

That which differentiates us, is what we have in common
Maxi Obexer: Greifswalder Manifest

The dynamics of diverse singularities within a commonality has nothing to do with the obsolete dialectic between the many and the one. While the one stands across from the many as its opposite, the commonality is compatible with the many, indeed it consists of the many.
Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri: Common Wealth. Das Ende des Eigentums

What we have in common

Following an invitation from the *NTGent* and the *Opera Ballet Vlaanderen*, the *Dramaturgische Gesellschaft* is holding for the first time in a quarter of a century (and for just the second time in its history) an annual conference outside German-speaking regions – in Gent, the city which has, under new theatre directors, and their setting new courses with their programming, evolved into a kind of future laboratory for European theatre. But it is not only *Campo*, *Vooruit* and *Kopergietery*, crucially important institutions whose influence reaches far beyond Belgium's borders, which are the engines of these changes: *Opera Ballet Vlaanderen* will drive discussions about musical theatre with its newly founded participatory section, and Milo Rau, at the beginning of his tenure as artistic director, confidently displayed the slogan "Het Stadstheater van de toekomst" above the entrance to the *NTGent*.

But what does it look like, this theatre of the future? What theatre does society need, and what functions do art and theatre have, when Western democracies are in crisis and truth has become a matter of political conviction? Across Europe we are experiencing a rapid radicalisation, firstly of rhetoric, then of action. Far too late, online hatred and death threats are being recognised for what they actually are: criminal acts which must be prosecuted, because they are not without consequences. In the face of the extent to which European democracies are being pressured to justify their existence, state institutions and political parties are coming under attack and fundamental principles of the rule of law are being questioned (or, as is the case in some EU countries, suspended), and as a result of which assaults and violence are once again becoming a widespread expression of social conflict, cultural institutions become vital spaces in the struggle for an open, liberal society. They are at work on the infinitely more attractive alternatives to nationalism, essentialism and other authoritarian perspectives: diversity, sensitivity, solidarity, constant transformation. This has massive consequences for the significance, perception and effectiveness of theatre in a free, open civil society. As experiential spaces for democracy, as public gathering places in the cities, as state-funded cultural institutions, the theatres have a responsibility above and beyond the creation of art: they can provide safe spaces and become inspirational spaces for social change.

Under the title "The Art of Resistance" Lara Steel will, together with Milo Rau, the Cameroun-Italian activist Yvan Sagnet, discuss European values, the role of the theatre as an institution and possible alliances and alternatives.

Not to fall for the narratives of hatred and identities, but instead to promote narratives which support an international civil society, and which are defined by their humane stance: this is what is being sought. *What we have in common* are the powerful opening words of the Greifswalder Manifesto – and that which we have in common as a society consisting of various different public spaces being torn apart by centrifugal forces, that is the deciding issue for society today. And it comes down to what differentiates us, as Maxi Obexer put it. So-called "identity politics" are currently active in an area of conflict which includes Othering, self-definition and self-empowerment,

the struggle against oppression and discrimination, but also in opposition to the “normalisation” and the de-politicisation of differences and their encoding in “identity”. At what point will national or ethnic origin no longer be an issue? When will gender cease to be a defining attribute? What kind of world would we then be living in – and what kind of art would we be producing?

Today we are also facing a struggle against the continuation of colonial practices which continue to manifest in, for example, cultural appropriation or racial discrimination, as well as a struggle for a new solidarity, which has as its goal taking responsibility for one’s own actions and maintaining a sensibility for differences without clinging to them. So: what differentiates us, and what do we have in common? Our access to resources, our different privileges, our “passing” – and the way in which we deal with these unfair distributions.

Given this context, we are particularly intrigued by two artistic treatments of these issues. Belgian author and activist Dalilla Hermans’ new piece “Her(e)” tackles questions of identity and origins against the background of the biography of someone who was adopted. And Luanda Casella, who will allow us a peek at her new work “KillJoy” at the beginning of the conference, is concerned with the unconscious implications which determine our language and our actions. Her unsparing multiple-choice quiz exposes individual and collective prejudices – about misogyny, racism, migration and economic imperialism.

