

## BELGIAN EXPERIMENTS ON CONTEMPORARY PERFORMING ART SCENE

DÁŠA ČIRIPOVÁ

Institute of Theatre and Film Research,  
Art Research Centre of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava

**Abstract:** The text presents a perspective on contemporary Belgian underground performing art scene. Despite its complex structure, it aims to identify distinctive creative trends and theme reflected in their works by Belgian artists. Special attention is given to lesser known venues and authors, along with companies that are either launching their career or are part of the Brussels underground. The selection of the material draws from the diversity and multi-coloured nature of the context. At the same time, it considers the programme of the international festival *Kustfestivaldesarts*.

**Key words:** Brussels independent scene, performing art, dance, experiment, culture, diversity

Brussels isn't merely the hotpot of Europe's political life and home to its key institutions. The city is also the centre of cultural developments. The historical evolution of Brussels has been shaped by two coexisting ethnic groups: the Flemish and the Valois, and/or the Belgian and the French. The officially recognised bilingual city has acquired social and cultural predispositions to become the meeting point of European culture. Even deeper in the past, Brussels was openly accepting and offering freedom to different names within the context of international culture who were undesired in their home countries. Brussels integrated a number of ethnic minorities that have, over time, become its component part. The diversity of its populace has automatically brought along diversity of local cultural life that understood culture to be part of European identity. Today, Belgium is thus among the culturally advanced countries with a thoroughly and transparently refined support system. The diversity of cultural institutions, culture centres with or without own infrastructure, the so-called culture-labs, international as well as local festivals, create a platform for organisations that not merely mutually coexist, but also collaborate closely on a range of projects. Theatrologist Charlotte De Somviele suggests that: "This horizontal, non-hierarchical architecture provides a strong incentive for initiative, exchange, involvement and responsibility on the part of each player."<sup>1</sup>

The quantity of contemporary Flemish art does not go against the quality of creative groups and individuals. Experimental diversity has been characteristic for this context since the 1980s that saw the emergence of the "Flemish wave" that continues to set trends in performing art, particularly in dance. This is no haphazard development. It was influenced, in part, by effective pressure on art strategy. Hence, "[S]ince the seventies, a de-federalisation process has taken place in Bel-

<sup>1</sup> DE SOMVIELE, Ch. *A Look into Contemporary Dance in Flanders and Brussels*. Brussels : Flanders Arts Institute, 2018, p. 5.

gium, in which more competences were gradually handed over from the federal level to communities and regions. In fact, culture was the first competence to be de-federalised. In this context, the bottom-up dynamics in the performing arts field was met with enthusiasm by Flemish policymakers."<sup>2</sup> Collective initiatives, festivals, art centres thus emerged in abandoned buildings and also on the outskirts of the city. Art groups managed to swiftly enter international structures. A multi-year financing system gradually emerged. It did and continues to support grass-root activities, i.e. Belgian independent scene, particularly dance. The preference given to dance project reflected the ossified theatre structure in the 1980s. Theatre-related legislation and theatre centres were unable to provide venue for performative projects, dance or interdisciplinary and experimental forms. A new generation of artists and convenors needed to create new spaces for the production and presentation of innovative theatre and dance.

Since the end of the 1980s, Belgian art context has been in constant motion. Performing art and dance scene have been increasingly blurring the borders between genres, giving rise to hybrid forms. They operated on the principle of interdisciplinarity, using video, architecture, text, light, music, or new technologies. Within the European context, this principle has become commonplace. Yet, back in the 1980s and 1990s, it was exclusively distinctive of the Belgian art context. At the time it became home to renowned authors, such as the choreographers Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker, Wim Vandekeybus, Alain Platel, Meg Stuart, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, writers and directors Jan Fabre, Jan Lauwers, Kris Verdonck to name a few. The boom in contemporary dance has been largely affected by the Performing Arts Research and Training Studios (P.A.R.T.S. founded in 1995 by the dance company Rosas (Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker) and the art group De Munt. Such a base, with dynamic and progressive energy, sets the latest trends and phenomena in contemporary dance.

