

## **AiR for Experiment encounter**

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One of the starting points of *AiR for Experiment* encounter is the recently published book *Artist-Run-Europe*. Initiated by Pallas Projects in Dublin, the indexing of European artist-run organizations, next to a series of articles looks at the conditions, organizational models, and role of artist-led practice within contemporary art and society within Europe.

Accordingly, AiR Platform NL and PlatformBK instigated an investigation about the parameters of the artist-run model in the Netherlands, with an emphasis on characteristic of context based organisations operative outside of the larger cities. Following the outcomes of the program, the aim is to compose the first draft of a document of recommendations for governments and art professionals alike, to ultimately work together towards more diverse arts-ecologies.

**I. Artist organizations in Europe and the Netherlands**, an overview with presentations by Heidi Vogels - coordinator of AiR Platform NL at DutchCulture | TransArtists (Amsterdam, the Netherlands), Mark Cullen - Pallas Projects (Dublin, Ireland), Mariska van den Berg - PlatformBK (Amsterdam, the Netherlands), and moderated dialogue with the audience.

### **Context on joint research Platform BK and DutchCulture | TransArtists – by Heidi Vogels**

In 1997, the AiR phenomenon was relatively unknown in the institutionalized art world. It was at that time TransArtists made information about AiR programs available to artists by means of a website; an open digital archive, a practical tool about opportunities of AiR programs for artists. Meanwhile AiR programs are mandatory to most artists' curriculums, and the TransArtists' website counts over 1.400 programs and attracts visitors from all over the globe.

The common denominator of an AiR program is generally described as a space for artists to facilitate their artistic process or development for a specific period of time. A concept that is variable and functions even more so on the level of encounters: enabling artists to connect from the context of another location to other networks of artists and curators, production facilities, experts from different fields, other social and cultural landscapes, etc.

In the Netherlands are currently around 50 AiR programs active. Artists organize most of them. Funding structures however, are mostly project based and rarely allow structural support to an organization. After additional budget cuts in 2013 when the Dutch government decreased the overall budget for culture with 25%, many programs had to close and disappeared. At the same time, small initiatives keep popping up, in the cities as well as in small villages in the countryside. This apparent need for artists to create space for the arts where there is none, to work, think, reflect and act together, is outstanding and one of the main characteristics of the artist-run model.

To organize an AiR program, from the perspective of artists, means to develop a structure to facilitate the production of art on your own terms. It allows you to put into practice what you consider important to cherish and to protect, and to share this with your colleagues and the audience. Even more so, shifting positions from being a maker, to an organizer, a moderator, a writer, empowers artists to bend, reverse, or exceed the structures of the institutionalised art

domain: A critical aspect that belongs to any thriving field or discipline in the arts and in society at large.

TransArtists and id11 therefore initiated this encounter to invite exemplary artist organizations and local governments from different regions in Europe to address the significance of moving in and outside of institutional frames. Gaining more insight in their practice will help us to bring to light the values of artist run organizations for whom operating from a local context is key. Furthermore, Platform BK investigated artist run organizations (with and without AiR programs) in the Netherlands operating in context of small cities and villages. Together with the outcomes of the program today, we aim to formulate a proposal to develop a document of recommendation for governments and art organisations alike, to work together towards more diverse arts ecologies.

### **Artist-Run-Europe – by Marc Cullen, Pallas Projects (Dublin, Ireland)**

Pallas Projects was set up 1996 as studios stemming from a need to create a space where artists can work together and have a sense of peerage after college. After sometime the studio model was dismantled and turned into an initiative for short-term exhibitions. Meanwhile Pallas Projects moved to eleven different locations. To mark its twentieth year, the staff instigated a body of research to look at the whole field of the artist production as well as artist led sector and the difficulties it encounters.

