

Community Arts: the Theatre of the Future?

140

[WOUTER HILLAERT]

Community arts in Flanders are unique in the world for at least one reason: they are known as 'social arts' (*sociaal-artistiek*) rather than 'community arts'. This immediately tells us a great deal about how they evolved and how they are perceived. For ten years now, they have been an integral part of arts policy. They may one day be the model for all artists – although the rest of the arts field has yet to realise it.

In 2014, the social-arts field in Flanders had two anniversaries to celebrate, but they went unnoticed. The first of these was the twentieth anniversary of the General Report on Poverty, published by the King Baudouin Foundation in 1994. The report is generally held to be the cradle of what would later become 'social arts'. The Report was based on the accounts given by people living in poverty, and it emerged that they felt cultural exclusion at least as deeply as material deprivation. For the poor, not taking part in the culture production of Flanders was just as much a problem as not having enough money to buy new clothes or pay the electricity bill. This was news to welfare workers and policymakers alike. Cultural participation became an additional key aspect in tackling poverty. Budgets were made available for artistic initiatives actively aimed at people experiencing poverty. Theatre proved to be a unique way to encourage them to tell their story, by literally making themselves heard and daring to make themselves visible to others.

This wondrous chemistry still takes place in community theatre: learning to act increases your self-esteem and greater self-esteem makes you a better actor. And even: the greater the artistic value of a project, the greater its social quality. Hence the term 'social arts'. In theory, at least. In practice, social-arts work evolved out of welfare work, and projects were led by culturally engaged welfare workers rather than established directors. In those days, the aim was not primarily to make art but to tackle poverty in a non-material way.

This is how the origin of social-arts practice in Flanders differs fundamentally from the often much older traditions of community arts in many other countries. It was not so much about political emancipation, as under the apart-

heid regime in South Africa, or attempts at peacekeeping, as in Northern Ireland, or keeping youngsters with no future prospects off the streets, as in occupied Palestine. In Flanders, community arts did not evolve as a bottom-up emancipation movement among cultural minorities, as has usually been the case in Britain, or as an effect of the political theatre of the 1970s, as in the community-based Rotterdams Wijktheater in the Netherlands. The birth of Flemish social arts was a top-down policy decision.

And it was at least a decision that fell on fertile ground. In 1994, Flanders was dealing with the aftermath of Black Sunday, the first major electoral success of the far-right racist party Vlaams Blok on 24 November 1991. The victory was a shock for civil society and the cultural field alike. Surely, when excluded citizens in the working-class neighbourhoods voted for a party that turned their exclusion into its trademark, it was time to put more energy into winning these citizens over to democracy again? Social-arts practice was not only a way of combating poverty, but also an emancipating cultural-participation project. When Antwerp was cultural capital of Europe in 1993, one of its official slogans was 'Can Art Save the World?' It was in this context that social-arts work was born. It was not only about the cultural emancipation of the poor, but at least as clearly about the social awakening of the cultural elite from postmodernism – out of the 'black box' of the so successful 'Vlaamse Golf' (Flemish Wave) and into the community!

Tartuffe, Platform K & NT-Gent, Photo by Arnold Van Herreweghe.



The art of the social arts

The second anniversary that went unnoticed in 2014 was the tenth anniversary of the Arts Decree (*Kunstendecreet*), a subsidy system introduced in 2004, with which the Minister for Culture, Bert Anciaux, brought together, in a single policy approach, all arts disciplines that did not have a fund. His strong commitment to 'culture for all' prompted his decision to integrate the nascent social arts in the new decree, alongside performing arts, visual arts, music and architecture. It is difficult to overestimate the impact of this voluntaristic decision. Suddenly, the five pioneering social-arts organisations – Victoria Deluxe and Bij' De Vieze Gasten (both in Ghent), De Unie der Zorgelozen (Kortrijk), De Figuranten (Menen) and Sering (Antwerp) – no longer had to scratch together project subsidies from all manner of sources year after year, but could now apply for structural funding for four years, and therefore finally establish a professional operation.



Buffalo Forever, Victoria Deluxe.

More importantly, after 2004 the artistic aspect gained ground. Social-arts productions had now extended their reach to local residents, senior citizens, prisoners, people without documents, young people from migrant backgrounds, psychiatric patients, et al. And, according to the Arts Decree, these performances didn't necessarily have to be of the same standard as professional theatre. Nevertheless, organisations took as much pride in creating an artistically convincing product as in the social process. They wanted to make worthwhile art. It was just as much about 'developing a new artistic language' as providing a platform for stories that receive too little attention in the cultural space. Today, in fact, hardly anyone refers to combating poverty, except as an integral part of the 'empowerment' of voices in society that are not so easily heard. Over a period of hardly twenty years, 'social arts' has transformed from disparate welfare practices to a fully-fledged sector of the arts landscape.