The Brussels scene, however, is not merely about iconic, well-established names and cultural institutions funded by the state or the city. Local culture centres and groups in other cities and towns in Flanders are an equally significant element that contributes to its dynamics and development. Authors like to move to venues that emerged as a result of the reconstruction of old buildings, such as Workspacebrussel/ Atelier – which is a lab for innovations in performative art that accentuates transdisciplinary projects. It primarily serves as an umbrella to pilot projects by independent and young authors. Workspacebrussel works closely with alternative venues of Kaaitheater, Beursschouwburg, Les Brigittines and the groups Rosas and Ultima Vez that work in their own venues. It also offers residencies, coaching, production support and presents selected works at its own biennial Working Title Festival.

Kaaitheater, established in 1980, is still one of the venues that offer repertory as well as experimental programme, theatre, dance, installations or lecture performance. It presents smaller stage forms, as well as major productions. The theatre has been long supporting selected artists and groups, offering them space and production base. At the moment, it is home to the choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker together with Salva Sanchis, the choreographer Jérôme Bel, performance theorist Bojana Cvejić, artist-in-residence and (as he calls himself) urban choreographer Benja-

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

min Vandewalle, theatre and film magician Pieter De Buysser, or the Danish dancer and choreographer Mette Ingvarstsen who focuses on the themes of sexuality, ecology, new media, etc. Kaaitheater is also the venue to a major part of the *Kustenfestivaldesarts* festival which will be briefly presented in the second part of this text. The Vincent Company, based in Antwerp, is the underground culmination point. The old factory in the port offers a view of a new riverbank annex designed by Zaha Hadid. The fine artist and stage director Vincent Van den Bossche, manager Sanne Hubert, designer Sarah Rombouts and production manager Cien Schelkens established an arts centre that brings together a number of artists and their projects. The setting in the port and old halls is largely used by a group of independent artists who prefer non-commercial approach to their work. Diverse and spacious hall sectors, along with the port embankment, serve as an important inspiration for the authors. Many works that emerged here follow from the dialogue with or draw directly from the outside environment. The distinct atmosphere seeped in art as further heightened by inconspicuous bars and cafés. One can thus spend a whole day with the artists from the Vincent Company.

Theatre Varia which, from among the aforementioned ones, most closely resembles theatre venue, was founded in 1982 by the then young stage directors Michal Dezoteux, Marcel Deval, and Philippe Sireuil. Their intention was to create an underground space in Brussels to operate alongside the major theatre and dance houses. Today, the theatre has its own repertoire featuring avantgarde productions. It also serves as the meeting point for Belgian and international artists. Similarly to *Work-spacebrussel*, it offers space and a long-term support to emerging artists. The management enables them to face the risk of not having yet made their names, plus they benefit from the two venues the theatre has: Big and Small Varia, and two rehearsal studios.

Les Brigittines is a sought-after platform in Brussels, a venue to explore dance, theatre, and visual projects. A former 17th-century Baroque chapel has, paradoxically, become the venue for progressive and innovative forms. Along with the programme that consists of performances by visiting artists, Les Brigittines holds regular smaller local dance and music festivals and, biennially, at the end of August, the international festival *In Movement*. As most Brussels venues, Les Brigittines also offers residential stays and creative labs.

The selection from the many active venues has been determined by their inclination to contemporary young Belgian authors who decided to work on the margins of artistic élites. The, as yet, firm funding structure enables them to enjoy the luxury of long-term process. The lab approach and improving professionalism are signs of mature culture. The culture in Brussels continues to discover – on behalf of performative art and dance – new names that rank among the world's award-winning authors. The quest for inventive means of expression within a given form, continues to break the existing borders of genres and themes. By using new media, objects or circus, they define the “new blood” of Brussels. Though these may be, *prima facie*, new trends brought by any European performing art scene, the scene in Brussels is distinctive because of its long-term creative background, major competition and high standards brought by the generation of authors of the 1980s and 1990s.

