

**PERFORMING URGENCY #2
A HOUSE ON FIRE PUBLICATION**

**TURN,
TURTLE!**

**REENACTING
THE INSTITUTE**

**EDITED BY
ELKE VAN CAMPENHOUT
& LILIA MESTRE**

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Introduction	9
I	
Gerald Raunig Instituent Theatre: From Volxtheater to Teatro Valle Occupato	14
Jan Goossens The Endless Possibilities of a City-Theatre: KVS 2001-2015	24
II	
Daniel Blanga-Gubbay and Livia Andrea Piazza Fictional Institutions: On Radical Imagination	40
Sébastien Hendrickx Art Presented as if it Were Something Other Than Art	50
Herbordt/Mohren The Institution	60
III	
Vera Sofia Mota in Conversation with deufert&plischke Could I Move Closer?	76
Juan Dominguez in Conversation with Victoria Perez Royo Artistic Strategies to Cope with the Institute	94

Ana Bigotte Vieira
**Turn, Turtle! Uso [Use], Espaço [Space]
and Falta [Lack/Missing]** 110

Elke Van Campenhout in Conversation with Vladimir Miller
**Exoskeletons and Hospitality:
The Institute in a State of Unfolding** 124

IV

Elke Van Campenhout
**Strange Love: How I Learned to Stop Worrying
and Love the Institute** 140

Various Artists
Tendering Institutes 146

Ahmet Öğüt
The Pitfalls of Institutional Pedagogy 152

V

Valeria Graziano
**Prefigurative Practices:
Raw Materials for a Political Positioning of Art,
Leaving the Avant-garde** 158

Nicolas Galeazzi
Commoning the Arts? A Field Report 174

Valentina Desideri and Jan Ritsema
PAF – Movement Research Definitive 184

House on Fire 193
Authors 194

INTRODUCTION

When we think of institutional critique, as the term has been coined in the visual arts, not so many examples come to mind within the performing arts field. What has become apparent in the last ten years or so, though, is a move towards an engaged re-appropriation of the arts institute in artistic (performance) practices, and a more in-depth collaboration between institutes and artists in rethinking the functioning, position, and decision-taking structure of the organisations.

If we look at the history of institutionalisation within the performing arts, it is clear that the institutes can be perceived as crystallisations of artistic and creative practices that preceded them, rather than as governing monoliths that dictate the field. In that sense the move towards ‘reclaiming the institute’ is not so much an act of de-masking, than it is an attempt to re-politicise the institutional field, an attempt to make the institute matter again as a centre for intensification to address common concerns. The institute helps to focus the concerns of diverse players in the field (artists, producers, programmers, union structures), and helps them to address issues that otherwise could only be dealt with in fragmentary meetings and practices.

In that sense the renewed interest in artistic practices as well as in institutional collaborations with artists, seems to be driven by a positive vibe, an interest in changing the governing structures from within, rather than a critical denouncement of their power structures.

It’s no coincidence that ‘the new spirit of the institute’ manifests itself at a time when Europe is suffering from multiple institutional crises. Confidence in the political and economic structures is at an all-time low, and the public funding of social, educational, scientific, and cultural institutions is under pressure due to state cuts and privatisations. Some institutional entities wield power without the necessary authority; others possess a residual form of authority, but not enough power to be able to set things in motion. In southern Europe, where the economic crisis hit hardest, a new generation

takes matters into its own hands. In several contributions in this book, authors refer to the Occupy movement as a major source of inspiration for new 'instituent practices', as art theorist Gerald Raunig calls them. His essay deals with a pretty well-known example of such a radical takeover, the Teatro Valle Occupato in Rome.

The story of Jan Goossens, the former artistic director of the Brussels city theatre KVS, proves how a fundamental re-politicisation can also occur within a relatively large, and (still) structurally subsidised art institution. His artistic policy aimed to rebuild an exclusively Flemish repertory theatre into a multidisciplinary and culturally more diverse theatre that could address a wide range of different inhabitants of the small world city, Brussels. His recollections show how difficult the process of instituting can be. There are many practical obstacles in the way between dream and reality.

For artists who are enthusiastic about 'the new spirit of the institute', to resort to fiction opens up a field of possibilities. Daniel Blanga-Gubbay and Livia Andrea Piazza analyse some imaginary organisations created by artists. Art reveals itself here as a site for radical imagination, relatively free from practical constraints, which can help us to re-think artistic and non-artistic institutions. When reflecting on these fictional organisations, Blanga-Gubbay and Piazza distinguish between different degrees of separation between fiction and reality, which characterise each of them. Artistic projects in which these two poles seem to coincide, often reveal the fictional basis of real existing institution we have come to regard as 'natural'. The dramaturg Sébastien Hendrickx also examines the power of the 'as-if'. In a number of projects by young Belgian artists, he detects a potential to think radically differently about the institutional futures of various social sectors. At the same time he warns against the instrumentalisation of artistic imagination, which can be triggered by the demand for explicit social engagement in the arts. The artist duo Herbordt/Mohren discuss in turn their participatory art work *The Institute*, a fictitious entity that relates to site-specific situations.