What differentiates us only brings us together when we transcend differences to become allies and dispense with hierarchies. To create a true “commonality” which does not ignore differences and histories in order to silence them, but instead works together to deconstruct these hierarchies. The annual conference of the Dramaturgische Gesellschaft 2020, with the title “Comm on – Allies, Activists and Alternatives in European Theatre”, focuses on the commonality and beginnings: how can theatre spaces and processes – how we live and work (and what we work) – become “commons”, that is, a resource which is self-organised, fair, and which can be accessed by as many people as possible, “beyond market and state”? What kind of activism is needed, which alternative spaces for thought, which models for action, and how can we become allies despite our systemic differences? How can theatre spaces be used as *common spaces* for civil society, and, in turn, how can the city be grasped as a *common space* for participatory formats? And what architectural spaces does the theatre of the future require? A panel on this topic will also tackle concrete implementations: the Gent opera house is facing a comprehensive renovation, and the London architect who is responsible for the project, Daniel Rosbottom, will discuss it with the Lucerne acting artistic director Ina Karr, together with two further experts.

[A common republic of love?](#)

Commoning has, with its values of sharing, mutual (intellectual) ownership and new solidarity as a social process for self-organisation, unleashed massive dynamic energies in recent years, and will be expected to become an increasingly powerful force in the years to come. In the field of the theatre this can be seen in movements like the ensemble network or the “40,000 theatre workers meet their members of parliament” action, and in many new collectively-led models in theatres from Marburg via Zürich to the “Ayşe-X-Staatstheater” as well. But beyond the development of commons principles in individual areas of life, it is about far more than “just” the structural realignment of institutions in the field of the theatre, as is already happening: following the failures of neo-liberalism, commoning offers an attractive counter-narrative which precisely does not bank on isolation, exclusion and nationalism, but rather operates in unifying and connecting categories (as opposed to divisive). As a

consequence, it suggests a shift from a market-based society to one based on culture (the philosopher Andreas Weber even described commoning as an expression of “living together, feeling together, loving”). The key speaker opening the conference, Pascal Gielen, sees public space as the fulcrum of sustainable urban development in post-Fordist economies, investigates the foundations of the term “commons” and its aesthetic dimensions, sees a key concept in creativity, and asks: Which artistic strategies and which aesthetics are Commoners drawn to, and what does this mean for the political dimensions of art, autonomy, and for the future relationship between art, ethics and democracy?

Because, as Gielen points out, mobile online societies call into question established hierarchies, traditions, elites and canons – which represents a problem for the future identities of what have, up until now, typically been vertically organised art institutions. They must transform to become horizontal institutes – but what does that mean? And how can it happen? Because it is obvious that the representational machinery of the early 20th century bourgeoisie needs new forms and agents to adequately represent modern society.

Following on from Gielen, Sarah Vanhee will reflect on consequences for art and its agents. Vanhee subjected the praxis of cultural institutions to a comprehensive critique in 2017 in a Belgian institutional debate which took place in, among others, the production venue BUDA, under the direction of the former art director Agnes Quackels. In her conference speech she asks how art, instead of being a commodity which is subservient to the market, can serve as a resource for all, and what role artists will then play, and how as-yet unheard voices can join the conversation.

How will narrative and representational institutions position themselves in future to post-narration and post-representation in times of decolonisation? We hope and expect, particularly when it comes the advanced discussions and reality in Belgium concerning questions of postcolonialism and diversity, important stimuli for the German-speaking theatre, and so we are very much looking forward to the keynote speech by the dramatic advisors from KVS Brüssel. And in Gent we also ask: Will city, state and national theatres be able to reorganise themselves as transnational or supranational theatres, like dance companies, orchestras, vocal ensembles and free groups have long since been able to do, and as the hosts *NTGent* and *Opera Ballet Vlaanderen*, who aim for a contemporary realism, are tackling in a kind of European experiment? And if the answer is yes, then what structural consequences would this have for the development of the free scene?

And what do these imply for the funding of culture? In real terms, how could participatory processes in urban development and the continued development of a cultural scene interact? How can a sensible debate be fruitfully conducted among inhabitants of a city or a region about what kind of culture they want or need? Because these questions will also have to be examined anew: on what criteria will art be funded, and who makes those decisions? We asked Marc Grandmontagne, managing director of the Deutschen Bühnenvereins, to discuss this aspect with international experts for cultural funding.