### From Brussels with Love

To navigate the contemporary Belgian or just through the Brussels scene, is no easy task. The international festival Kunstenfestivaldesarts is a fine compass. The festival is dedicated to the presentation of the crème de la crème in European performing art. The 2019 edition featured, yet again, foremost contemporary authors (Trajal Harrel, Frederico León, Matte Edvardsen & Matteo Fargion, Silke Huysmans & Hannes Dereere, Francoise Chaignaud & Marie-Pierre Brébant, Nora Chipaumire, Alice Ripoli, and others). The audience rate exceeded 30,000. This year, alongside the Kunstenfestivaldesarts, an additional programme, entitled *From Brussels with Love*, was arranged for curators of international festivals. The international event was convened jointly by the Wallonie-Bruxelles Théâtre Danse and the Flemish Arts Institute. The group of twenty-one international specialists saw a presentation of a wide range of diverse young artists and companies whose names remain, for the large part of the main Festival audience, as yet unknown. Discussions between artists and specialists proved mutually inspiring. They enabled the international group of experts to become acquainted with the situation within and with the context of the Belgian unofficial scene. It is, naturally, difficult to compare the Belgian context with Slovak "independent" scene. Still, even Belgium has companies that work amidst the range of major names and generous state subsidies on the margins, often renting one of the aforementioned rented venues, or working in a factory or an established theatre that takes them under its wings. Apart from the opposition and positioning vis-à-vis the official scene, independent authors bring to the Belgian art context their own creative poetics and approaches. They thus, inconspicuously, set the trend in performing art.

One of the means for performing artists to approach artistic representation of reality is the processual approach of the lab. It was represented at the Festival by two projects. The Belgian transdisciplinary artist Kim Snauwaert and the Russian multimedia artist Anyuta Wiazemsk prepared processual performance<sup>3</sup> *Between Us*, in which they staged their wedding (in private life each has a heterosexual partner). They used the project to show the absurdity of terminology in marriages of migrants with local partners in Belgian law, such as real and pure marriages. The research project includes a theoretical part where the two artists analyse partner relationship that endures the pressure of the demands by the surrounding context: they present artistic trajectories as well as social expectations. The visual artist, illustrator, stage director, and performer Stefanie Claes also finds inspiration in real life, transforming it into a mystical, yet cruel world.<sup>4</sup> She works on her projects for a number of years, for her performances draw on interviews, meetings, and other authentic material. Her detailed and long-term work does bear fruit – the works are of major appeal for their powerful stories as well as their interpretation. The latest example of her work is the project *Mia Fair*, where Stefanie Claes works with several hats on – as stage designer, sound operator, make-up artist, lighting designer, puppeteer, as well as nar-

<sup>3</sup> The term processual performance refers to a long-lasting project that is divided into a number of research and creative phases.

<sup>4</sup> Stefanie Claes is member of the Lucinda Ra collective created by stage directors, musicians, visual artists and designers "of the same blood group."



Stefanie Claes: *Mia Fair*. Vooruit in collaboration with DEStudio, 2019. Director Stefanie Claes. Photo Tina Herbots. Flanders Arts Institute.

rator. She found her latest theme in direct proximity to her home – a safe haven baby box for unwanted newborns. Through a powerful story of such a child she explores the importance and inevitability of the past for our future. In the preparatory phase she explored the city archives to find out who and when established the foundation for the children “put aside.” Using puppets that she made herself, she tells the ruthless story in a minimalist, visually impressive staging. Her presence in the miniature space, flexibility and dexterity she is bestowed with, make the *Mia Fair* performance an exceptionally sensitive. Yet, at the same time, it is a hard-bitten and genuine masterpiece that is no short of fairy-tale magic.

The use of new media in contemporary dance is represented on the Brussels independent scene by the increasingly popular Louise Vanneste. The former ballerina eventually focused on contemporary dance and choreography. In her work she develops her signature movement language that confronts the experience of the viewer. In her movement installation *alta*, Vanneste draws from the novel *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique* [Friday, or, The Other Island] by Michel Tournier. She transforms the realistic and fantasy themes into sensory experiences. In a dark room, amidst the freely moving spectators, she creates images of mental countries that resonate in archetypal and collective memories of individuals. Within the projections of environmental shots of a landscape, dancers change their positions vis-à-vis the image. They thus create their own countries of sand, stone, thread, wood, etc. There is no border between the outer and inner worlds, or between reality and imaginary geography in *alta*. Louise Vanneste used the images to attack the spectator’s senses, whilst using the

contrast of virtual reality and the actual laws of nature. The method she employs to use the new media in movement and to which she accordingly adapts their choreographies creates her signature movement language.