Some contributions for this book tackle the relationship between artistic practices and existing institutional frameworks. They propose diverse strategies of implication and engagement, opening up possible futures and alternative exchanges between parties that are too often still seen as adversaries. Projects by deufert&plischke reposition the audience as a political agent by inviting it to partake in the work itself. In Vera Sofia Mota's interview, the so-called *artistwin*

explains how it uses the theatre as a construction site for temporary micro-societies. In conversation with Victoria Perez Royo, Juan Dominguez discusses how in his past artistic and curatorial work, he related to the art institution in three predominant ways: by leaving or ignoring it; being in-between (neither totally inside nor outside of an institution); and resisting the institution. Royo and Dominguez also reflect upon the divide between the current needs of artists and art works and the bureaucratisation which characterises the big cultural institutions in their native country, Spain. With Ana Bigotte Vieira's essay, we turn to the situation of the Portuguese art field and more specifically to Lisbon, from 1986 to present times. 'Lack' appears in Vieira's text as a mode of curatorship that brings to the fore what is needed for an artistic practice that is not yet accommodated by the institution. It's a motivation for intervention. In an interview with Elke Van Campenhout, the artist, scenographer, and researcher Vladimir Miller explains how he regards the institute as an architectural entity: a spatial organisation of people and things, communications and power relations. In his work, the notion of the 'gap' questions the stability paradigm and the role it plays in shaping institutional environments and workspace politics.

The institutional forms explored in this book include the theatre institution and the pedagogical institute, which seem to have complementary temporalities. Where the theatre is the place of production and presentation, the school or research environment provides the context for a longer period of investment of development and reflection. In 'Strange Love: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Institute', Van Campenhout proposes the concept of the 'tender institute' where she proposes critical love and radical embrace of the different other as a pedagogical tool. She developed this concept pragmatically as the founder and general coordinator of the post-master in artistic research a.pass in Brussels. Various Artists contributes to this publication with three models created within this context.

The Silent University, a project by Ahmet Ögüt focuses on bridging the divide between art and institutionalised pedagogy by suggesting a new structure as a parallel knowledge transfer platform. It is specifically geared towards refugees and asylum seekers. The Silent University stands as an example for the recent trend of artist organisations: organisations founded by artists not to support their own work, but organisations as the (artistic) work itself.

At the end of the book, the focus shifts towards the institute of the commons. Nowadays, more and more art institutions seem to open up a renewed investment in the common, the transformational power of the coming-together of an 'interest community'. A re-ordering in order to be able to transform what comes to the surface in this move towards transparency of the power and decision making organisation of subsidies, and 'matters of concern'. Institutional discussions in that sense go far beyond the limits of disciplinary issues, and open up a common field of discussion around societal, ecological, and political questions that cannot always be addressed exhaustively in particular artists' practices. Valeria Graziano proposes the concept of 'prefiguration' as a promising conceptual candidate for undertaking an alternative reflection on the contemporary politics of arts. Through his own research project, Nicolas Galeazzi articulates on the commons discourse and the option of commoning principles in the making of institutional frameworks in relation to the propositions of American political economist Elinor Ostrom. The book ends with the case of PAF (Performing Arts Forum) a privately owned initiative in St. Erme, France which has proposed a radical form of common management of space, ideas, and practices since 2006. It's a project initiated and run by artists, theoreticians, and practitioners themselves. Its autonomy is constantly contaminated, corrupted, and deviated by the currents of people and interests that keep circulating within the space.

Turn, Turtle! Reenacting the Institute is the second part of the publication series *Performing Urgency*, commissioned by European theatre network House on Fire, which will continue half-yearly. *Performing Urgency* focuses on the relationship between theatre and politics, and asks: How can theatre engage in contemporary social and political issues without compromising art or politics? What kind of knowledge or impact can art generate that activism and theory alone cannot? What are the processes and methodologies of political theatre today? It aims at a broader discussion of the conditions, aesthetics, concepts, and topics of contemporary performing arts.

Lilia Mestre

GERALD RAUNIG

INSTITUENT THEATRE



**FROM
VOLXTHEATER
TO TEATRO
VALLE
OCCUPATO**

In the manifold crises of machinic capitalism in the recent past it is possible to reflect on the experiences of the 1990s and 2000s, to an ever-expanding scene of transversal practices between political activism and art production. These experiences, however, are nothing other than delicate beginnings, which must construct their abstract machine in light of the multiple crises today. This is where a critical theatre practice also moves from the critique of the institution in the direction of instituting; it becomes *instituent theatre*.

Instituent Practices

When I talk about an ‘instituent practice’, this is not the opposite of institution in the same way that a utopia, for example, is the opposite of bad reality. Nor is it necessarily to be understood in its relation to institutedness. Instituent practice as a process and concatenation of instituent events is instead an absolute concept that goes beyond the opposite of institution: it does not *oppose* the institution, but it does flee institutionalisation.

This understanding of instituent practice further develops ideas with which Antonio Negri established his concept of constituent power. In his 1992 book *Potere Costituente* (the English title is *Insurgencies*), Negri primarily pursues the question of how a constituent power could be imagined, which does not produce constitutions separated from itself, but rather *constitutes itself*: constituent power as a composition that constitutes itself in a machinic process. Starting from this terminological genealogy, instituent power is also to be understood as self-instituting. In this, it goes through two temporalities that also make up its two components: on the one hand the component of what is evental in the instituting, on the other the component of persistence, of insisting on repeatedly starting again. Multiplicity extends into all these dimensions of instituting, as far as possible into all the folds of the spatial surfaces and temporal continua: there is the multiplicity dispersed over a plane, which is condensed and composed in the moment of instituting (event, incision, break), and there is the continual multiplication of instituting along a timeline (stream, process, persistence).

