

ART-CENTRES AND TRANSNATIONAL PROCESSES

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Summary

Art-Centres can be understood in the context of new initiative for artistic organisation as it appeared after the 1968 movement, at first in a western context. Transnational processes can be seen in perspective of hybridity and new internationalism as Nikos Papasterigiadis speaks about it. The combination of art-centres and transnational processes gives a predominance of a new synergy in today's global cultural development and artistic situation. The Benelux countries, northern Europe in general, Canada and East-Asia provide interesting examples of this development. It is marked by a strong focus on new, non-institutional art-centres but also the informal networks of cultural houses and theatres are significant to this question of art-centres and transnational processes. This article emphasises the significance of the growth of cultural organisations based on the networking principle, and thus creating a basis for transnational processes. The art-centres are crucial to understand these processes.

1. Introduction

It was a networking of a very dynamic kind that promoted non-institutional art since the 1970s. It was a process mainly taking place in western Europe as well as in North-America, where I will emphasise on Canada. During the 1980s with some predecessors rooted in the 1968 anarchistic movement, but finally, in the meantime turning into new organisations replacing old ones and creating brand new ones, like the Informal

European Theatre Meeting contesting the slightly old growing International Theatre Institute (ITI). It was also the coming of cultural factories as for Trans Europe Halls Network (TEH). These were organisations which were quite new for the time. It was a development of new networks of an informal kind that replaced older more formal ones, in the sense of covering up new areas and artistic directions. This was the result of some farsighted peoples' innovative way of working.

2. Hybridity and New Internationalism

The transition from the 20th century on to the 21st century is far away from being a pleasant journey, is the statement of Gavin Jantes, while trying to tell us that the only way of getting to understand the changing values is to reconsider your own position. It requires an attitude towards the otherness. Consequently we are not able to get away from the fact that growth in cultural matters means difference (Gavin Jantjes, *Aftenposten*, Oslo, 15.12.1999). His point is that there is no way anymore to defend unity or uniqueness in the sense of culture. This implies that cultural and artistic expressions have become hybrid, meaning that different cultures and forms are mixing into unforeseen creations of cultural exchange. The institutions of art as we traditionally knew them, have been confronted with otherness. Nikos Papastergiadis tells us that "...., the crisis in narrating modernism has opened a space for the coding of other aesthetic representations within modernity. What has emerged is a new critical discourse which has re-defined the politics of representation, questioning the status of originality and appropriation thereby revealing the dynamic instability in the distinction between high and low art" ("The complicity of culture: Hybridity and 'new internationalism', *Cornehouse Communiqué* no 4, Manchester, 1994.)

So, different worlds are mixing towards a new hybrid state of affairs, which include debates on postcolonialism and 'New Internationalism'. Eurocentrism is not valid anymore and the question is simply "who is the other"? In "Beyond the pale: Art in the age of multicultural translation", *Cultural diversity in the arts*, ed. R. Lavrijsen, Amsterdam 1993) Homi Bhabha stresses the cruciality of the performative role in cultural difference. Cultural energies are heading towards processing and translation and not conservation and uniqueness. Bhabha attacks mainstream institutions in their repression of the image of the other. This was the state of being when it comes to art mediation until at least the 1970s. A black man in a white gallery would have been impossible to imagine. The black man belonged to folkloristic and not to any kind of artistic institution. The European sense of artistic uniqueness inside a given tradition has been contested by new ideas of centripetal movements and cultural as well as multidisciplinary mixture in the understanding of anthropology and the arts.

Art is a question of connections and disconnections, as Nikos Papastergiadis puts it, and he continues by saying that "..., the hybridity does not seek either transcendental elevations or reconciliatory conjunctions, but is constituted by the abrasions of the neither/nor, this perennially unhomey condition, is what is most delicately avoided by the popular fascination with migration and cultural difference ("The complicity of culture...", s. 37). These recognitions of a cultural understanding are based on a non-mainstream, non axis bound mainstream position, but on the notion of the dissolution of centres. "Post-mainstream is possible concept to describe what happens when mainstream movements both of experimental kinds are being exhausted, and according

to logics that I will try to describe, mixes styles and traditions that were not possible to describe in a mainstream concept...." (Knut Ove Arntzen in "Post-mainstream as a geocultural dimension for theatre", *Trans, Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*, 5 Nr, Juli 1998). A result of this has been the contestation of old systems for artistic exchange and creation, and new art-centres representing new ways of production and curating in the arts have had an immense signification the last 30 years.