For thirteen years, the designer and musician Wannes Denneer, stage director and actor Jef Van Gestel, and dancer and choreographer Karolien Verlinden have been representing a distinctive, utterly playful group of artists, entitled the Tuning People. Their work could be defined as sound theatre or acoustic recycling: in each work they experiment with sound. By bringing together a number of art disciplines, they go beyond their limits of work, as well as spectator perception and comfort. They admit that their approach is brutal, yet poetic. Ultimately, though it is full of surprising ideas that go well beyond the idea. In the acoustic performance *Tuning Things* Wannes generates sound through physical action. Together with a group of visiting musicians he creates a sound installation made of different music and non-music instruments, such as loudspeakers, saws, tubes, pipes, bell, fan, compressor, etc. In another part of the performance, the musicians recycle sound archive of their own score or archived concert recordings.

In addition to the sound theatre, the Tuning People are also distinctive for adopting circus elements and including them in a sophisticated performance. The intensity and latent danger that is part of circus, give dance a touch of adrenaline. Moreover, circus structure of tricks with dramatic gradation requires challenging physical work and brilliant wit. This also applies to *Kadrage*, where two actors capture in thirty frames, with the use of pantomime and circus gags, thirty absurd and comic situations. They address the themes of friendship, occasional egotism in friendship, attempts at one's own uniqueness, and the struggle for a better place within the frame (in the world). The performers make *Kadrage* an utterly witty and intelligent theatre with both physically and ideologically playful approach.

The group of creative artists who use circus or movement elements in their work includes Kasper Vandenberghe, member of the Troubleyn Company/Jan Fabre (e.g. *Mount Olympus*). Vandenberghe has recently founded his own company Movedby-matter. In their project *Calculated Risk*, Vandenberghe continues the dialogue with the Bauman liquid time where an individual longs to undergo a risk, he/she literally seeks risk, while denying it, for it is predictable, hence, riskless. The performer, wrapped in bubble wrap like in a space suit, throws himself off a height of several metres in a way not to get hurt. He has mastered physical laws and gravity, therefore the risk represented by the fall turns into a safe risk.

The group Post uit Hessdalen also draws on circus. Their artistic core is made of a director of photography and circus artist Stijn Gruppung and theatre artist Ine Van Baelen. The team is distinctive for their hybrid stage productions that bring together a number of art disciplines – theatre, video, visual art, and circus. Each performance works with live music that is in contrast with the visual aspect. The performance *Man strikes back* is a collaboration with the choreographer Ugo Dehaes, professor in robotics Edwin Dertien and composer Frederik Meulyzer. The futuristic circus performance used the principles of artificial intelligence as the authors explore the limits of technologies and human physicality. The wooden bench they created is connected to the sound system by Frederik Meulyzer. It makes a sound depending on the manner in which it is hit by juggling balls to the music by Stijn Gruppung. The dynamic stage set in locomotion not only produces an intriguing and utterly original sound but is



*Kadrage. Text and direction Tuning People. Vincent company, Antverpy, 2019. Photo Tina Herbots. Flanders Arts Institute.*

also an attractive element that draws viewer's attention. The site-specific music project *15419 FT* is a collaboration between Post uit Hessdalen and the singer Boudewijn de Groot. It merges the specific nature of the port environment and acoustic music of the echo by approaching and distancing from the river bank, accompanied by French horn. The performance utilises physical distance of the spectator and tests his or her potential to perceive distance (the authors build on the quotation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggesting that our eyes and mind are in harmony with the world).

Contemporary dance struggled, at its dawn, with communication barriers not merely in the Slovak context that is used to classical theatre. The same, however, also applies to Belgium. Therefore, many contemporary authors target their works directly at the spectators with whom they want to engage in a dialogue. They see the recipients to be those who, ultimately, are responsible for the outcome of the performance. The spectator thus ends up in the director's chair. The dancer Benjamin Vandewalle intentionally uses this principle. Directly in the city in an open space, he explores the choreography of a public space. The spectator is an integral component of Vandewalle's site-specific projects (e.g. *Walking the Line*). That makes dances a kind of social instrument. Object dance is yet another line in contemporary dance. The stage is no longer dominated by human bodies and their relationship. Non-human "actors" are increasingly part of the productions. Here, the most popular Belgian representatives include the Danish-Belgian dancer and choreographer Mette Ingvartsen. In her projects *The Artificial Nature Project* and *7 Pleasures* she explores the relationship between the human and the non-human (an object).