The first component, the temporality of the event, the break, the incision, the first time also enables questioning the connection between constituent power and instituent practice. This raises problems of the form of concatenation, problems of inclusion, and problems of authority in a double sense: authority as a decisive instance, which installs itself implicitly or explicitly as a hierarchical position; but also 'authority' as a singular 'origin' of instituting, as machinic-dividual authorship (*auctoritas*). If instituent practice can be understood as stream *and* as incision, then it is the event of instituting, in which the preliminary decision is made about how cooperation develops, how the *con-* in constituent power relates to the mode of instituting.

The discourses surrounding 'the author' of instituting occurs here in two different and decisive modes: on the one hand as an 'authoritarian' subject imposes its form on the object of instituting; on the other hand, as an instituent machine, the 'authorship' of which does not depend on an individual or collective. Transposed to artistic practice, this terminological bifurcation of au(c)thority recalls the distinction between the paternalistic artist, on the one hand — who identifies an audience or a community and chooses it as her/his object, predicting and preceding it — and the artistic singularity, on the other, who/which enters into the machinic stream that leads to instituting, where sometimes more, sometimes less artistic skill is needed. In this second mode there is no talk of the avant-garde, of the artist predicting or even preceding, but rather of becoming-common as experimenting with forms of social organisation, with instituting and composing singularities. This mode of instituting is therefore not only symbolically effective, but its tendency toward either an authoritarian positing or a composition of the singular is also crucial for its later potential as insisting, instituent practice and for the ongoing impulses for machinic-dividual production of desire.

On the second temporality of instituent practice, the process, the stream, the insistence: these mutually interlinked main components of instituent practice centre around the properties of long duration, persistence, and repetition, which are only seemingly opposite to the event. The instituting, the first, repeats itself, but not as an origin — strictly speaking, there is no strong first time in the flux of instituting. Instituent practice does not stop with instituting a break or an incision, but is instead distinguished by ever new

instances of instituting, the first time of which is actualised in a non-linear way in potentially endlessly different variations.

Multiplying and perpetuating the event of instituting allows a change in the quality of composition: the concatenation of the many, ongoing, and differently-composed instances of instituting forestalls an authoritarian mode of institution, turning against the closing (in) of the institution. The multiplication of instances of instituting shifts the composition of the multiplicity distributed over a plane with every new event of instituting.

Of course, an instituent practice could emerge in any social field. But let us stick for a moment to a specific example between theatre and occupation. Amateur theatre in the anarchistic-autonomist sense and in the Brechtian tradition was started in 1994 in the squat Ernst-Kirchweger-Haus (EKH) in the Viennese workers' district Favoriten. Autonomist political groups, anarchists, and Kurds began to squat in the house, which had previously been used in the 1930s as a variety theatre, in 1990. In addition to the autonomist and Kurdish-Turkish groups, in the mid-1990s there were also Roma families and refugees living in the EKH, which was repeatedly the focal point of political disputes. These disputes sometimes took place with the Communist Party of Austria as the owner of the house, which did not entirely accept the squatters without resistance, and sometimes with the police, whose raids were apparently aimed at combating the specific combination of autonomist and migrant squatters (as well as those without papers).

Volxtheater, as theatre activists in the EKH called their practice, arose firstly from the idea of switching from event organisation (in other words, from setting up the PA for concerts all the way to cleaning toilets) to producing the event. Secondly, it arose from the fun in expanding the primarily musical event experiences by introducing more performative and linguistic elements, which led to the development of their versions of operas (from the opera of 'Beggars for Beggars', to the dog-opera, to the trip-hop opera).

Counter to the class-specific function of the bourgeois theatre, counter to spectacular cultural industry formats, but also counter to the structuralised forms of the independent theatre of the 1990s, alternative processes of working and rehearsing were developed. Volxtheater activist Gini Müller later summarised these processes in his article 'Transversal or Terror?' (2002): 'Interests, conflicts, living conditions continuously changed the group composition, but

the principles defined in the beginning remained: no director, collective work and decisions, no personal fees, open to interested people'. From 1994 to 1997, in addition to smaller projects, Volxtheater developed and produced Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Three-Penny Opera*, a free interpretation of Kleist's *Penthesilea*, and Heiner Müller's *Der Auftrag* with considerable success as operas with band and DJ participation and eventually the use of electronic music. The treatment of these plays became increasingly free with the authority of names entirely dispensed within the collective production process and the performances evolving in Volxtheater plena and experimental rehearsals.

Following their successful first production, the *Three-Penny Opera*, the theatre collective decided to update Kleist's *Penthesilea* as a play about wild women, going beyond the classic identity clichés of femininity and women's struggles, and instead experimenting with queer, transversal concepts. What was raging and resistive about Kleist's Amazon drama, written in 1806-07 and condemned as unplayable after its première 70 years later, was used to develop a contemporary aesthetic of women's resistance. In this way, a feminist furioso was to be created, in which women 'naturally' appear militant, yet without simply assuming macho-martial poses:

Fighting. Nothing easier than that. Every female memory stores enough wounds inflicted by society as a structure or as a man. A little autonomist screaming or dance exercise releases memories of long repressed offenses from the cramps and posture damage. Our bodies and voices, necks and stomachs are marked by the — fortunately failed — education to be good, pretty, pleasant little girls. A few warm-up exercises and our fists start pounding by themselves. (Volxtheater Favoriten, *Penthesilea*, 1996)

Going beyond Kleist's position of abstracting gender aspects, the Volxtheater *Penthesilea* was used to invent a non-particular offensive from gender-specific experiences of oppression. To begin with, the queen and the main heroine were abolished, priestesses and princesses turned into comrades, and the heroine's monologues re-distributed among many women. Lesbian love relationships, Achilles' becoming a woman, the idea of a world with any number of gender variations, but also the attempt to link anti-sexist and anti-racist strands (an autonomist Amazon group kidnaps the Minister of the Interior, whereby the Amazon army meets the reality of the year

1996, which in the EKH is one of more and more police raids and associated racist assaults) expanded the strategies of breaking out of identity models.