Accessibility

The question of who has access to institutions must be faced anew: it is one of the great future topics for theatres. In 2019, the Dramaturgische Gesellschaft was the cooperation partner of the symposium *Theater barrierefrei gestalten* (tr: Organising accessible theatre), curated by Silke Stuck and Noa Winter, as part of the *grenzenlos.kultur* festival, Germany’s oldest festival for inclusive art – a milestone for accessibility in German theatre, as the sense of new beginnings was palpable. The

overwhelming (and, in this context, new) interest shown by representatives from city and state theatres drew attention to the fact that things are happening in the way theatres see themselves, and the urgency (and above all the potential) inherent in this field are by now widely recognised in Germany as well. Many examples of best practices are astonishingly easy to put into effect and have an effect which reaches far beyond the intended target groups – they typically make a theatre visit easier and more pleasant for all theatregoers.

We suggest using the German term ZUGÄNGLICHKEIT instead of the more formal BARRIEREFREIHEIT, which implies that the sign is a legal requirement (which it is), because the idea of *Zugänglichkeit* means accessibility for all, independent of specific target groups. And doing this does actually accomplish that – lowering inhibitions above and beyond the core targets groups.

We therefore offer several workshops with accessibility experts both with and without handicaps, including the influential Leipziger audio description experts, and in cooperation with IZI Deutschland the surtitle expert Yvonne Griesel. There aren't always easy solutions: anyone who wants to get deeper into the topic of how the typical way a theatre is run excludes people, can visit Wera Mahne and Pia Jendreizik's basics workshop on theatre and deafness: and the introductory workshops from Silke Stuck and Noa Winter are for everyone who wants to see some changes in their theatre. It's worth attending and taking the assistance of experienced coaches.

Theatre structures

But, to borrow Björn Bicker's words from our last annual conference, it can no longer be about a "theatre for all, it has to be about a "theatre with all". And thus we are very quickly far beyond issues of mere representation, especially as many theatre companies very clearly state that they have no interest in serving others as "inspiration porn" or tokens. In the light of current debates on structure, the question is therefore: How can, or how must, a theatre appear which not only claims commonality, but actually generates it in its structures and working processes? It's no coincidence that collective workflows can unleash a great power – this has long been evident in the collectives on the free scene, but recently and increasingly observable in theatre direction (Oberhausen, Marburg, Zürich²), or in future-facing projects like the Ayşe-X -Staatstheater. In Belgium, this discussion about fundamental changes in locations and institutions for performing arts began years ago. Directorial teams have become more open in many locations and within diverse organisational structures. And new methods are being tested to integrate different groups of people. We would like therefore to bring together various protagonists from the Belgian and German theatre worlds in a discussion on means, opportunities and obstacles in this process of transformation: Kristof Blom from Campo Gent, Martine Dennewald from Festival Theaterformen Hannover/Braunschweig, Matthieu Goery from Vooruit Gent, Barbara Mundel, future director of the Münchner Kammerspiele (previously director in Freiburg and editor of two TdZ publications on the "theatre of the future"), Agnes Quackels as a representative of the new directorial duo at the Kaaaitheater Brüssel and host Jan Vandenhouwe from the Opera Ballet Vlaanderen.

To examine future developments and themes in children's and youth theatre, and in anticipation of the 2022 conference, which will be emphasising this field, the dg-AG Junges Theater will present their own excellent panel, including Gent's own *Kopergietery*. The AG Stadttheater der Zukunft brought their own expertise to bear on the development of the programme and will also be presenting their own contribution. Members are asked to make their own contributions on Saturday

at the big BarCamp, and we are looking forward to the reactions to the newly-configured general meeting, which will this time be even more than usual a platform for exchanges.

Change always begins with your own behaviour, and dramatic advisors are the designers of the employment conditions within which they work – it's about being sensitive to discrimination in the context of theatre, reflecting on your own position within the institution and within the hierarchies: awareness and commitments are of central importance. Golschan Ahmad Haschemit will conduct an extensive anti-discrimination workshop, and for the conceptualisation we were able to get hold of Sabrina Köpke from the Deutschen Gesellschaft für Personalwesen e. V., who recently oversaw the process of composing the (we think: exemplary) Code of Conduct for the Deutschen Bühnenverein.

The publishing world of the future?