The research started in 2012 in collaboration with Eindhoven-based Onomatopée with the aim to show how artist run practices occur parallel to commercial institutions, museums and galleries. A few questions raised in the book are: what positions do artist run spaces occupy in the field of contemporary art? Are these spaces an alternative to, or in conversations with, the institutions? Are the values recognised? How are these spaces sustained without becoming institutionalised? What do artist run spaces add to the ecology of civil society?

Marc Cullen touches upon several shared characteristics of artist run spaces. They are considered non-hierarchical as well as non-commercial, which support and value experiment. They attempt to advance social and cultural interaction, can help in the early stage of an artist career and are key in revitalisation of urban areas. The common denominator is that they are founded because of missing elements in the arts field as experienced by artists. Their needs are addressed through the new initiative. Artist run spaces often operate off the radar, on a voluntarily basis and employ a critically engaged way of perceiving contemporary art. There is an almost permanent lack of resources resulting in an economy of sharing and free labour. Artist run spaces are by nature difficult to quantify and to record. The topic has been addressed, mainly with a focus on the USA and Canada in the 1960s-70s, but not as a further study of debate. Cullen used the artist run art fair Supermarket in Stockholm, Sweden, among others, to point to the diversity of artist run initiatives.

A problematic issue Cullen discussed is the sustainability of artist run spaces. Voluntarily labour is unsustainable but needed in most cases. When funding is applied to a space, a new level of bureaucracy becomes part of the organisation structure. A catch-22 notion on the duration is discernible: to be sustainable a space needs to create an organisational, often hierarchical, structure, while the artists who initiated the space should safeguard its advisory role instead of take on a merely organisational role. How much of the artist run structure is left if a space enters funding bureaucracy? The field of self-organisation of non-institutional platforms is complex. For this reason, it would be useful to make a distinction of what an artist run practice is, to be able to secure its sustainability.

The publication features artist run spaces from 37 countries and offers opportunities of contact and collaboration. Cullen pointed out that many other questions can be asked or answered, and some cases may be overcome. Conclusively, he considered artist run spaces at the core of mutual support to avoid artist isolation. In essence, they are an alternative.

In the subsequent discussion, Van Roosmalen stated a lot of sectors have voluntary positions and that it is quite something to consider artists to have another ethos, without political financial and/or religious interest. Cullen responded that the ethos is about coexisting and supporting each other; be willing to achieve a goal which is not necessarily motivated by a financial end, but by making and/or processing art together. Trust is needed and one should believe in each other.

Van Roosmalen then posed that artist run spaces are initiated because artists felt there was a deficit of spaces; the word alternative is predominant, alternative to museums, galleries etc. Question to Cullen is if he thinks this still is the case. Cullen answered there are overlaps but that it still happens. Museums, for example, are not very open for experiment, while openness is key for grassroots or artist run spaces.

Subsequently, Arno directed the conversation to the risk of institutionalisation, for example when a hierarchical structure is implemented due to impeded requirements from the funds. Cullen pointed out there is a myriad of different types of artist run spaces and there also are many spaces which do have a certain organisational level (board, director etc.). Bureaucratisation is another risk, which can happen when applying for funds. The latter activity is considered time-consuming, which takes away attention from your programming. Spaces are asked to do more with less money that pushed them in a position where breakdown or crisis becomes more probabilistic.

Heidi Vogels asked if there is anything to say about differences in characteristics within artist run spaces across Europe. Cullen stressed the large number of those spaces in Europe. Within each country there are very different models. An example he pointed out is Transmission in Glasgow which is self sustaining. It has a members committee run by six people of which is renewed on a yearly basis, three members per year. This results in a rolling committee and a dynamic, rejuvenating organisation. The downside is having no real institutional memory; it only remembers back four to five years.

### **Mariska van den Berg – Platform BK**

In collaboration with Youri Appelo and by invitation of TransArtists, Van den Berg has conducted research on the impact of artist run spaces with artist-in-residence programmes on the surrounding urban environment of small and medium-sized cities. Grassroots or artists initiatives often experience an impotence; these initiatives need support to continue their practice but have no access to local funding because local governments apply complex rules for support. In most cases these initiatives are small and invisible and their importance is not sufficiently recognised. Contrarily, the arts scene is convinced about its value within the scene and beyond. Van den Berg asked why we do not try to be precise about the value not only in the scene but also in a social and public sense.