The inclusion of community arts in arts policy is something else that makes the Flemish situation unique. In Flanders, it is first and foremost the capacities that art encompasses – creativity, critical sense, sensitivity, alternative thinking, awareness of form – that shape the social aspect of community arts. Naturally, there has been intense debate during the ten years on the relative emphasis on the social and the artistic. For example, does the artistic emphasis provide sufficient scope for more accessible and above all process-oriented projects involving truly vulnerable people? Nevertheless, there is a broad consensus among those involved in the social arts: the Arts Decree was a blessing.

It extended the initial focus on theatre to other disciplines – from film and choral song to circus and visual arts – to the extent that many organisations today have a multidisciplinary approach. It has led to a situation in which the first, fairly documentary human-interest productions – actually real-life accounts thinly disguised as theatre pieces – have now made way for more abstracted general stories about the state of society in which there is also scope for humour and self-criticism. Call it an artistic 'coming of age'. It is thanks to the Arts Decree, after all, that professional directors and artists have been persuaded to approach social-arts organisations, that a prestigious civic theatre like NTGent makes co-productions with Platform K (for artists with a disability), and a major arts centre like Vooruit sets up projects with Victoria Deluxe.

Whereas community arts in other countries sometimes tend to operate in a somewhat insular fashion, in Flanders there is increasing interaction and branching. It is no coincidence that theatres such as the KVS (Royal Flemish Theatre, Brussels) and Antigone (Kortrijk) engage in social-arts projects, or that cultural centres such as De Warande in Turnhout or De Spil in Roeselare set up broad community projects based on similar methods. Social-arts practice is becoming much more a specific artistic approach than a separate, securely fenced-off field of the arts.

A broad patchwork

Yet it still cannot be said that there is one single approach. There are as many approaches as there are companies, and even projects; the approaches are as diverse as the casts. For a long time, Victoria Deluxe followed a target-group approach whereby almost every new project involved new players, ranging from detainees in Ghent prison (De Nieuwe Wandeling) in music-theatre

performances behind closed doors, to intergenerational projects involving young people and senior citizens from a retirement home. Today it is just as interested in working on film documentaries (e.g. about AA Gent supporters and their love of the club) as on theatre productions with a returning and socially very diverse group of Ghent residents, based for example on Walter Benjamin's 'difficult' cultural criticisms. Victoria Deluxe is by far the most political social-arts organisation in Flanders, consistently opposing all manner of antisocial tendencies in society, for example by engaging players and audiences against the migration policy of the City of Ghent, new regulations of the Public Centre for Social Welfare, or the Israeli occupation of Palestine. In this context, community arts contributes to a global re-politicisation of the cultural field. Culture broadens the civic consciousness.

By contrast, Tutti Fratelli, a younger Antwerp theatre company led by the renowned actress Reinhilde Declair, focuses on the classic theatre repertoire, from Shakespeare to Bertolt Brecht. While most organisations produce new works that are the result of dialogue with their participants, Tutti Fratelli enables its players to 'become someone else' by offering them the safety of existing fictive characters. In order to do justice to the characters, a high artistic standard is set through a purely artisanal approach, with professional training in voice, stage movement and self-presentation on stage. The director Ivan Vrambout, in his work with companies including De Figuranten and Cie Tartaren (Leuven), also chose to adapt well-known works such as *Antigone* and *Uncle Vanya*, which regained a certain originality thanks to the stark authenticity of their small companies of players. The value of such an approach lies not so much in its contribution to social emancipation, but in the unique interpretations of the classics that depend purely on who performs them. When his characters are played by people recovering from depression, Chekhov's work is suddenly *more* – not less – Chekhovian.

At the Unie der Zorgelozen, the emphasis is on the sense of family within a neighbourhood, expressed in works written by the Unie's own artistic director Geert Six. Phenomena such as cycle racing or the local bar frequently serve as metaphors for what small communities do to each other, or for what higher authorities do to them. The Unie also offers 'development tracks': experienced participants work on their own creations or act as mentors for newer participants. In this context, social arts are about the resilience of an entire community. Productions can also relate to a context of urban renewal, as in Ghent's Rabot district, where theatre-maker Simon Allemeersch spent more than two years living in a controversial social housing block that was due for demolition. On the basis of his impressions, he worked with the residents to create a film and a one-man production. Other companies work on an international level, one example being Sering, which has worked for many years developing local productions from an international virtual network with other community-arts organisations in South Africa, Peru and Canada.