The publishing world is also changing. New collective working approaches lead to new models for publishers, and new agents enter the market. How can collective thought function in publishing? How do new perspectives on authorship change the work in publishing? And what are the consequences for a lively communication between theatres and publishers? This year, we don't only want to present as usual the new winners of the Kleist grant awards and continue with the beloved authors' conversations, in cooperation with the Verband Deutscher Bühnen- und Medienverlage, but also more broadly discuss these fundamental questions for the future in a larger panel format.

Thank you

We would like to thank our hosts, *NTGent* and the *Opera Ballet Vlaanderen*, Milo Rau and Jan Vandenhoutte in particular, for their invitation and the substantial financial support for the conference, as well as all employees from all the institutions which collaborated on making this conference possible. Stefan Bläske and Korn Bollen in particular were and are crucial communication partners for the contents of the conference during the conceptual and planning phases.

We thank the Flemish Ministry for Culture and the city of Gent (citymarketing) for the support, which is an important aid in being able to stage the conference in this scope. And we are very pleased about the important support from the Landesbühnengruppe des Deutschen Bühnenvereins. We also understand this to be a structural statement. Because the NTGent, from whom the initial invitation came, is at heart essentially just that: a state theatre which has always been commissioned with the job of travelling the country and bringing culture to different regions. When the Landesbühnengruppe now specifically (and, as far as we can tell, for the first time) supports this particular dg conference, then we can take it as a very confident and future-facing political statement expressing a new self-image on the part of the regional state theatres, which are – especially with the politically active Tübinger and Marburger in their respective regions – ushering in an exciting new era which we could maybe understand as “urban theatre for the regions” in civil society.

We would like to thank the Verband Deutscher Bühnen- und Medienverlage for the successful cooperation concerning the events and look forward to the Verband holding its traditional reception this year in the majestic foyer of the Gent Opera House.

For the first time we are receiving a grant from the foundation of our house bank, the GLS Treuhand, for which we would also like at this point to express our gratitude. For covering various travel

expenses we would like to thank the Goethe Institute in Brussels, the Genshagen Foundation and ITI Deutschland.

Theatre programme

The historic centre of the former city-state Gent with its belfry, Gothic cathedral and church spires, canals and splendid houses, is worth a trip in itself – if there weren't also the art and cultural houses and institutions which, for a city with a population of just 250,000, must be unique. Not only highlights from our hosts' city are on the agenda – “Anatomy of Pain” by Lies Pauwels, “Familie” by Milo Rau, the ballet “RASA” (from La Bayadère) by Daniel Proietto, and Ersan Mondtag's debut operatic work, “Der Schmied von Gent” (which can be seen in neighbouring Antwerp) – but also performances in the arts centre Vooruit and, in CAMPO, a new production by Louis Vanhaverbeke.

And as if that weren't enough, 2020 is also Van Eyck Year, during which an exhibition will celebrate the “optical revolution” by the master of the Gent altar. So we recommend booking a hotel in time, and adding a couple of days on for after the conference!

Expanding freedoms

The Belgian theatre and dance scene has established a formidable reputation since the 1980s as an engine for innovations in European performing arts – this is, together with the current sense of new beginnings in the air, the reason we chose to hold our *Future Lab of European Theatre* in Gent.

As we see it, for years now it has been the substantial funding of projects which has continued to produce exceptional new art – and so we view the planned funding cuts by Jan Jambon's government with great disappointment: a ridiculous 60% (!) is to be saved from the project funding for the free scene, but also 3% of the budget for seven big cultural institutions like the *Opera Ballet Vlaanderen* and 6% for all other cultural institutions like *NTGent*. These cuts will have severely negative consequences for the outstanding success story of European cultural policy. We appeal to the cultural policy makers to stand up for an open society and for diversity, and to show themselves in solidarity with artists in Belgium who are fighting against these massive funding cuts.

The board of the Dramaturgischen Gesellschaft:

Kathrin Bieligk, Uwe Gössel (assistant chair), Kerstin Grübmeier, Dorothea Hartmann,

Karin Kirchhoff, Beata Anna Schmutz, Harald Wolff (chair),

with Jana Thiele (executive secretary)

Undine Klose and Raffaella Phannavong (office)

[Übersetzung: Patrick Charles]