The research already showed there are many definitions of and differences between these initiatives. Furthermore, it showed very small organisations cannot meet the conditions for support applied by local government.

Important element in the research is the local embeddedness: to question what the local connections are, what relationships are created and how they come about? How attribute value to these often-transient practices? Do they contribute to the value of civil society? What is the

relationship with the local government? Can we think of other values artist run spaces can provide, to find an appropriate approach for funding and support of these organisations?

Focus points of the research are: urgency or *raison d'être*; core activities and value; local embeddedness; future; financing (and needs), not only about money. Four initiatives are investigated to present the spectrum partially:

1. Hotel Maria Kapel, Hoorn: AiR which presents exhibitions, and aims to attract audience through a public programme and a cinema with mainstream programming. It enables residents to make new work and the exchange on a local and an international level is important. The aim is to challenge the perception of what constitutes contemporary art. The production of the artworks and/or exhibition is the core business; during the construction people can visit the space. The artists can invite other artists to come together. The initiative has connections to the municipality as well as the government.
2. Motel Spatie, Arnhem: a project space and AiR inventing forms of engaged autonomy and DIY urbanism. It is located in a pre-WWII neighbourhood, situated in a former shopping mall. It also organises non-art activities, like a kitchen on Friday evening. It has ambitions to develop as a network. The financial situation is precarious.
3. Kunsthuis Syb, Beetsterzwaag: an AiR with an exhibition space. Artists are invited based on a project proposal and stay for six weeks. There are local volunteers who work with the artists. It questions: What can you produce taking the local history and qualities as a starting point? How to engage people with your projects?
4. Expodium, Utrecht: An urban do tank which considers practice as an important way to be present. It has a nomadic nature because it decided to deinstitutionalise by abandoning the space. It employs a variety of methods of artistic research and it considers itself a satellite of grassroots. It is an interesting example because of different levels it functions on coming from the idea the city belongs to all of us. Recently published 'Unmaking the Netherlands' (2016) which is the result of an unsolicited interference within the debate of the development of the Werkspoorkwartier area; the project started without funding, over the course of the research subsidies were granted.

Van den Berg shared a few preliminary conclusions: the value of these spaces is the specific art ecology of each initiative; the direct vicinity; reflection on the city (and its urban development); the discourse on civil society. A common struggle is that the condition to receive (financial) support often pushes an initiative in the direction of an already existing model because it needs to fit within a yet existing structure of the supporting party.

Van Roosmalen remarked that the question of value is only addressed to the organisations themselves. This is not an absolute quality; a value is negotiated between different parties. He then asked if perspectives from locals or the local government are also part of the research? Van den Berg answered this is part of the research but still needs to be further investigated.

Bart Witte from Expodium remarked it indeed is a complex process of positioning yourself in relation to local sponsors and negotiate their expectations. The Expodium book is based on artistic research focused on a narrative. Expodium had constantly to pitch the plans for the area's revitalisation to possible partners. By means of the project, Expodium also wanted to engage the local community through lectures, screenings, public space interventions, exhibition and walking tours through the area.

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**II. Case studies and Q&A** (3x40 min) where collaborations between artist organizations, artist-in-residence programs and local governments were discussed, and how the role of experiment can be valued. With panellists: Mark Cullen - Pallas Projects (Dublin, Ireland), Holger Jagersberger - Atelierhaus Salzamt (Linz, Austria), Blanka de Bruyne - Haarlem City (Haarlem, the Netherlands), Maritt Kuipers - Kunsthuis SYB (Beetsterzwaag, the Netherlands), Rūta Mašanauskaitė - Artkomas (Kaunas, Lithuania).