3. Movements of Informal Networks

When the development of new art-centres started off, it turned out to be at its most fruitful in countries with very liberal attitudes towards traditional culture, like The Netherlands and Belgium. The Dutch Ritsaert ten Cate is one example of people canalising the energy of new cultural understanding, breaking away from traditional state or state like institutions. In Amsterdam Ritsaert ten Cate attracted artists and theatre people from USA, GB and other European countries to his barn in Loenersloot outside Amsterdam, which he had turned into an art gallery and a show place in 1965. In 1971 it became the Mickery Theatre at the Rozengracht in central Amsterdam. This started in a time when England still had theatre censorship (until 1968), although also Britain became a part of this networking development with the establishment of organisations as International Centre for Contemporary Art (ICA) at The Mall in London. Another offspring for this development was the Paradiso and de Melkweg cultural centres in Amsterdam, where international cultural venues grew forth with among other initiative the Festival of Fools at de Melkweg.

This new networking also reflected new multidisciplinary trends in the arts, like the hybrid performance art which combined plastic art, installation work and theatrical performance into a hybrid which can be referred to as a visual kind of dramaturgy. In such a dramaturgical compositions, the means of expression are put on an equal footing, like text to image or space to frontality. It was a step towards the breaking down or deconstruction of literary theatre of the romantic tradition and modern directors. Also political movements in theatre and cabaret contributed to this development, which had created a crisis in institutional theatre in many European countries at the end of the 1970s. A traditional theatre of fixed companies was contested with group theatre and then project theatre. Group and project theatre was based on smaller units either of a permanent basis or work units of few persons that could be connected to the art-centres alongside with visual or plastic arts. The BANF centre outside Calgary in Canada is one example, and the already mentioned ICA in London another.

3.1 Festival of fools to international theatres

The notion of festival of fools originated from the United States, spread around in northern Europe like the Festival of Fools in Copenhagen since the late 1970s. At consequently was leading into new ways of producing culture, like the network of Project Theatres in the 1980s. It was consisting of theatres like the Kaaitheater in Brussels, the Theater am Turm in Frankfurt and Hebbel Theater in Berlin. Kaaitheater was organised by Hugo de Greef and started off in 1975 working as a festival until 1985, and thereafter as a production place for project theatre. They took care of artists like the later so famous Rosas and Jan Fabre. The main focus for both Mickery in

Amsterdam and Kaaitheater in Brussels was international networking, and the catchword that Hugo de Greef worked according to, was "you have to be yourself to be international." The Copenhagen International Theatre and The Bergen International Theatre originated on similar premises, first being festivals and later turning into international production centres. In Germany Theater am Turm, since 1986 under the direction of Tom Stromberg, and since 1989 Hebbel Theater in Berlin took a similar position under the direction of Nele Herteling. They became key organisations in the creation of a new euro-aesthetics, as joint venture projects across the national borders very much concentrated to north western Europe.

3.2 The Informal European Theatre Meeting

IETM started off as a club for friend of these ideas in 1981, and subsequently establishing a secretariat in Brussels. By 1991 they had 300 professional members, i.e. theatres, individuals and production organisations. They organise every year different conferences in different cities in Europe. The point is to discuss professional problems, of mediation as well as promotion, alongside with theoretical workshops and showcases of theatre organised by the local representatives. This way, different countries can present themselves, and in the later part of the 1990's more and more the former east block countries have had the possibility to present themselves. By the latest this was the case in April 2000 when an annual plenary meeting was held in Prague, and by early Autumn 2000 it moves on to the Icelandic capital of Reykjavik where they will focus on science and art.

The goals of the IETM to large extent reflect how the informal networking is connected to new internationalism understood as transnational processes. At the core of the IETM to start with were the north western European project theatres and festivals, and some of them were connected with the Trans Europe Halls as art-centres of a multidisciplinary as well as multinational direction. At first multinational would indicate the European EU area and the European Economical Area, which make some of the non-EU countries associated with EU.

A result was a widely spread development of new hybrid aesthetics which would connect to a sense of axis in-between cities like Brussels, Amsterdam, Frankfurt and Berlin, an axis that then would be extended to Copenhagen, Gothenburg, Stockholm, Helsinki, Oslo and Bergen. In 1986 Hugo de Greef formulated the crucial question to a delegation from Norway: But what is happening in Norway? Of course he knew that Norway had national institutions of art representing Ibsen and Munch, but he asked for the new networking connection with regard to new euro-aesthetics in the arts of a hybrid kind. At this time Richard Martel from Le Lieu in Québec would visit Norway for investigations of the same kind. He met Baktruppen and Baktruppen people were invited to do street performances in Québec city. A bit later Baktruppen, Norway and Michael Laub, Sweden, would be invited to perform in Brussels and Amsterdam.

