19 happened, it gave us an opportunity to rethink what working across borders could really look like, beyond speculation but as a necessary, new reality. That's where the idea of 'Concept Touring' was born.'

With Concept Touring, LIFT created an online residency and commissioning project for artists to develop a platform to support artists working on international collaborations with little to no travel. The residency supported nine projects by fifteen artists where the idea, the process, the works travel but the artist does not. 'To us, Concept Touring is a set of tools to promote international collaboration with low-to-no travel. And through looking at new ways of working and showing work internationally together with artists, they broadened our sustainability scope. Concept Touring for us was not just about climate, but more about sustainability in general. It was based on three pillars: mobility and the difficulty of obtaining a visa to the UK, especially for artists from the Global South, pandemic-proof work, and climate. It is an experiment that we tried out with artists, and a first take at what is becoming a larger body of research for LIFT involving artists, academics and presenting colleagues.'

The question of western privilege when it comes to sustainable international touring is something that has been coming up more frequently in the past few years. 'Choosing railroad over flights when travelling is not a choice everyone can make. Lots of artists we work with live in countries that have little access to trains, some people can't afford more sustainable transport options. There's a risk of enhancing inequality when making sustainable choices.' But there's more to it than the unequal access to sustainable transport in different parts of the world. 'There's also the risk of narrowing audience perspectives', Nelson adds. 'While it's a sustainable strategy not to fly anymore as an

artist and coach local artists to recreate your work instead, like Jerome Bell and Katie Mitchell are doing, for us it is important to give our London audiences connections with other international artists around the world and their presence and stage vocabularies. So yes, we do still put people on planes. We flew in artists from Lithuania or from Nairobi but we also brought Concept Touring artist Giorgia Ohanesian Nardin and their touring party to London from Milan via train.' And in order to try and balance the environmental impact of the flights they are still organising, LIFT is looking at developing a carbon budget, so that they can make conscious choices when inviting artists.

Having widened that scope of environmental sustainability to include social justice as well, in the next round of funding, LIFT wants to focus on sustainability across the organisation, similar to how they work on anti-racism. 'Our commitment to anti-racism and environmental responsibility are not separate bubbles of activity. Both missions are braided throughout the organisation. And that definitely is a change in methodology and practice. For instance, if we discuss our sustainable travel policy, we ask ourselves: how do we travel and how can we maximise travel? Naturally, we pay attention to the climate impact of travel modes, but there's other perspectives to consider as well, such as accessibility for example, or the impact of colonialism on travel infrastructure. Our travel policy recognises that not all members of our team have the same experience travelling. Therefore, we make accommodations for those with disabilities, or to places where they are more likely to face racism.'

This way, Kris wants to really 'build' sustainability in its widest sense into key business areas, e.g. by having an environmental responsibility line in all their budgets, making sustainability part of their 'green lighting process' to take projects forward, retaining it as a regular item in board meetings, etc. 'We'll need to upskill our team so that everyone has a better knowledge about it, but we'll also include someone with environmental expertise in our board who can help inform our practice. We want the people we work with and our service providers to share our ethics, and we will work closely with European partners to develop international sustainable touring methods.'

In the past two years there have been many thought exercises about doing things differently post-Covid. It seems that in these trying times of higher costs, burn-outs and reduced funding, it is difficult for organisations to change their course. Moreover, rethinking international touring is more expensive and more labour intensive.

'It's all about the will to actually make limitations, take decisions. And not everyone has the will. Here in the UK the cultural sector is on its knees. Funding conditions have become so strict and so labour intensive that there's tons of burnouts. We're losing a

bunch of cultural workers and artists, especially young, diverse people to other fields. We're making culture in a hostile environment towards migration, and our audiences are facing an astounding level of austerity, in terms of energy poverty, food prices and the shrinking post-Brexit UK economy. All these conditions make it difficult to make the more expensive choice, which is often the more sustainable choice. And especially in that climate, there is a need for protecting a space for experimentation and for freewheeling ideas. It's an act of resistance to keep that kind of dream space open. As an organisation, we need to do both: answer to the funding requirements and at the same time create a fertile environment for artists and then tour it in a sustainable way. We just have to shift our strategy and our language depending on which party we're dealing with, but still deliver the same essence, which is: supporting artists.'

Putting artists at the centre of their practice, as well as committing to social and environmental justice, is a tight rope to balance, as becomes clear in LIFT's experiences. But equally artists are required to completely rethink their art practices: how far can you go in reducing your impact and contributing to a socially just transition while keeping your work challenging and interesting? It's today's experiments - however absurd they might still seem to some - that will feed into a world of new, sustainable and just practices, and for that they can use all our support and funding.