**a. WochenKlausur, Vienna, Austria – presentation by Manfred Rainer** WochenKlausur is an artist collective founded 23 years ago in Vienna. Its goal is to find solutions for socio-political problems and to implement these solutions in society. The collective works project-based: it does research in a specific area, finds a problem, comes up with a solution, which is as sustainable as possible with the aim to have the project continued without being dependent on the artist collective.

The first project was the *Medical Care for Homeless People* in 1993 in Vienna started upon invitation from the Vienna Secession. During the project, the collective made a mobile public clinic for homeless people to receive medical care without complications. The project is still running and it treats about 700 patients a month. The target community shifted to migrants in the course of time.

In 2013-2014, WochenKlausur was invited by the Van Abbemuseum to create an artist-in-residence programme in the framework of the project *Museum of Arte Útil* by the museum. The result is the *Artistic Strategies in Psychiatry* residency, which is a collaboration between the museum and the GGzE (Mental Health Care Institute Eindhoven).

During the subsequent discussion Blanka de Bruyne asked how using art as a medicine helped the existence as a space. Rainer answers WochenKlausur is not a space, but a collective that does projects; about 40 projects through 23 years. The project with the Van Abbemuseum is the first invitation by a cultural institution. Rainer stated the following; 'If this institution says we are an artist collective, we can say what we do is art'. De Bruyne then asked if the city invites the collective for projects. Rainer informed that invitations come from a variety of parties: the city department, classical museums, festivals. The collective moved from the very free contemporary art field to more specific topics, and is not completely free to choose whatever it would like to do. If the (local) policy changes then the projects change as well.

Van Roosmalen asked if the free way of thinking and invitations of the institutions gave the collective credibility, which is answered positively by Rainer. He told it was very important to have this cultural capital in the beginning to be able to say what they do is art, to ask the questions what art can do and if it can have a concrete impact.

Van Roosmalen asked what price the collective has to pay if it gets institutionalised. Rainer answered WochenKlausur works a collective. More than seventy people have participated as part of the collective in the course of the years. Most of them did just one project and few are part of the core team. When the collective gets an invitation, the core team decides which skills are needed and which people would be suitable to invite to participate in the project. In this way, it is able to operate without a permanent institutional structure.

**b. K.A.I.R., Košice, Slovakia presentation by Zuzana Kotikova**

The AiR aims to make the residents acquainted with the city and incites collaboration between them and the local artists. In 2013, Košice was the EU Capital of Culture with programmes focused on creative industries, art education and art production. Several buildings in the city were renovated for the programmes, one of them for the AiR. When the capital of culture project was finished, the hosts had to find a new space.

The K.A.I.R. was well developed and for that reason able to continue. Since the beginning of 2016, it operates as an independent AiR and collaborates with an adjacent gallery. Kotikova considered the following as advantages of the change in their structure: effectivity and flexibility; independency; less bureaucracy. A difficulty now is the financial instability.

De Bruyne asked if the art academy in the city has an international focus. If that is not the case, she considered it hard to make an international programme happen. Kotikova answered the academy's international orientation is not very strong, but due to the capital of culture project the city's focus became more international. The AiR does a bilateral exchange with a partner organisation in Wrocław, and hosts international artists as well as local artists.

Van Roosmalen asked how the AiR combines its independence with funding from the municipality. Kotikova answered the money comes from the local creative industries fund, which on its turn receives money from the municipality. Due to this indirect way the AiR has been able to work independent. Kotikova considered the municipality's focus on big events, instead of small initiatives. However, it does appreciate its presence.

### **c. Contemporary Art Foundation In Situ, Sokołowsko, Poland – Gerard Lebig and Zuzanna Fogtt**

The Contemporary Art Foundation In Situ is located in the Polish mountains near the Czech border. It is situated in a former treatment centre for tuberculosis. At its peak moments it hosted 2.000 patients. The town has 400 inhabitants.