The collective discussions and rehearsals in the months before the performances provoked crucial conflicts and an exchange of experiences, which were to decisively influence the further development of the Volxtheater all the way to the renowned VolxTheater Karawane (PublixTheatreCaravan). Especially the disputes over classic cadre obedience, rationality, self-discipline, and subordination under the flag of a primary contradiction were played out again and again. This process is described by Volxtheater:

Vehement discussions. Should we show Amazons as they are supposed to be? Those that place the collective struggle above their own ego trips? Those that listen calmly to one another, not interrupting, always considerate of the weakest members in their group? Or should our Amazons' Kleistian conflicts, the love of a man, the madness, the megalomania, the passion for war lead them into disarray? Vehement discussions. Shouldn't the courageous women resistance fighters in the male-dominated liberation movements fight twice as much? Against armies. And against the patriarchal structures in their own organization. Haven't they been barred often enough from fighting against patriarchal structures within the organization because of the need for unity against the class enemy?

Volxtheater did not stop to break through processes of structuralisation and closure in the political project of the squatted house and to initiate a persistent movement of opening and instituting. Later this instituent process increasingly expanded: from performances in the EKH itself, to guest performances in other squatted houses, to performances on the street, and finally various forms of activist theatre caravans. In controversies revolving around organisational forms and contents, however, the Volxtheater kept coming back to its implicit function, to the most important aspect of the pre-caravan Volxtheater as an instituent practice. Even with the first performances in the EKH, it was not solely a matter of criticising capitalist society and bourgeois theatre practice, but also of using the means of collective art production to institute something new.

Institutions of the Common

As Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt write in their preface to *Commonwealth* (2009), the commons is, on the one hand, 'the common wealth of the material world — the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature's bounty — which in classical European political texts is often claimed to be the inheritance of humanity as a whole'. On the other hand, and this is the aspect stressed by Hardt and Negri, the commons encompasses 'those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledge, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth'. In terms of the latter, the commons therefore means the practices of interaction, of care, of living together in a common world. These are practices that do not consider 'humanity' as separate from 'nature', either in the logic of exploitation or in that of protection.

On these two levels *Commonwealth* can be interpreted as an ending to the authors' trilogy (*Empire* [2000], *Multitude* [2004], *Commonwealth*) that correlates with the fading of the anti-globalisation movement. This is a further step towards actualising post-operaist theory and to enrich it with new theoretical currents (in this case mostly queer, feminist, and postcolonial concepts). Yet, the talk about the end of the anti-globalisation movement is taken in by all too simple ideas of cycles of struggles and submerges the various changes, passages, and trajectories of the different social movements (probably already since 1968, doubtlessly since the 1990s). On the other hand, taking into account the continuities of movements such as the Zapatistas, of anti-globalisation, social fora, precarious workers, and student occupations, the discourse about the end is nothing more than a pathetic phantasy of rupture. From this perspective *Commonwealth* not only constitutes an end of a trilogy, but also marks the beginning of a new boom of social struggles connected to all those movements.

Over the course of the whole book one can discern a third aspect of the common — in addition to the two prevalent meanings introduced in the preface — one that picks up on the issue of the concatenation between the singular streams of a multiplicity as a central theme: the common as a self-organisation of the social relations. Self-organisation should not be understood here in any way as a simple empirical fact or a nature-like automatism, but as the political project of instituting the common. This implies that the common cannot be perceived as being-common, but only as becoming-common, as a constant production of the common. It also implies that the

common and the singularities are co-emergent, not only compatible, but constituting each other.

An institution of the common can emerge through the (self) transformative molecularisation of existing institutions, but it can also be practiced as an occupation in the sense of occupying new territories. Of course, there is nothing on earth like an empty space or territory, but in the multiple crises state apparatuses (and for that matter art institutions) start to leak, some of them are evaded and others are emptied out. This is a potential moment of instituting persistent occupations.

It is more than a temporal occupation, more than occupations like the one of Théâtre de l'Odéon in 1968 or the cultural section of the Occupy movement (known as 'Occupy Museums') in 2011 in New York. An art institution of the common applies permanent and persistent modes of occupation. Of course in the last 50 years many occupation movements included actors of the art field. In 2011, alongside the revolutions of the so-called Arab Spring and the M15 movement in Spain (and even before the movement which became known as the Occupy movement), emerged a new wave of occupations in Italy, this time in the field of theatre. In that year many theatres and cultural spaces across Italy were occupied: the Cinema Palazzo and the Angelo Mai in Rome, the S. A. L. E. Docks in Venice (occupied already in 2007), the Asilo della Creatività e della Conoscenza in Naples, the Teatro Coppola in Catania, the Cantieri Arsenale and the Teatro Garibaldi Aperto in Palermo, and the Macao in Milan.