*Man Strikes Back*. Text, direction and music Post uit Hessdalen. Vincent company, Antverpy, 2019. Photo Tina Herbots. Flanders Arts Institute.

An aforementioned characteristic Brussels phenomenon is the internationalisation of the Valois and the Flemish dance scenes. The past thirty years have brought a major influx of international dancers, choreographers, and performers. That inevitably affects the constant progress in art. Diverse cultural heritage and thus different aesthetic criteria are introduced in the contemporary dance traditions of their homeland by a number of Belgium-based choreographers (Fabian Barba, Radouan Mriziga, Serge Aimé Coulibaly).

These artists include two immigrants to Western Europe. In the early 1980s, they settled in Brussels. Though their names resonate in the global context as well, they are still more part of the Brussels underground than of the official scene. The Brazilian dancer and choreographer Claudio Bernardo, the laurate of, inter alia, the Philip Morris Prize, returned to Brussels in 1989. There he worked with such acclaimed artists as Nicole Mossoux and Patrick Bonté. In 1995, Bernardo founded his own company As Palavras. Their portfolio includes a number of titles that featured in a range of world dance festivals. Their latest work, *#Frontiera* builds on the stage adaptation of *The Trojan Women* by Euripides, as directed by Thierry Salmon in 1988. Bernardo borrowed from Salmon's production the original soundtrack sang by Giovanna Marini in the Ancient Greek liturgical and pop music. Through the ancient myth, *#Frontiera* address the current issue of exile. It is an appeal to contemplation about the perception of barbarism through the lens of the past and the present.

Mauro Paccagnella worked in his native Italy in companies such as Aterballetto and Ensemble Micha van Hoecke. He is based in Brussels since 1991. In 1995, he

founded Woosh'ing Mach'ine company there.<sup>5</sup> In his latest project, *HOMOGRAMM-TANZ* he adopts, together with the musician Didier Casamitjan, the language of Arte Povera and instrumental theatre. Using hologram and humour, he attempts to create an image of the memory of body and its destroyed parts. The performance is an allegory of time and a questioning of the legitimacy of longevity.

## Conclusion

The vibrant Brussels scene, both official and unofficial, continues to draw new authors even though (or because) it is a context that is utterly challenging for authors. Brussels is the city of challenges and testing artistic qualities. The attractive world of art turns, from time to time, into an uncompromising battlefield of names, poetics, as well as of violent innovations. Inspiration and diversity, the creative focus and incessant locomotion are part of the battle that is still worth winning in the city. The pulsating culmination of the environment that sets the trends and tendencies in contemporary art has been thriving for three decades not merely because of the culture policy that is favourable to artists, but also because of the openness of the city to the diversity of its residents and their cultures. Last but not least, there is also the progressive professional training of dancers, choreographers, and visual artists. The theoretical artistic education follows the enviable suit. That sets the foundation for a successful and creative art scene.

*The study is an output of the project VEGA 2/0110/19 Poetics of Contemporary Performance Art.*

**Translated by Lucia Faltin**

## LITERATURE

DE SOMVIELE, Charlotte. *A Look into Contemporary Dance in Flanders and Brussels*. Brussels : Flanders Arts Institute, 2018. 21 p. No ISBN.

Dáša Čiripová  
Ústav divadelnej a filmovej vedy CVU SAV  
Dúbravská cesta 9  
841 01 Bratislava  
Slovakia  
e-mail: dasa.ciripova@yahoo.com

---

<sup>5</sup> He collaborated with, inter alia, Frédéric Flamand, Charleroi / Danses, Karine Ponties, Olga de Soto. In 1999, at the dance forum in Lisbon he received the PEJA prize. Together with Gilles Monnart and Joz Deconinck he founded, in 1993, the company Un Œuf is Un Œuf.