But there is no standard approach. Some organisations build on the work of a single theatre-maker, while others continually invite new directors to work with them. Participants form single, highly diverse groups that develop over the years, or share the same vulnerable profile and become involved in the arts just once. There are initiatives that operate on project subsidies or resources from a local OCMW, and others that employ several permanent staff and are involved in many projects simultaneously. Some organisations have their own premises,



Lysistrata, Tutti Fratelli.
Photo by Cuauhtémoc
Garmendia.

where participants can be received on a daily basis, and others are based in cultural centres. Social-arts practice in Flanders is thus evolving into an ever-larger patchwork that one day engages in a heated debate about the appropriate ideological approach, and the next day unites to lobby the Minister for Culture to increase the overall budget for community arts. And to think that the social-arts sector didn't even exist twenty years ago - a great deal has happened in that time.

Peripheral or central?

But a great deal still needs to happen. Community arts in Flanders are still not taken entirely seriously by the arts world as a whole. At best there is collaboration - for example between NTGent and Platform K - but this seems to be a PR strategy on the part of the civic theatre rather than a genuine artistic choice. Community arts still have low symbolic capital, particularly in a theatrical field in which artistic autonomy is so important, and in which 'engaging with society' is still regarded to a certain extent as an artistic addendum, a peripheral requirement to justify funding. The real level of interest is evident at events such as Enter, the biennial festival at which the social-arts field gathers to show its best work. At the most recent Enter, in 2012 in Ghent - the capital of the community arts in Flanders - in the whole ten-day period, there were hardly any arts programmers or arts-centre representatives to be seen. Do they not believe that anything happening in the social-arts world is relevant in terms of art itself?

One artistic benefit of community arts in Flanders (and probably worldwide) is the renewed appreciation of historic forms of popular culture. Without the existence of a definite plan, social-arts theatre is increasingly drawing on the traditions of the circus, fair, masquerade, carnival, variety, musicals, mediaeval fables, and even 'catch' (professional wrestling) and Kermesse cycle races. In capitalist societies these have become commercial events, but social-arts practice is restoring their original meaning: colourful protests by society's underdogs against the powers that be. Beneath the sensuous adornments, and with the necessary humour and irony, they present sharp political stories about the state of society. This makes for critical theatre *and* theatre with which many people can identify. It is proving to be an ingenious alternative to the traditional documentary mosaic, which mainly presented stories of the individual as a victim. The community arts have discovered their ideal metaphoric dramaturgy in the historically popular forms. They are also a useful solution in terms of staging productions involving large groups – often with as many as twenty or thirty players. While conventional theatre has fewer and fewer resources for staging large-cast productions, Tutti Fratelli & Co. are reinventing the subversive mass spectacle.

And there are other senses in which conventional theatre companies can learn from social-arts practice. At a time when support for subsidised arts is shrinking – to the accompaniment of populist cries of protest about 'subsidy-guzzling' and the arts being 'a leftist hobby' – arts organisations will have to demonstrate a stronger commitment to their social anchoring. Although Flemish politicians are considerably more convinced of the importance of the arts than their counterparts in Britain and the Netherlands, Flanders is also facing a new round of cutbacks. In terms of the future of the arts, the ability to forge connections with the rest of civil society will likely prove more important than establishing a unique artistic profile. Let that ability to connect be the speciality of community arts. For twenty years they have been building expertise in establishing a dialogue with new audiences, tapping into and maintaining broad networks, and persuading the non-involved to support culture. Soon these competencies will have to be part of every artist's basic skills package.



Nonkel Wanj, Cie Tartaren.
Photo by Sander de Wilde.

This shift is already taking place in the Netherlands, where, in 2011, one-third of the arts budget was cut. Young artists are now breaking away from the theatres and basing themselves in 'art factories in the cities. Half of their work involves communicating with the public. Their creativity is no longer purely in the artistic, it is also in the social aspect of their oeuvre. In Flanders too, a new generation of art-makers has emerged over the past ten years who no longer distinguish between working with professional actors in the theatre and being involved in participatory projects with illegal immigrants or prisoners. They do both, within a single artistic line. By nature, artists such as Thomas Bellinck, Simon Allemeersch, Michiel Soete, Lucas De Man, Jozef Wouters, Tom Dupont and many others want to be at the centre of things, and are much freer in their relations with the institutes that the generations before them established as autonomous beacons. They are aware that, in the 21st century, the most exciting work is not being done at the centre but on the periphery, in the desolate borderlands around the community. Although they do not refer to their work explicitly in terms of the social arts, they often work with similar approaches and from similar convictions: dialogue, open processes, co-creation.

Perhaps that is why social-arts anniversaries in Flanders shouldn't be celebrated. In the long term, community arts could well become the standard rather than the exception. Is that unique role ahead of us, rather than behind us? A great deal will depend on the critical sense with which artists continue to explore the objectives of arts policy. In today's neoliberal participation society, community arts are all too easily used as an underfinanced cultural fig leaf to conceal the harsh reality of the social dismantling of the welfare state – a process that is taking place throughout Europe. Should social-arts organisations allow themselves to be used to that end, or offer every possible resistance? ■

Translated by Yvette Mead



Maustrofobie, CC De Spil.
Photo by Fabian Parent