All of these occupation practices have been linked to or influenced by the occupation of the Teatro Valle, the oldest theatre in Rome (founded in 1727), which was occupied by actors, directors, musicians, and cultural workers when it was threatened by privatisation in June 2011. Its occupiers renamed the theatre 'Teatro Valle Occupato' and declared it a *bene comune*: a common good. They occupied the space on 14 June 2011, the very day of a referendum, when Italy's water system was declared a *bene comune*. There was a deliberate connection with and return of the two meanings of the commons in *Commonwealth*: the first aspect, the material, 'natural' component of the commons, represented by water, was connected to the immaterial common good of theatre production.

The instituent machine of the Teatro Valle became a reterritorialising force. The social machines and body-machines of actors, musicians, directors, technicians, and other cultural workers re-territorialised the traditional everyday life of a theatre and fabri-

cated a new territory. Of course, this occupation was based on the profound crisis of labour in the cultural field, on the precarisation especially of the younger generations of theatre workers, on the corruption of classical theatre production and its consumers. But it would be far too narrow to conceptualise the Teatro Valle Occupato as just another sign of protest against the theatre world.

As in all cases of the occupation movements in 2011, the seizing of the space was connected with questions of assembly, of condensation, of the form, place, and time of reterritorialisation. The occupiers took seriously the space and time they set up, taking time for long, patient discussions and time to stay in this place, and developing new forms of organisation and production every day. Here the theatre was not just a symbol anymore; the stage was not just a privileged space of representation, but also a place of nonrepresentationist, inclusive, molecular organisation. And all of a sudden there was also a front against the Valle, or even more than one front. Conservatives began to reel off their traditional discourses of 'aesthetic relevance': 'non è accaduto nulla di teatralmente rilevante', not seeing that a radically new ethico-aesthetics can emerge only from evading the logics of the spectacle and from the experiments with molecular organisation. Then also the old independent theatre scene began to feel excluded, and some from the old left complained — 'tecnicamente siamo di fronte a una privatizzazione mascherata' — that the Valle was masking privatisation in their eyes. For the activists these attacks might have been harmful, but in fact they were just a symptom of the misunderstanding of the common, still applying the old private-public dualism.

Yet the idea of the theatre as a *bene comune* was not just a flowery expression of a bunch of new hippies in the background of the creative industries. It was closely connected to the combined social and juridical invention of an institution of the common. In this sense, the occupiers also worked hard to establish a new legal structure: the Fondazione Teatro Valle Bene Comune. After 27 months of occupation, they presented the statutes and the 'political codex' of their foundation on 18 September 2013. In this political codex, they declared the Valle an institution of the common, based on self-organisation and consensus, on new forms of social security in discontinuous forms of creative labour, on an economic model against privatisation, and finally on an understanding of intellectual property that builds upon the social richness of knowledge as a commons.

It is evident that new institutions of the common need protocols and lasting consensual agreements. But even with the most revolutionary set of rules, the molecular machines are in constant danger of being swallowed by their own state apparatus. So the really urgent questions are not about the symbolic quality of the occupation or the hegemonic discourses, but rather questions of this kind: what happens in the oscillations between the sociality of the occupation and the model-like prescription of the rules of an institution of the commons? How not to forget that the institutional process was generated inside the struggle? How to avoid the molecularisation of the molecular organisation? Here, the third aspect of the common comes into play again: the protagonists of the Valle transcended the purely legal logic and recomposed multiplicity exactly through the social-juridical procedure of a constituent process in which legal text machines and social machines work together. A finished and stabilised constitution was not the aim, but a constituent process, an instituent practice in search for commonism. The many assemblies, transversal projects, and ethico-aesthetic experiments were not meant to be striated, standardised, and cut down by the legal structure of the new *fondazione*, but the procedures of the constituent process were supposed to produce the common as collective self-organisation and self-education. In this sense the statutes of a foundation of the commons that was never legitimised by the state could only serve as components of a molecular becoming-common. Occupying the theatre does not mean taking over the old institution and giving it new rules, but transforming and reinventing its very forms, inventing an instituent theatre.

JAN GOOSSENS

THE ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES AND TENSIONS OF A CITY-THEATRE



KVS 2001-2015

I. Origins of a Flemish Repertoire Company

When KVS, the Royal Flemish Theatre of Brussels, was founded on 1 October 1887, there was no artistic agenda as such. The new cultural institution's mission was overtly political and its strategies were broadly cultural. In the nineteenth century, the Belgian state was unitary, Francophone and bourgeoisie-dominated, and offered little cultural, political, or economic space and power to its Flemish community. KVS was therefore founded to play a leading role in the cultural and general emancipation of that Flemish community, which in Brussels formed a large, powerless majority. KVS quickly turned into the symbol of what was, at first, a battle for cultural recognition (mainly a language struggle taking place before the Second World War), then a fight for political representation. A symbolically crucial moment in the struggle for linguistic emancipation was the very first speech ever made by a Belgian King in the Dutch language at KVS in 1894 – it was during that speech that the Flemish Theatre was given the title of 'Royal' Flemish Theatre by King Leopold II. (King Leopold II at that time was also the individual owner of the Congo Free State in Central Africa which became an official Belgian colony in 1907, a topic KVS has dealt with extensively in the past ten years).