In 2005, a fire destroyed the treatment centre, but the artist group decided to renovate and to repurpose it. The project was based on the idea art needs an independent place. During the renovation, performances already took place at the venue. The entire complex currently houses an old theatre, workshop spaces and exhibition spaces. It functions, among others, as an experimental platform for sound, as an AiR, and as a hosts for the Context 2016, the 6<sup>th</sup> international Sokołowsko festival of ephemeral art. Artists have moved to the town, which results in more local activities.

At this moment, some friction exists between the organisation and the Polish Ministry of Culture. The foundation's audience comes from all over the world. Due to the recent political changes in Poland, contemporary art is not much supported.

### **Discussion with the panellists**

Holger Jagersberger mentioned Linz was the EU Capital of Culture in 2009 and experienced the same process as K.A.I.R. He advised to step out of the creative industries level, make it invitation only to avoid misunderstanding. It could be non-funded and self-financing.

Van Roosmalen: 'it is interesting to see how WochenKlausur works by invitation only. This results in a different position as an artist group to develop a project. The Eindhoven AiR project is the outcome of an art project.' Rainer answered there is a difference: the artists of the group do understand themselves as artists. Each of the projects requires a different approach and for each project a different organisation is created. All tasks are divided and every participant is considered an artist. Artists, curators, and critics always negotiate what we understand as art. Rainer mentioned

there is a symbolic dimension: 'if you look at social work, you would not look at it as these projects. What makes art?' Mark Cullen commented: 'You consider the society as your medium.'

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**III. How can dialogue take place between policymaking institutions and artists?** With: Josip Zanki - Croatian Association of Visual Artists (Zagreb, Croatia), Ferrie Förster - Alderman, City of Delft (Delft, the Netherlands), Angjerd Munksgaard - cultural advisor (Kristiansand, Norway), Nikos Doulos and Bart Witte - Expodium (Utrecht, The Netherlands)

Zanki took the floor firstly and stated policymaking in Croatia is centralised and made either by the Ministry of Culture or on a local level. Although cities have independent juries, the minister upholds the right to change a process. This decision is always very political and strategic within this power system.

Munksgaard mentioned that the municipality of Kristiansand funds an AiR which is administrated by the local art centre. The municipality does not interfere in the programming or selection of artists. As a part of her position she incites projects, during which she closely works with local artists but she stands next to the administration. Within the borders of professionalism she considers it very hard to prevent a corruptive state. She also considers autonomy more important than democracy.

Förster responded he is unable to explain to the Delft city council why €100 per citizen are spent on the arts. During a survey, citizens graded local cultural activities a 6,9. Ninety percent of the budget is spent on the four largest organisations: the library, a local museum, a centre for arts and culture and the theatre. Within the new cultural policy, Förster aims to stimulate activities beneficial to Delft and its citizens focused on either innovation or participation. He considers it important to listen to the local community.

Doulos and Witte mentioned the good intention of the city council of Utrecht, which focuses on a qualitative process instead of quantity. It also aims to map value of the public space. They also believe there is no such notion as the city council; their goal is to build personal relations with the civil servant. One might consider this indirect but Doulos and Witte like to believe it has its effect. Van Roosmalen posed without aiming for a straightforward answer: is this the moment the *trias politica* idea by Thorbecke has come to an end?

Zanki continued he believes there are two positions of financing culture: by means of state or local funding bodies or by means of the creative industry. In his regard, one can achieve independence by combining a financial structure based on these two.

Witte mentioned Expodium is not being culturally funded by the city council since 2012. The city council did indirectly fund the recent research by buying fifty books but paying for thousand copies. He is glad to have the practice outside the artistic funded discourse. Expodium currently focuses on urban art and development areas and was also invited to give presentations and workshops to the council on how to do research on this topic and how to do urban development in the near future. If it decides to continue with this focus, he also wishes to continue the funding through commissions structure.