But the notion of axis would soon be replaced by post mainstream or circular thinking as expressed by Gordana Vnuk in Zagreb: "The 'post-mainstream' meeting in Zagreb, organized during the last year EUROKAZ (i.e. 1994) tried for the first time to discuss and articulate a new theatre development which shifts the focus of interest from the

Western centres of economic and cultural power to the East, to marginal European countries and in a wider context to non-European cultures"

(http://www.datum.org./11Vnuk_Eurokaz.html). (see *Local cultures and global dynamics*)

3.2.1 A transnational experience: Baal meets Nora in Bergen

Inside the rich European economic area Norway is a marginal country, but Croatia as an ex-Yugoslavian republic would have to reconstitute itself in a new world after years of war following the split up of Yugoslavia. In the years of communism Yugoslavia although had been one of the most free countries with regard to cultural exchange, and during this time the Eurokaz festival had started and presented experimental mainstream from the economical strong part of Europe and from other parts of the world. Gordana Vnuk was the main organiser of the Eurokaz which continued during and after the war, and she invited to the first post-mainstream conferences. The intention was to organise a new informal network for the marginal countries and to support the circular orientation towards the axis way of thinking. What happened was that the central countries of the axis orientation very quickly absorbed the criticism from the margins. The Informal European Theatre Meeting soon was organised outside the central and economical rich part of Europe.

An interesting result of the meeting between the margin inside the rich area and the margin outside, was a project organised in Bergen by Bergen International theatre. Albanian actors from the Albanian National Theatre in the ex-Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, would gather in Bergen, Norway, to make a production based on the idea of letting Bertolt Brecht's "Baal" meet Henrik Ibsen's "Nora" (or: "A Doll's House"). The director was Croat Branko Brezovec with Gordana Vnuk as a dramaturg. This was in 1993. For the ex-Yugoslav people coming to Bergen at this time would be like having a break from the war. The point about the work was to mix textual elements from Brecht and Ibsen and let these fragments come to a very physical theatrical expression. Some of it could make one think about old theatrical traditions from the Balkan area, going back to Antiquity, and some would be like middle European expressionist exposure of lavishness and cruelty. "Three Noras waiting for Baal" was the final title of the production, and parts of it was presented at the Santarchangelo festival in Italy, right across the Adriatic Sea and in a situation much more marked by the ongoing war. (see *Global information fluxes and cultures*)

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Baktruppen's information material: www.baktruppen.org

Biographical Sketch

Knut Ove Arntzen is since 1983 lecturer and associate professor of theatre research at the Department of Cultural Studies and Art History, Section for theatre research, former Department of Theatre Research, University of Bergen, Norway. He was a theatre critic in the Oslo-based paper "Arbeiderbladet", and since 1984 he is a consultant to the Bergen International Theatre. In 1994/95 he worked with *Les 20 jours du Théâtre à Risque*, Montréal, Canada. He has specialised in modern/post modern theatre, which he has been teaching on a permanent basis in Bergen, as well as in Antwerpen, Frankfurt am Main, Kaunas and Oslo. He also attended many international conferences like the International Federation for Theatre Research (I.F.T.R) world congresses for theatre research in Stockholm, 1989 and Moscow, 1994 as well as "The small is beautiful" Congress in Glasgow, 1990, and the "New concepts for theatre" in Amsterdam at the Felix Meritis Foundation, 1993, and the I.F.R.T. conference in Cholula-Puebla, Mexico, 1997 as well as the Canterbury World Congress, 1998, and the same year at the SAVAL conference in Johannesburg, "A Sense of Spaces". He participated in conferences organised by the INST, like in Riverside, 1995, and several times at the Burg-Schlaining and in Innsbruck, 1997, and with UNESCO in Paris, 1999. He has published a series of articles in periodicals and on internet dealing with a visual kind of dramaturgy as well as post-mainstream directions and new contextuality in the arts. He is a co-editor of the book *Dramaturgische und politische Strategien im Drama und Theater des 20. Jahrhunderts*, St. Ingbert - 2000, based on the 1995 Bergen conference. He has written a book, *Theatre, art and context from euroesthetics to marginality in a northern hemisphere*, which first will be published in Norwegian, and containing some of the analytical positions that have been published in articles and on internet in English and German languages.