The political fight for representation came into full force after the Second World War, when KVS had really become the cultural 'centre' from where an emerging, self-conscious Flemish bourgeoisie imagined itself, albeit without having gained any formal political representation and power yet. Identifying with and strongly supporting KVS was by then an integral part of almost every Flemish citizen's civic responsibility. Throughout its history, the KVS has played an important role, without any real interruption or change, in developing a theatre repertoire in Dutch, housing a company of prestigious Flemish actors with 'national' visibility, and developing a Flemish cultural audience and intellectual community. The institutional shape of KVS was traditional: an intendant/director had

the entire artistic responsibility – they made the repertoire decisions, they picked the permanent actors, and they staged most of the productions. This ‘bourgeois repertoire company’ model (not unlike the model of many Central- and Eastern-European National Theatres and of some the city theatres in Germany) remained the dominant institutional model of KVS up until 2001.

The struggle for Flemish emancipation was eventually successful in prompting far-reaching political reforms. After decades of both slow and sudden reforms, it even ended up fundamentally changing the Belgian state model. Within their own region and community, the Flemish acquired substantial competences and financial means to give shape to their own future. The Flemish community in Brussels – where the French-speakers had in the meantime become the majority – turned into one of the best-protected minorities in the world. Culture was disconnected from the Belgian federal level and became a matter for the community level, which meant that KVS now formally became one of the key houses of official Flemish cultural life. Even though a strong connection remained with the city of Brussels (which owns the entire KVS infrastructure and is the company’s second biggest funder), the KVS was seen within the imaginary of the Flemish community as exclusively ‘their’ house of culture, in ‘their’ capital city. The artistic project of KVS was still secondary to this political mission of identity-formation.

The Belgian state reform in 1993 could have been a turning point for both the Flemish community in Belgium and for KVS in Brussels. The Flemish nationalist, inward-looking focus, could have grown into an outward-looking perspective. KVS could have explored different paths towards developing a common future in a federal state that now offered extensive possibilities to the Flemish to organise large parts of their life as a community, with relative or even far-reaching autonomy, within a European framework. However, despite all of these constitutional changes and a wave of ground-breaking and radically new developments in the Flemish performing arts landscape from the early 1980s onwards, the agenda of a considerable part of the Flemish political establishment, and the mission of KVS as a traditional Flemish repertoire company, remained unchanged. In other words, they kept their old directions even though they radicalised them.

Whereas the Flemish struggle for emancipation also had a progressive, anti-bourgeois component in the beginning, the ultra-nationalist component definitively rose to prominence after 1993.

This added an explicitly liberal set of economic goals to an ever more radical demand for increased political autonomy, a cultural vision based on linguistic homogeneity, and ethical conservatism. KVS remained a theatre for and by the Flemish population of Brussels, stubbornly stuck in a Flemish emancipatory mode whereas that Flemish battle had been fought and won. At the same time, they ignored the reality of Brussels which had been changing fast, becoming very mixed, in an evolution that put new struggles for emancipation on the agenda. Just as importantly, KVS was losing touch with the new reality of the Flemish performing arts, in which a number of avant-garde artists didn't only reinvent their art form, but also the institutional context within which they worked. These artists developed their own independent structures in which the artistic practice of the central artist was the starting-point for the internal organisation, and which quickly gained international visibility and recognition.

One could say that after reaching the point of relative ('national') liberation, the Flemish community's focus now shifted towards reaching national unity: an idealised form of belonging together in an ethnically and linguistically uniform community, which often situates the origins of that unity in a fictionalised common past that never really existed. The unitary Belgian state is now slowly being replaced by a Flemish community whose nation-building ambitions are not yet oppressive, but whose focus on national unity, cultural homogeneity, monolingualism, economic neo-liberalism, and ethical conservatism don't fit well together within the increasingly mixed realities of its capital city of Brussels. Within this Flemish context of 'nation-building', no need was felt to question or open up the artistic mission or institutional model of KVS. Therefore, KVS remained a permanent company of actors working for homogeneous Flemish and bourgeois audiences, which produces traditional repertoire productions without any artistic risks or connections to the work of the avant-garde artists mentioned above. Again and still, the artistic project of KVS remained at the service of its political mission of identity formation.

For the current KVS team, which began its mandate in 2001, a long-term struggle started to develop a new mission, legitimacy, and institutional model for KVS in this fundamentally different context. On the one hand, the battle for Flemish emancipation had been won, but on the other, KVS's immediate urban and artistic context had completely changed. To put it simply, KVS had lost its cultural and

political reason to exist in a city with which it had no connections left. KVS had ignored, or been incapable of developing, any artistic connections with the generation of avant-garde Flemish artists and independent companies that made the Flemish performing arts landscape explode in the 1980s and the 1990s. Was their new legitimacy simply to be found in a nostalgic looking back and embracing of the ‘multicultural’ aspects of the Belgian state, which after 1993 became the institutional house for three communities, their languages, and, to a certain extent, even their cultures? Or were we, on the other hand, to identify with a strong Flemish political current that claims that we would be a morally better, politically more efficient, economically more productive, and culturally more coherent Flemish community if we were to become an independent nation-state? Finally, could KVS really continue to draw its artistic and institutional legitimacy as a Flemish repertoire company built around an intendant / director from the success stories of some of the German city theatres of the 1970s and 1980s and their ‘director’s theatre’? How could the house develop a pertinent artistic project, how could artists take up a role in it and fully take advantage of all of its capacities, and at the same time take into account rather than ignore the exceptional political position of KVS within Flemish society?