Roosmalen remarked on Förster's earlier statement that within the two key words 'participation' and 'innovation' arts and culture have a significant role. In his regard, art can offer you something you did not know you needed. He posed the question if society has a need to know what it does not yet know it needs? Art allows one to get acquainted with the unknown. Förster agreed

but also mentioned it is difficult to justify its relevance when budget cuts need to take place. Förster asked Munksgaard how she convinced the city council that autonomy is more important than democracy? Munksgaard mentioned her voice is not always heard by politicians, but she is there to support the artists and present their projects to the politicians.

Subsequently, Heidi Vogels posed that what once was a counterculture (an alternative artistic practice) is moving into the mainstream: should we turn around the idea of what culture is because it is understood as something to be consumed. One could therefore benefit by redefining the term culture, instead of focusing on consuming or producing it. Witte considers this a responsibility of both the art field and policy makers, and there is a lack of vision. In his regard, a central question should be where we want to be in ten years and how art can add to this. He believes one has to keep on talking from the artistic background because everybody is a citizen and there thus is always a connection.

A remark came from the audience: if democracy was the only way to ground the existence of the arts, then the autonomy concept is abolished because a specific expectation exists. Art comes about through disruption. If a cultural policy is based on democracy one gets rid of this idea. Förster responded there is no support for culture in Delft, and there also are no artists, no studios or no galleries. By means of funding the city council aims to give space to create art on a sustainable level. He agreed with the remark but also mentioned it is difficult to justify the ten million euro budget. He also considers a crossover with schools, for example, important to show what an art or artist can add to society. He also stressed he believes there is gap between politicians and citizens.

Zanki mentioned art becomes a commodity and refers to the book *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (1991) by Hakim Bey. In Zanki's regard, art can only be a virus and a metaphysical medium for which we have to fight. Witte concluded that in regard to the discussion on the financial relation between government and art initiatives one should leave the single minded out, if the aim is to be relevant and to have an interesting climate. In his opinion, art should come to a much more intimate relation.

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**IV. A Mobile AiR Experience:** Presentation by artists Teun Vonk (Rotterdam, the Netherlands), Matthias König (Den Haag, the Netherlands). With an introduction from Lieselot Van Damme and Bouke Groen - project coordinators of VHDG (Leeuwarden, the Netherlands). An initiative without private property; unexpected and uninhibited manifestations in the city, the region and the country.

VHDG started in 1999 as an artist initiative in Leeuwarden. The local arts scene is very limited, which results in a lot of freedom to do art projects. The aim is to anticipate on the need of the artists as well as on what the public likes to see. A few years ago, a local discussion started on the position of the artist as a social worker. VHDG wanted to safeguard the position of the artist and came up with the SRV project in order to bring art to the people. The project consists of a former supermarket-van turned into a mobile artist's studio. An artist is invited to do a residency period in the van.

Video artist Teun Vonk did a residency in September 2014. Within his practice he focuses on the dynamics of groups of people, and their behaviour and relationships. For the project, he researched societies in the province of Friesland who cater funerals because of a lack of professional funeral directors in the region.

Matthias König is a German artist based in The Hague who did a residency in the VHDG SRV in September 2016. He usually makes sculptures, installations and works with sand. For the SRV



project he asked himself how to present his work in an environment not specifically waiting for an artwork, and to an audience not expecting to be confronted with art. König approached the bus as a riding sculpture and the landscape of Friesland as the exhibition space and drove around to meet people in order to bring art to the people.

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**V. Conclusive words** by Danielle van Zuijlen (initiator of Hotel Mariakapel in Hoorn, currently based in Ghent, Belgium as independent arts organizer, currently developing a residency program for studio organisation NUCLEO).

Van Zuijlen stated one has to try to protect room for experiment through artist initiatives or AiRs. She herself moved from her artistic practice to that of an art organizer and questions what position is more effective. She referred to Expodium, which had an art space before, then chose to work in the urban field. As a result the organisers returned to the artist role and lost the weight of a space (institution). Van Zuylen concluded artists need to be very precise in choosing their position as a collective or organization, concerning how to translate their artistic vision in a program and the structure of an organization.