The new team decided to look forward, not backward, and draw its cultural and political inspiration from the unexplored challenges of the new reality in Brussels, rather than from the known territory of Belgium’s existing state structure, or from the emerging Flemish state’s structure. The city of Brussels therefore became the starting point and the stepping-stone for a radically new vision of the artistic and political mission of KVS. In order to reach that vision we adopted a perspective on our city that was, in many ways, ‘stateless’: a city that has no country. If we want to capitalise on the radically mixed and multilingual reality of Brussels; if we want to take seriously the fact that as a population in this city we share no common past but have to develop a common future; if we want to understand the implications of a bi-communitarian political structure that Belgium – and its Flemish and Francophone communities – imposes on Brussels not taking into account more than half of the city’s population; and, last but not least, if we want to reconnect with the vital new energies in the Flemish performing arts, then we have to dare to think outside of the evaporating Belgian state structures, the emerging Flemish state structures, and the traditional institutional model of KVS.

KVS's mission today is to artistically account for the life of the nation as it emerges in the diverse and cosmopolitan urban laboratory that is Brussels, and to fully integrate the new artistic trajectories, explorations, and forms that have emerged in Flanders over the past decades. We want to account for the extremely hybrid life of Brussels, radically mixed and multilingual, that points towards a common future that needs to be constructed and that will need to be a shared space. In today's Brussels only about 9% of all households are Dutch-speaking, and what is more, only between 45% and 50% of all households are French-speaking. In all other households a mix of languages is used, and in most cases one of those languages is neither Dutch nor French but are increasingly likely to be English or Arabic. Brussels is one of the wealthiest regions in Europe, accounting for about a third of Belgium's GDP and attracting highly-educated individuals from around the continent, but it also has a 20% unemployment rate. About 30% of the population live under the poverty line. While Brussels is a rather small city compared to London and Paris, it is, through its current population, very cosmopolitan and extremely connected to other parts of the world such as Central Africa or Palestine. Political trouble in Kinshasa or on the West Bank immediately leads to instability in Brussels.

Artistically accounting for the hybridity of Brussels has meant completely transforming the artistic project and the institutional structure of this company. It has meant giving a much more important role to a much wider range of artists/creators, and making space for multi-disciplinary art forms other than theatre, since dance and music are some of the most dynamic art forms in Brussels today and are often better suited to speak to the entire, linguistically-mixed city. It has also meant changing the repertoire of KVS to focus more on developing new repertoire for the city rather than endlessly playing the classics of the Western repertoire, which mean less and less for a growing part of the city's population. It has also implied letting go of a permanent company of Flemish actors. Documenting and artistically transforming the diversity of today's Brussels requires undertaking extremely different projects in different disciplines, or drawing from multiple disciplines at the same time, and especially, drawing on very different artists. A wide diversity of such artists have come to play a much more fundamental role in how the institution is organised, how it functions, and what its artistic and other priorities are. Finally, we have also attempted to play a humble but

real role in today's struggles for the emancipation of some of the new minority communities in the city that are just as excluded from the official conversations and from official cultural life today as the Flemish used to be a hundred years ago. To reiterate, Brussels is deeply connected to a number of cities in the Global South, but its political and cultural structures do not reflect that in any way. In that sense KVS definitely doesn't see itself as an anti-Flemish project; on the contrary, KVS considers itself to be the true heir of the emancipatory Flemish movement.

II. Transformation into a Brussels City Theatre

a. Structure and Hierarchy

KVS always had a strict and simple artistic hierarchy: the intendant-director made all of the artistic decisions with very little consultation of, or input from, the company of actors or other artistic collaborators. Repertoire choices, casting choices, staging choices were all in the hands of one individual. The artistic project of the company overlapped with the artistic trajectory of the intendant-director who also had the overall financial and operational responsibility of the company.

In 2001 a radical change was opted for by the institution's board, which had less to do with an analysis of the artistic, cultural, or political position of the company, than with a pragmatic financial and infrastructural crisis (a large accumulated deficit and a renovation of the historic KVS building, which was extremely complicated and costly) that endangered the institution's future. However, there was some sense that the complete isolation of the company could not continue and that KVS had to be reconnected with the city of Brussels and the Flemish artistic landscape.

In May 2001, I was appointed artistic director of KVS and Danny Opdebeeck was appointed as the financial director. Both of us were under the age of 30 at the time. For the first time in decades the artistic director of KVS was not an artist and did not have to shoulder the overall financial responsibility of the company by himself. The artistic and financial directors found themselves on the same level within the institution. That might look like a degradation of the artistic component of the company, but it also led to new possibilities. For the first time it would not be one artist's vision or trajectory that would be central to the company, but rather a diversity of artistic voices would be included in KVS's artistic project.

The project would be held together by the vision of Brussels as a diverse and cosmopolitan city, rather than the construction of a Flemish identity and repertoire. On the operational level finding a consensus between the artistic and financial departments was inscribed in the daily procedures of the company, which brought these two departments back together in a way that proved to be very productive.

b. Repertoire

With very few exceptions KVS had always limited itself to the bookcase of existing, classical, and Western repertoire. From 2001 it opted for a radical opening up of its notion of repertoire. To begin with, the choice was made that KVS would be a performing arts house, rather than simply a house of theatre. Repertoire also exists in dance and music, but it is not necessarily text-based. All ‘materials’ (movement, sound, images) that could be the starting-point for artistic creation were looked at as building blocks for potential new – and meaningful – Brussels repertoire. Within the theatrical repertoire, a special focus was put on commissioning new text-based work or on digging up existing but forgotten repertoire that would have special pertinence in this city.

For example, *Gembloux*, a new text developed by the ‘Maroxellois’ authors Sam Touzani and Ben Hamidou, which dealt with North-African ‘tirailleurs’ that were conscripted by the Allied Forces to fight with them against the Nazi-troops in the Second World War, led to a crucial production. For the first time ‘homegrown’ Brussels artists with an immigrant background, who had never had any reason to identify with the institution KVS, collaborated with the rest of the KVS team. For the first time also the audience turned out to be a mix of French-speaking, Dutch-speaking, and Berber-speaking Brussels citizens, many of them coming to KVS for the first time. All of them realised that nobody had the monopoly on the Second World War and that it was a piece of Brussels, Belgian, European, and world history that they all shared.

In another example, *The Life and Works of Leopold II* by Belgian author Hugo Claus, is a piece dealing with Belgium’s colonial past that was written in 1969 but was never staged in Belgium. This proved to be the starting production of a long trajectory giving visibility to the fact that Brussels, in an historic and contemporary sense, is not only the Flemish, Belgian, and European capital, but also a profoundly African city. More recent productions and projects, such as

Thomas Bellinck's *Domo de Europa Historia en Ekzilo* (2013), an exhibition-performance dealing with the falling apart of the European project; Alain Platel, Fabrizio Cassol, and Serge Kakudji's *Coup Fatal* (2015), in which European baroque music is revitalised by a Congolese orchestra turning the arias of Händel and Vivaldi into Kinshasa pop songs; and *Infini* (2015), in which architect Jozef Wouters digs deep into the history and future of the 'Bol' (the 500-seat performance space 'à l'Italienne' of KVS) as a space and instrument for theatrical imagination, show the variety and depth of what contemporary repertoire for a city theatre like KVS can be.

c. Company and Artists

The position of artists in KVS radically changed from 2001 onwards. Until then, KVS had always had an in-house company of permanent actors. They were rather passive elements in the artistic trajectory and projects of the intendant-director. For all sorts of reasons, this did not seem the right model if we wanted to connect KVS to the hybrid reality of Brussels and the diverse artistic landscape in Flanders. The idea was to build very diverse artistic seasons, with input from a variety of artists and creators working in a multiplicity of disciplines, and to offer reasons for very different and new audiences to identify with KVS with every new project. This could not be done starting from the same company of permanent actors. Even more importantly, the artists/creators we were interested in were all but passive elements for the company. It was these artists/creators who would lead the artistic project and the general model of the new KVS. From 2001 to 2005 the permanent company of actors was down-sized gradually until no permanent members were left. This created the much-needed financial and artistic space in those first years to try out diverse collaborations with a variety of artists and independent companies, many of whom had never had the chance, or more precisely, had never wanted to work at KVS.

When KVS returned to its renovated historic building in the centre of Brussels in 2006, the need was felt to drastically reinforce the in-house presence of artists-creators. The Brussels-based independent company Dito'Dito – founded in reaction against big institutions like KVS in the early 1990s and with a rich track-record in developing artistic projects in and with the city of Brussels – stepped into the KVS project, together with three young, Brussels-based directors: Raven Ruëll, Ruud Gielens, and David Strosberg. All of these artists were made co-responsible for every artistic deci-

sion from then on. In a weekly meeting with the artistic director and two permanent dramaturgs, these in-house artists decided by consensus on every single project that would be produced or invited by KVS. This nine-member artistic team co-signed every KVS season from 2006 to 2009. Their role within the company was manifold: creators, performers, programmers. Then from 2009 on, both the new and permanent artists went on to discover other horizons and left KVS, for reasons that were both internal and external. When a new generation (Thomas Bellinck and Jozef Wouters) started making their way into the company, they expressed the wish not to be included in the artistic team as such. However, their role in and impact on the company increased gradually, one reason for this being that they realised very ambitious and, for KVS, atypical projects such as the exhibition *Domo de Europa* and the meta-theatre performance *Infini* that required all departments of the house to function in much more flexible and inventive ways.

III. Cases

a. KVS and Brussels

In transforming KVS from a traditional Flemish repertoire company to a Brussels city-theatre, the overall aim was to let KVS reflect as much as possible the hybrid reality of Brussels, to document it, and artistically transform it. The first crucial steps were made during the Bottelarij-years (2001-06) in Molenbeek, while the historic KVS building in the centre of Brussels was being renovated. In Molenbeek, artistic steps were made with Brussels artists such as Sam Touzani and Ben Hamidou to introduce surtitles and multi-linguism on a structural basis and even on stage and the first collaborations with Brussels-based company Dito'Dito were set in motion.

This Brussels-perspective was radicalised the most in the 2011-12 season under the title TokTocKnock and driven by KVS artist Willy Thomas. For an entire year, all KVS creations were made outside of the house and outside of its classical performance spaces in three different areas of Brussels. A group of about 15 varying artists – who were all Brussels-based from different generations and working in different disciplines – used various elements of the urban Brussels reality as building blocks for artistic creation. After two months of working in each of the three areas, their creations were shown in temporary venues and in the public space of these areas. Thomas Bellinck's *Domo de Europa* and the first KVS collaborations with